

January 21, 2017 (Journey worship service)

TEXT: Matthew 4:18–23

TITLE: Faith Fishing

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Today I'll be quoting from Dick Sternberg's "The Art of Freshwater Fishing" and from the gospel according to Matthew about a shared topic: fishing. Sternberg: *"A little homework prior to a fishing trip will pay big dividends later. When planning for a trip, whether it be for northern pike or bluegills, you would be wise to gather information that will make the outing more enjoyable and successful."* And from the Gospel of Matthew: *As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."* Now, a paraphrase of that same passage from Matthew might go like this: *As Jesus walked into a Journey worship service, he saw a large group of churchgoers, for they were Christians. And Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." To which the nervous Presbyterians replied, "Who, me? I don't know how to fish."* So let's change that today once and for all.

Fishing basics: Point 1: Casting – Sternberg: "The back cast starts with a fast upward motion of the forearm and wrist. Stop the rod when it is nearly vertical. The forward cast follows without delay. Using mostly wrist power, snap the rod forward in a quick downstroke. It's exactly like the motion you'd use to throw a chunk of potato off the tines of a dinner fork. Try practicing this first."

Evangelism basics: Casting – Why does the idea of being called by Jesus to become fishers of people make us nervous? Maybe because we imagine sharing our faith is like casting our lines into a crowded stream. It's so public—so "out there." What if no one likes our lures? What if we don't know how to answer the questions that arise after our opening words plunk down in the middle of the conversation? Yet Jesus still stands there, calling us to be fishers of people and waiting. So we follow Sternberg's advice and we try practicing first. If fishing students can practice with chunks of potato on a fork, faith fishers can also do a few practice exercises.

First, start with yourself. Ask yourself, "What do I truly believe? What does my faith say about God, about life and death, about what is truly important in this world?" Try putting that into words—even just a sentence or two saying "This is what I believe." Or put it into a prayer—saying "God, this is what I think I believe. Help me understand better." Faith fishing for others always begins with us. After all, casting forth your faith is not like being a Jehovah's Witness ringing a doorbell. It is simply being a friend who believes – a friend who lets someone know they're in your prayers—a friend who is willing to ask whether someone is truly alright and where they see God in this moment of their life. If you're sincere, bringing up faith or prayer in a conversation won't be like tossed potato chunks. It

will simply be an act of kindness and love—which is the heart of the faith you’re trying to share.

Fishing basics: Point 2 – Wading. Sternberg: “Wading is the most common method of fishing in streams. Anglers should try to avoid scuffing the bottom or making large ripples. Remember—fish are usually closer than you think.”

Evangelism basics: Wading. There’s probably a person near to you who actually wants to talk about faith, or hear from you why you come to church. Remember, once you decide to answer Jesus’ call, it’s not necessary to charter a boat for distant lands or foreign villages. The “fish” are always closer than you think. Chances are lots of people already know you take seriously your commitment to matters of Christian faith. Any time you have a conversation that moves beyond superficialities to substance, in which emotions or feelings are expressed, it is likely appropriate to introduce a faith dimension to the discussion. If someone describes something they are struggling with, you can ask “What gives you strength during this hard time?” And if, in their response, they mention something like prayer or God, follow up on that opening. Ask them to say more about it, or offer how your faith or this church community has been a support in hard times. The fact that you’re even having this conversation is because this person trusts you enough to be vulnerable and honest with you. Not to mention your own faith experiences at this point is to withhold the very thing others are hoping you’ll provide.

Fishing basics: Point 3 – Jigging. Sternberg: “Jigging is one of the most difficult techniques to master. But it is a skill worth learning, because few fish can resist a jig’s enticing action. Jigging involves moving a lure so that it appears to be swimming or crawling in the water. Whenever possible, use fresh bait. A lively minnow has much more appeal than a dead minnow hanging limp on a hook.”

Evangelism basics: Jigging. Most people prefer to see faith in action. Those around you already know a lot about you by what they see you do—how you talk, how you treat others, how you spend your time, the things you are passionate about. And let’s be clear, being busy is not the same thing as being productive. Anyone watching you can easily tell the difference.

I want to give you some encouragement—Presbyterians are actually quite good at jigging, at putting our faith into action, getting involved and helping out in times of need. The challenge, though, is to make sure we’re not fishing in the same spot over and over again—to make sure we’re not just jigging for one another. There is much to be done here in our church: become a church officer, join a committee, see Wil and volunteer, sing in the choir or teach a Sunday School class. But as faith fishers, we need to invite others to jig with us—to join you when you come for worship or for a concert or to do a project that helps others. Never to invite someone to church is like fishing from the shore expecting the fish to jump into your bucket on their own.

Now, it's at this point that the fishing analogy begins to wear a little thin.

Fishing basics: Point 4 – Setting the hook. No, I'm not going to go there. That's the wrong image altogether. Besides, every good fisherman knows that the goal is catch and release, not catch and consume. Or in church terms, the goal is to guide them to God, not burn them out in a church's frying pan.

If we remember our other fishing textbook, the gospel of Matthew, Peter, Andrew, James and John didn't fish with hooks; they fished with nets. The "God version" of fishing always involves a net—something bigger than us pulling us in often despite ourselves. We are captured by God's love. We are brought in by God's relentless grace. We discover who we are through the tireless, persistent, capturing embrace of Christ.

At the heart of our Presbyterian theology is the firm conviction that we are not saved by our own efforts. We are saved by grace. We do not barge our way into heaven, waving our credentials and flashing our résumés; we are brought in led by a shepherd, reeled in by a fisherman. It happens in lots of ways. We find wisdom at the foot of Jesus, the divine teacher. We find shelter with our Creator, as if protected under the wings of a mother hen. We find healing and new beginnings with God, who is like a loving father welcoming back home a prodigal child. It is all of that—a net, a pull, a hope, a love that enfolds us and will not let us go, no matter how choppy the waters or deep the sea.

This has been a momentous week as we have transitioned to a new presidency in Washington and watched with some legitimate concerns as a new cabinet is approved by the Senate. The last few days have seen celebrations and protests, and people on both sides of the political divide rightly wonder where do we go from here? Now is not the time to pack up your fishing gear and hide in the basement. Now is not the time to stuff our fingers in our ears afraid to answer the call of Jesus. Now, more than ever, Jesus is saying "Follow me. Proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Protect the vulnerable and bring healing to those in need. Become fishers of people."

To do this, just remember the fishing rules: Practice casting – know what you believe. Be willing to wade out a bit—fish are always closer than you think. Jig—put your faith into action—don't be a dead Presbyterian minnow. Invite others to worship and work beside you. And believe in the net of God's love—the yoke of Christ—the embrace of the Holy Spirit—the draws us in and draws us together, making of us more than we could ever hope or imagine or believe on our own.

So, you don't think you know how to fish? Pshaw—Christ is calling. And He knows good fishers when he sees them. Amen.