

Third Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): "Hooked on Christ!"
Isaiah 9:1-4; Matt. 4:12-23
January 21-22, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Given where we live, we have a lot of people who fish in this congregation!

Personally, I don't want to touch worms, I'm not big on eating fish unless it's accompanied by cocktail sauce, tartar sauce, or lots of bread crumbs, and I easily get seasick, so you're going to have to tutor me, teach me: what are the qualities of really good fishermen, fisherwomen, fisherkids? What does it take to land a big one??

Any guesses why I'm asking this today?

Yup, in today's Gospel Jesus invites Peter & Andrew, "*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*" (Matt. 4:19) Ahead of time, I was guessing 2 of the qualities you'd mention would be:

- patience
- passion.

We always think of Jesus as a carpenter, but the word used for his and his foster father Joseph's profession is broader, like artisan or craftsman. Couldn't He have asked people He knew from His own job circle to follow Him first?

The first 4 people He picks as His disciples are all fishermen, so I'm thinking there's a lesson for us there. Maybe it's because "fishing" or "catching" people is a great metaphor for leading folks to Christ, regardless of our paid vocation in the world. Every time this Gospel comes up I share this same wonderful snippet from the German mystic Meister

Eckhart because I haven't found anything else that says it better. Part of the beauty is how it underscores that God has to "catch" us before we "catch" anyone else:

God lies in wait for us with nothing so much as love. Now love is like a fishhook. A fisher cannot catch a fish unless the fish first picks up the hook. If the fish swallows the hook, no matter how it may squirm and turn, the fisher is certain of the fish. Love is the same way. Whoever is captured by love takes up this hook in such a fashion that foot and hand, mouth and eyes, heart and all that is in that person must always belong to God. Therefore, look only for this fishhook and you will be happily caught. The more you are caught, the more you will be liberated.¹

Sticking with the metaphor, Jesus calls us to "catch" people's attention, to "captivate" others with our love of the God who loves us, our gratitude for the Gift Given of our Savior, our appreciation for this faith family in which our joys are multiplied and our sorrows divided, our love of this spiritual community which calls upon our time, talent and treasure, yet values us mostly for who we **are** rather than what we **do**. After all, God's love cannot be earned. It is pure gift.

I was originally going to say that the Lord Jesus calls us to "share our passion for Christ and for the Gospel." But that would sound pretty foreign and maybe even scary to many of us. We Lutherans are pretty "contained" people. We may think of our faith as a **private** concern, not a **public** matter. But I've gotta say it: our faith **is** deeply personal, but it **is not** meant to be private. Jesus said we should shout from the rooftops what He has told us (Matt. 10:27). It's not our style to stand on the street corner and read from the Bible to random passersby. But as followers of Jesus we **are** called to lead others to Jesus by our witness of faith. You've heard it many times before but I'll say it again: we are here for those who are not here yet. It's not enough that I receive comfort from my faith. I must let others know about this treasure of faith that is available to them, too. Sharing faith isn't a Bible-thumping, aggressive activity. Most often it involves telling a story, our story.

Think of the people you know, the people you care about, who are unhappy. Maybe they're in your family or circle of friends, a co-worker in the office, a student or a teacher in your school, a teammate on the playing field, a fellow musician in chorus or band, another parent in Scouts, a member of your book club. Offering to say a prayer **with** them may seem out of the question, but how about a quiet mention that you'll pray **for** them? And if they say, "Why in the world would **that** help?" you could simply say, "It helps me." Or if someone shares he or she is suffering from intense loneliness and feeling anonymous in this world, just ask if they have a faith family. If they say no, offer, "You're welcome to come with me to mine. I think you'd like it." You could even quote the little signs outside this building: "This is Christ's Church. There is a place for you here."

The "nones," the folks with **no** church affiliation, are not going to be "hooked" by gimmicks. Ultimately, we are all "hooked" by love. People are savvy and sense our true motivation. Are we anxious to welcome them because they'll bump our **numbers**, in terms of worshipers, membership, money?? Or because we're anxious to share the goodness of God that we have found in the Gospel, in the Word, in the Sacraments and in this Body of Christ? I'll always remember our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton (who has a wonderful sense of humor) caution the clergy and other church leaders at a synod meeting: "People know if you're sizing them up as organ donors." ☺ They can pick up on the vibe of: "There's a visitor! Let's pounce!" Big difference between that and, "Here's a new friend to welcome and help feel at home in our church home. Here's another pilgrim on the journey whom the Holy Spirit has led to and through our door. Let's walk with this person."

This weekend of the annual meeting is a great time for us to remember that we are here for those who are not here yet. We are here to preach the Gospel of God's love in

Christ to those who have not heard it yet. We are here to be forgiven, to be inspired, to be made new, to be fed on Word & Sacrament so that we become more and more like Christ. Then we leave here to take our Lord Jesus Christ into the world with us. He is not a secret to be kept. He is a Savior to be shared. Many folks are praying for a light to shine into their darkness. Or they are despairing in their darkness because they know of no light bright enough to pierce it. But powered up by the Holy Spirit, the light of Christ could shine on them through us. Amen.

¹Paul Ofstedal, ed., *Daily Readings from Spiritual Classics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), p. 62.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham