

Third Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/B): "Hooked on Love"
Mark 1:14-20
January 20-21, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The crossword clue was "tackle box assortment": 5 letters. Any guesses from the fisherfolk in the pews or in the loft?

Answer: LURES. I know almost nothing about fishing, so my first guess was "FLIES." I was thinking about a beautiful collection of fishing flies I'd seen, created by our church friend John Acker.

I found this on-line definition of lure:

LURE: tempt (a person or animal) to do something or to go somewhere, especially by offering some form of reward.¹

Lure is a word with a dark connotation: lure a child to kidnap him or her, lure a fish to catch it. The word BAIT is similar. To refer to someone as JAILBAIT is not a compliment. To call something CLICKBAIT is to say it's designed to suck you right in and take you places you might otherwise not go, causing you to spend more time or money on it than it really deserves.

So what does any of that have to do with how God deals with us, or how Jesus calls us to relate to our fellow human beings? In today's Gospel Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John. He famously says, "*Follow me and I will make you fish for people.*" (Mark 1:17b) Some of us remember an older translation, "*Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.*" Here's the paraphrase from *The Message*:

"Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." They didn't ask questions. They dropped their nets and followed.

Simon and Andrew, James and John, couldn't have "caught" anybody else in the net of the Gospel if Jesus hadn't "caught" them first. Somehow He captured their hearts and their imagination. They were "all in," really quickly. "*Immediately*" is the word St. Mark uses.

It's so fast, it's weird. They've cast their nets into the sea, and before the fish have time to arrive, these guys have left, disembarked, stopped fishing and started following. James and his brother John leave their father Zebedee and his hired men staring in disbelief as they recede in the distance. I was thinking most of us would probably be hard-pressed to come up with a time we made such a **huge** change so **quickly**, **transitioned** so **dramatically**, dropped what we were doing like a hot potato and picked up another cause in a flash.

BUT – then Pastor Mark told me he'd once come upon his father's Army enlistment papers from World War II. Del Farnham enlisted in early December of 1941. 'Can't be a coincidence that the attack on Pearl Harbor was just a few days prior. Similarly, when Pastor Mark was deployed to the Mideast during the 2nd Gulf war, one of his chaplain's assistants had enlisted right after 9/11. An attack on our country, the onset of war, can make people drop what they're doing, reshuffle their priorities, and do dramatic things like quit their jobs on a dime and enlist in the armed forces.

According to St. Mark, the event that catapulted our Lord Jesus into His public ministry in Galilee was the arrest of John the Baptist. Unlike St. Luke, St. Mark doesn't say anything about the mothers of Jesus and John being cousins. But St. Mark **has** reported already in this first chapter of his Gospel that John himself baptized Jesus. They knew each other. John was preparing the way for Jesus, and when John is removed from the scene, Jesus steps into the spotlight. We might say that with John's arrest by Herod, Jesus becomes acutely aware that evil is marshaling its forces against Him, and it's the fullness of time to go on the offensive against everything and everyone that stands opposed to the

coming of God's kingdom, the establishment of God's reign, the reality of God's rule over our lives, God's sovereign ownership of our lives.

As we said before, lures and bait can have negative connotations. So can fishing. In Hebrew Scripture, God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah of sending fishermen (and hunters) to catch and dispense with those who are evil (see Jeremiah 16:16-18). Through the prophet Ezekiel God refers to Pharaoh as a kind of leviathan, sea monster, who mistakenly says:

*“The Nile belongs to me;
I made it for myself.”
But I will put hooks in your jaws
and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales.”*
(Ezekiel 29:c-d, 4a)

I **have to believe**, though, there is more **grace** and **mercy** than judgment in the “fishing” Jesus has in mind for His first followers and also for us. I always end up coming back to Meister Eckhart's “take” on this Gospel. He was a 14th century German mystic, a Dominican friar, a theologian, so we might not think he'd have a great deal in common with us, but listen to this:

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

And the more you are caught, the more you will **want** to catch others. True joy is contagious. Holy joy wants to multiply. Our joy in being so **loved** by God, so **liberated** by God's forgiveness of our sins, our joy in God's **erasing** our failures in love, that kind of joy wants to travel. It's “good news” that can't be contained! It wants to spread like wildfire!

Last weekend we sang the hymn “The Summons,” including this stanza:

Will you leave yourself behind
If I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind
 And never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
Should your life attract or scare?
 Will you let me answer prayer
 In you and you in me?

A life of faith **will** attract others. A sense of peace in the midst of the turmoil of the world, acts of generosity by people whose material means are slim, a happy heart despite loss, enduring trust in trying circumstances, hope regardless of heartache, these are things that make people wonder, scratch their heads, ask, “What does she know that I don’t?” “What does he have that I don’t?”

At this point in the world’s history, living a life of faith is countercultural. So some people will be hostile toward it and toward us. It’s true of all of us: we’re tempted to reject what we don’t understand. But we catch more flies with honey than vinegar, so we don’t reject or judge those who reject or judge us. We extend the hook of love. We’re not looking to conquer; we’re looking to embrace. Our goal isn’t to exclude but to include.

The Lord’s **not** calling most of **us** to leave our jobs and families in order to follow Him. He’s calling us to follow Him **through** caring for our families, **through** performing our jobs, coping with unemployment or underemployment, or living out our retirement soulfully, wholeheartedly, honestly, responsibly. The time **may** come when there’s a different call, an urgent call to follow in a different way, like upon the shores of the Sea of Galilee, or after December 7, 1941, or after September 11, 2001. **If** and **when** that other call comes, may we be **ready** to leave our nets and follow! Meanwhile, living in love is the best way to set the hook of love! Amen

¹Oxford Languages definition, Google search.

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

