

Epilogue: Have Your Caught Any Fish?
May 16, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: John 21:1-14

In American culture, the act of going fishing, or should I say 'goin' fishin', is about more than just catching fish. Whether you grew up in the city or the country, fishing is as much therapy as it is sport or provision of dinner.

Last weekend, for example, we gave thanks to God for the life of Sylvia Nance, mother of our member Ruby Jones and her siblings, grandmother to member Shawanda Jones and her cousins, and great grandmother to Trey, Justin and Daniel and their many cousins. Momma Sylvia, as her family knew her, was the matriarch who never turned anyone away from her home or her table. She worked hard in the spinning mill for 30 years. But she also knew when it was time to go fishing and she took her kids and grandkids every chance she had.

These days, as country music continues to grow in popularity well beyond the Conway Twitty set, the pastime of fishing pops up in song after song. Take a recent hit by Brad Paisley. As with some of the best country songs, the lyrics not only tell a story, but they make you laugh. I won't sing the song, but the words go like this:

Well I love her
But I love to fish
I spend all day out on this lake
And "heck" is all I catch

Today she met me at the door
Said I would have to choose
If I hit that fishin' hole today
She'd be packin' all her things
And she'd be gone by noon

Well I'm gonna miss her
When I get home
But right now I'm on this lakeshore
And I'm sittin' in the sun
I'm sure it'll hit me

When I walk through that door tonight
That I'm gonna miss her

Oh, lookie there, I've got a bite.

(Now, I know including those lyrics in a sermon may get me in hot water with some of our women. But hey, with the national NRA convention in town this weekend, I thought I'd be inclusive.)

Let me get back on track (which may not be easy at this point). Whatever reason we have for going fishing, we do it in part just to get away, to disconnect from the world and to reconnect with nature and ourselves. We go to clear our minds or maybe to collect our thoughts before we re-enter this loud, confusing, cluttered, way-too-busy life.

As we continue our Eastertide series on the sayings of the risen Christ, we hear today the story of the disciples going fishing. Most Biblical scholars believe this story was added later to the Gospel of John, after it was first written - an epilogue that provides a formal conclusion to the gospel.

I wonder whether the disciples went fishing that day for the same reasons we do. Yes, they might have needed something to eat, and some of them were professional fishermen, so it may have been like work. But it also seems possible that they just wanted to get away and try to make sense of things. Their friend, and teacher, the one they thought was the long-expected messiah, had been tortured and crucified. They were utterly disoriented, lost. They don't know where to go, what to think, what to feel, what to do.

We can almost hear the resignation in Simon Peter's voice as he says:

"Well, I am going fishing," to which his friends say, "Well, we'll go with you."

Scripture tells us that they fished all night and caught nothing. At sunrise, they hear a voice from the beach.

"Have you caught any fish?" the stranger said.

"No," they respond.

"Then try fishing on the other side of the boat," the stranger said. They did, and in just a few minutes they had so many fish in the net they could hardly haul it in.

* * *

Here in America, it might be said that we in the mostly white, European American Protestant church have been fishing on one side of the boat for the last fifty or seventy-five years. We've been hauling in the nets, but there have been fewer and fewer fish. The reasons for the decline in the mainstream church are complex. They invite misinterpretation of society's changes along with bad theological explanations of what God is or isn't doing.

One author, a Congregational church pastor in New England, has written a book that likens the decline of the Protestant church in America to the plagues that Egypt faced just before Moses led Israel to the promise land. That's a harsh word for many of us to hear. I don't think for a minute that God has sent challenges to rain down on the church to teach us a lesson by suffering. That vengeful God is not the God I know.

On the other hand, God sent the plagues to get the Pharaoh's attention, to get him to free the Hebrews before something worse happened. So, whether we consider them plagues or just reality, the trends she highlights are worth understanding. They are:

- A decline in membership, caused in part by the church's misreading of differences in how generations worship and practice their faith.
- Spiritual boredom on the part of many worshippers.
- Too much inward focus by individual churches.
- Low levels of commitment by church members.
- Closed social and power systems within churches.
- And, anxiety about evangelism.¹

Like the gospel itself, these realities should make the church at large squirm, at the very least, if not go to its knees and ask for forgiveness and guidance.

As for us at Caldwell, we should go to our knees and give thanks for what we have – and respond to God's blessings with all we have. As a church that is effectively three

¹ Becoming a Multicultural Church by Laurene Beth Bowers, from chapter 1, p. 23

years old, Caldwell was reborn as a diverse and inclusive community of believers. We credit the remnant of the “old Caldwell,” those who opened their doors and their hearts to new kinds of members. We should also credit those who came here who had both a deep commitment and experience in building a diverse church.

The reborn Caldwell has not had time to get too set in its ways. As a congregation, you are comfortable with change and risk taking. God forbid that we should ever start to use the seven deadliest words in the church – “We have never done it that way.” You don’t have an in-bred group, family or otherwise, that meets unofficially out in the parking lot, tries to control everything and protects its power at all costs (at least I hope not). As a missional church, you seek to be outwardly focused, which many experts say is the best way to stay inwardly healthy.

All of these aspects of our life here are fantastic blessings. We don’t have to unwind years of bad habits of being church in ways that have led other churches to shrink. None of this is to throw stones or stand in judgment of churches that are shrinking and struggling. As I said, the challenges facing the Protestant church at large are complex and not easily fixed. It is to say that to whom much has been given, much is expected.

In addition to seeking to be a missional church, we are by most definitions a multicultural church, as I wrote about in my newsletter column this month. By multicultural, I mean a community that seeks to recognize and honor multiple cultures and ethnic traditions rather than one dominant culture.

In some respects, to seek to be a multicultural church is to do as Christ told the disciples, to fish on the other side of the boat. As a church reborn in a multicultural body, I believe we are called to be true to that identity, to learn more about it, strengthen it and model it.

Population projections show that by 2015, whites will no longer be a majority in Charlotte. Our city will be many hues of humanity from that point on. As this town, settled 250 years ago largely by white Scottish Presbyterians, turns many new colors, we at Caldwell have been given a head start, a gift, a growing, thriving, missional and multicultural church. It is as if God has already thrown the net to the new side of our boat and hauled in a net full of different members, stories, experiences and possibilities. Now we must follow God’s lead: keep tossing the net and keep gathering in different kinds of people.

As I’ve said, many here have experience in doing that. Later this month I will know a lot more. I will attend the PCUSA National Multicultural Church conference in Chicago. I go

as a member of a team that will organize that same conference when it comes to Charlotte in 2012. The conference agenda is full of sessions about best practices, helpful models and examples and the latest learnings about how to be a multicultural church. I hope to learn even more ways we can continue to build our multicultural muscles, and I'll report back to you in early June.

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But here's the even better news. We don't all have to attend conferences to advance what God has started here. We share a wonderful, immediate opportunity that has literally landed on our doorstep. As most of you know, we have been listening for God's guidance for how we might best use our most ample resources as a congregation – our Price Education building.

Now those prayers are being answered with the sounds of construction workers and very soon children's voices as the Central Avenue Bilingual Preschool expands to the Caldwell campus. Furniture and equipment should arrive this week and the children the week after that – 34 preschoolers. Ann Alford, the session and others have worked tirelessly to get us to this happy day.

Last week, I attended a meeting of a number of Presbyterian churches involved in ministry to our Latino neighbors. It was a welcome contrast to what we have seen and heard coming out of Arizona. Cesar Carhuachin, who leads Latino ministries for our Presbytery and who preached here a few weeks ago, made the point that we should be realistic about whether we will see these neighbors in worship any time soon. Many are Catholic, speak little English and almost all prefer to worship in Spanish, just as we English speakers prefer to worship in English.

Cesar shared some data from a survey of Latinos about how churches could be most helpful in their lives. The top-ranked answers included things like hosting classes in English or setting aside space for a food bank.

I found that information helpful and the suggested ministries worthwhile. But I also asked a question. What if, initially at least, we didn't try to do ministry TO them or wrangle them into worship to fill out our pews? Instead, why not invite them into fellowship WITH us, a meal or a fun activity that transcends cultural or language barriers?

To my surprise, this seemed to be a novel idea to most in the room, including those with some experience in Latino outreach. But once the idea settled in, all seemed to agree

that fellowship would be a welcomed – if a bit unexpected – first step to building relationships with our Latino neighbors.

So, that is where you come in, I hope. We have two such opportunities in the next month. On Wednesday, May 26, ten days from now, the bilingual preschool hold a midday celebration of their arrival at Caldwell. Parents of all the families in the school, not just those with children at the Caldwell location, will be invited. Teachers and graduating children will be celebrated with fun and food and festivities. The school will have the event here to make the parents feel more at ease here – and to get to know some of us.

Then, about a month later, we at Caldwell plan to host the families of the children who will attend classes here. We plan a meal and some other ways we can get to know each other, before the school year ends and we say goodbye until the kids are back at school in September.

Stay tuned for more information about these God-given chances to build relationships that can truly advance peace and understanding in our city. I hope as many of you as possible can make time for both.

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The simple idea that relationships are built, deepened and enjoyed through fellowship, through breaking bread and sitting at table, comes straight from scripture, or course. The gift of hospitality and fellowship over meals resonates throughout scripture, just as it does in the epilogue to John.

After the disciples had hauled the net full of fish on to the shore, they saw the stranger who had called out to them. He was cooking bread and fish over a fire there on the beach.

“Come and have breakfast,” Jesus said, and the disciples’ eyes were opened and they recognized that their host was their Lord. So the disciples sat down and ate. That morning, recognizing Christ, they didn’t worship. They didn’t rush out to serve in Christ’s name. At that moment, they sat down and shared fellowship with roasted fish and toasted bread by the warmth of the fire.

Friends, as we continue to be good stewards of what God has started here, let us pray that we can continue to deepen the relationships among those of us who are already

here in the name of Christ. So many of us have new friendships that we hope will last for many years to come.

But let us never forget that our real purpose here is to fish for new friends in Christ, serve others in Christ's name and to be good hosts with all that we have. So, let us pray that we learn more about how to toss our nets over the unexpected side of the boat. And when it comes time to eat together, with friends old and new, of every color, experience, perspective and walk of life, may God always open our eyes to see Christ in each others' faces.

Amen.