

Jesus sure knew how to fish. What would Bill Dance give to have Jesus on the lake with him? With Jesus as your fishing partner, you easily would win enough bass tournaments to pay off that \$70,000 fishing boat. They say when Peter let down the nets at Jesus's command, the catch nearly sank the vessels they were in; this, after a long night of one empty net after another. Jesus knew how to catch 'em. But this story isn't about catching fish, not ultimately. You know what it's about. I don't have to tell you.

Jesus had been fishing awhile in Galilee, and the catch was overwhelming. Once word spread about his teaching and healing, there wasn't enough room on the beach to contain all the people. So Jesus had to ask for a little help. Would Peter mind rowing him out a few yards so Jesus could have some breathing room? And Jesus, who had caught so many people's attention, was about to catch Peter's.

Peter didn't know what to do with Jesus in his boat. To his credit and against his best instincts, he obeyed. It didn't make any sense, but he also took the boat into deeper water and let down the nets. When the nets came back full, Peter fell on his knees and begged Jesus to get away from him. Jesus was too much of a good thing. His light shined a little too bright. If Jesus didn't mind, Peter preferred that Jesus leave him and his sins alone.

But Jesus had a better idea. First, he told Peter to relax.

"Don't be afraid," he said. And then, he invited Peter into God's work, the work for which Jesus was sent and had started already in Galilee. He hardly gave Peter a choice. "From now on, you'll be working with me." And of course, you know Jesus wasn't talking about catching fish.

Jesus is still fishing. Two thousand years later, and he's still using sinners like us to catch people. I don't know how he does it. What do we know about fishing? And we are scared to death. Not so much of Jesus, but mostly of the fish! What if we use the wrong bait and fish get angry at us? What if someone asks us a question about God, and we get all tangled up in the net trying to answer? If we could come to worship, pay our offering, serve in some way and otherwise be left alone, that would be great. But no, Jesus just smiles that I'm-the-captain-of-this-ship-not-you smile, and tells us he's got bigger plans. "Come on, let's fish for people."

On the one hand, we're so grateful someone fished for us.

Sunday School teachers, parents, friends, ministers threw the gospel net over us and with love drew us gently into the boat. Thanks to them, we know something about the love of God, forgiveness, purpose, the life everlasting. Salvation isn't automatic, you know. It takes a community of people who'll bring you on board, nurture you, demonstrate in their own lives how

God's mercy transforms and empowers. Where would we be if someone hadn't cast the net for us?

On the other hand, we feel so inadequate to cast the gospel toward others. We're not qualified to have deep conversations about matters of faith. Besides, everybody we know has been caught already. This is the Bible Belt, after all, fished to near extinction of the species. We need to know more before we go fishing: demographics, training programs, methods for keeping us and the fish safe. And Jesus just smiles that get-over-yourself smile. "Come on," he says in his resurrected glory, "I caught you. Now I release you with my power. Let's go fishing."

Why? Why fish these difficult waters? Because God loves the fish, all of them, even the barracudas and the carp. One of the commentaries on this passage mentions that the Sea of Galilee or Lake of Genesserat was home to three species of fish used for commercial purposes. Peter and his friends likely would have had these three kinds in their boats. I don't know. Three kinds sounds like way too few to me. I'm not sure we can name all the fish in the waters around us. Doctor fish and lawyer fish. Politicians, factory workers, managers and technicians. Fish of too many colors to count, some even with rainbows on their sides. God loves all of them. In fact, God loves them so much the Son dies fishing for them. He casts his biggest net from the top of a cross,

flinging his arms open. You may wonder why we can't stop with the fish we have already. Because God loves all the fish in the deep, blue sea, and wants to bring in all he can.

Well, okay. We might be willing to join the cause, but that last line gets us, referring to the first disciples. "They left everything and followed Jesus." Everything? Does every disciple have to leave everything in order to fish with Jesus?

Some do. It's part of their calling. St. Francis of Assisi heard the call of Christ, and was famous for leaving everything, including the clothes off his back. Villagers covered him in a hurry. Albert Schweitzer was headed toward tenure at the university. When Christ called, he left it all – the office, the secure medical practice, the students – to go fish in Africa. I heard about a fellow who left everything, including his mom and dad. They said he wouldn't survive, that he wasn't made of the right stuff. He went to Brazil anyway, where he became one with a native tribe for Jesus's sake. So yeah, if we're being frank, sometimes the call to fish with Jesus means leaving your former life behind you.

But some fishers, really most fishers, stay right where they are. Their location doesn't change, just their eyes. They start to see the world as an ocean, and they go fishing right outside the front door. Maybe they have to leave behind the idea that they

don't know enough to fish. Maybe they have to take off the notion that there are no more fish to catch. But mostly they fling their nets right in their own backyard and wherever else they go in the neighborhood, trusting that God can use them to draw others close. Not all fishers have to drop everything. But all of them have to change the way they go about their business. Got to change. Got to.

Tom Sanders, a fellow minister and evangelism teacher, was my partner in a leadership development group. We talked to each other over the phone once a month as part of the process. I was whining and complaining to him about my lack of evangelism skills, but he wasn't very sympathetic. He said, "Instead of making evangelism that thing you have to add to your already too long to-do list, think about this. Try to do everything you do with an evangelistic twist." So when I make a session agenda, make room for a prayer for recent visitors? Uh-huh. Work outside the office in places where people are rubbing shoulders and forming friendships. Yep. Invite people outside the church to be a part of courses and small groups and special events. You got it. "Don't fixate on what you can't do," Tom told me, "focus on little things you can do right in front of you." When Tom told me that, I had a vision of Jesus, smiling that why-are-you-making-this-so-hard smile. "Come on," says the Lord, "they're biting."

We still don't like that word evangelism. All our defenses are up. It just means sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus, drawing others toward that community where forgiveness, purpose, and true hope are found, caring enough to toss the net that once found you and brought you near. Evangelism is only a dirty word because we've let others make it so.

Other words are much scarier. Words like lifeless, as in having lost a sense of direction, marking time and content to wait for the end; self-satisfied, as in feeling no need to grow in our discipleship, comfortable in our routines and allergic to change; uncaring, as in no longer concerned about the well-being of those around us, confusing indifference toward others with giving them room. We ought to be a lot more afraid of those words than the word that means reaching out to love our neighbors with the good news of Jesus.

Don't be afraid of fishing. It's not like we haven't already started. You would have seen for yourself had you gone with the youth group last weekend and seen all those unfamiliar faces. And I know for a fact that many of you go out of your way to make sure that any fish who show up on Sunday receive a warm welcome to the boat. And there are some of us who already see the world as an ocean and have brought your friends to this community to share with you the life that comes from God.

It was time to take down the bulletin board on which we wrote all the things that brought us joy in our congregation's life. I read your remarks many, many times. Perhaps you remember the one from someone who said something like from the day he arrived not too long ago he or she felt loved and included, that we helped make this place home. And that's what he or she was looking for, home. I don't aim to embarrass whoever wrote that statement. I aim to say don't tell me you can't fish.

Thank goodness someone fished for us. We've been caught up in that community that experiences something of the love of God, forgiveness, purpose, the hope of eternal life. Just as sure as we have been caught, we are released to troll the waters right outside our doors. I hope your eyes have been changed, and that you see Jesus smiling that we-can-do-this smile.

Come on, since God loves them so, so much, let's catch some people.