

This is the fourth Sunday after Epiphany and our gospel readings have been focused on the beginning of Jesus ministry. We have heard a voice from heaven announcing “this is my son the beloved, in whom I’m well pleased.”

Last week we heard Jesus reading from Isaiah 61 in his home town of Nazareth and saying that the scripture was fulfilled in its hearing. Jesus is initially well regarded, then he goes on to say that God loves other people as well the Israelites, which makes the people mad and they try to kill him.

I didn’t mention this last week, but another important element of that lesson is that it foreshadows the crucifixion. Jesus proclaims the beginning of his ministry in a house of worship and the religious people are offended, a mob of angry people try to kill him. And that is exactly what will happen at the end of his ministry, Jesus will be teaching in the temple in Jerusalem, and the religious people will be offended and will indeed have Jesus killed.

In other words, right from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus and religious professionals are at odds with each other. And that will continue to the very end of his ministry.

In our lesson for today Jesus calls his first disciples, Simon, James and John. And they are fishermen. Just plain, regular, people... This is significant, in a cultural world dominated by hierarchy, Jesus doesn’t call the best and the brightest, he calls regular every-day people like you and me.

And I identify with that. I grew up on a farm, in the middle of nowhere special and the only thing I excel at is being average! These fishermen are my kind of people!

Jesus is the master of parables and metaphors. In our gospel lesson we have fishing, and the transformation of scarcity into abundance. Fishing is the metaphor for the catching of God’s people. And it’s not just a little catch, it’s so big we don’t know what to do with it all. Jesus says, “from now on you will be catching people.” Let’s reflect with this lesson this morning and see what kind of fish we might catch...

Quick story... I grew up in a family that liked to go fishing. Our farm was only a mile away from Eagle lake. My Dad took my brothers and me out quite a bit, usually on a Sunday afternoon.

When we were starting families, my brothers and my sister, we all had sons about the same age. Family get togethers often seemed to involve fishing. I remember the first fish that my son Jon caught; he must have only been three. We were at my parent's place on big lake, up by Monticello, fishing off their dock using worms on plain hooks and bobbers.

Tons of little Sunnies, we were almost guaranteed to catch a few. I was able to convince Jon to hold the little pole and put his hook and bobber in the water. Just seconds later, the Sunnies were nibbling on the worm. Eventually we got one hooked.

Jon was squealing with laughter as he tugged on the pole and reeled in the line, he thought there was someone under the water playing a game with him. As soon as he saw the little sun fish break out of the water, it scared him and he didn't know what to do.

I remember he jumped, and his first impulse was to throw the fishing pole in the lake. But fortunately, his second impulse was to look at me, and I reassured him it was alright. Within seconds he was laughing, giggling and showing off his "first fish" to all the cousins. He was suddenly "the man, Jon the fisherman..."

Quickly there was a scramble, eight little cousins were all grabbing fishing poles, hooks, worms and bobbers every which way standing on that dock doing everything they could to catch a little sun fish. And after that, Jon was hooked, he wanted to go fishing every day! We spent a lot of time at pottery pond. He was nuts about fishing. Some of his best memories are fishing in Canada, with the church group.

So, what is it about fishing that makes us so captivated? Well, the truth is-- fishing is just plain incredibly catchy! We fish in faith that we might catch something; but in truth we don't always know **if** we'll catch anything, or **what** we're going to catch. When we catch a fish, it's as though we receive a little miracle; it's always a little surprise. Out of nothing, we receive something.

Like going to church, when we act out of faithfulness, sometimes we experience the unexpected light and love of Christ in the dark places of our lives. Sometimes in our sin we catch forgiveness, in our fear we catch understanding, in our sorrow and despair we catch meaning, and in our brokenness, we catch reconciliation. God comes to us and gives us “little sun fish;” little miracles of healing, joy, wonder and surprise. Out of nothing, we receive something.

And then something else very important also happens. Fishing is so incredibly catchy that it moves us toward a life of fishing. Fishing itself has the power to catch us and to move us toward a way of life, toward discipleship... Fishing is the perfect metaphor for making disciples.

The invitation to “follow Jesus” is fundamentally about being caught, and then going to work to catch others. In our Lutheran identity we have a strong tradition of understanding that we are called to love our neighbor. In baptism we are caught, we are called, and our calling is to love our neighbor.

And we experience that calling in two very different ways. Sometimes we love to love our neighbor because they are people we enjoy being with, and we enjoy doing things for them. But that’s not always the case. Luther said your neighbor is given to you. In other words, God puts people in your path that need your help, and sometimes we don’t like that person...

And not only that, sometimes the person needs something we don’t want to do. So, imagine, someone you don’t like asks you to help with something you don’t want to do... Then, what are you going to do? Are you going to make an excuse and walk away from the person, or are you going to roll up your sleeves and help? This is a tough situation... And this is exactly where we encounter God’s command to love the neighbor-- as a cross.

Sometimes it’s uncomfortable when we are commanded to love the neighbor. Christianity is not all fun and games, songs and praise... Christianity is also about picking up your cross and following Jesus. This is serious stuff, sometimes Christianity asks for a pound of flesh.

And this is also exactly where we experience the miracle of abundance out of scarcity. In our Gospel reading Jesus asks Simon to go out to the deep water and let down the nets. Simon is reluctant, he argues

with Jesus, “why bother, we were there all night long, there’s nothing there.” Finally, he says, “Okay, if you say so...” They follow Jesus request, and suddenly there is so much fish the nets are tearing and the boats are being swamped...

This fishing when there doesn’t seem to be anything to gain, points to a universal spiritual truth about the cross, and it’s a paradox... Eternal life or abundant life comes exactly from spending yourself in service to others when there doesn’t seem to be anything to gain. Because being of service, helping a neighbor is like healing for a restless soul.

Being of service is meaningful. Being of service is being God’s hands. Being of service is transformational. You all know this to be true. Where’s the bigger blessing, in the giving or in the receiving?

Through this cross to love the neighbor, God transforms scarcity into abundance. And this is not magic or hocus pocus religion, this is deeply true and what makes us all universally human. And I’ll tell you, it’s catchy.

The good news this morning is that Jesus is the master fisherman, and we have been caught. We are all on a journey where God gives us the strength and imagination to bear our crosses for one another. As we live into our baptism, as we bear our cross to love, God is working miracles amongst us.

We pray for transformation, we pray for the kingdom to come, we dream about it, we yearn for it, we hope for it, and indeed as Martin Luther would say, it comes to us-- right here right now -- in meaning and understanding, in love and forgiveness—in abundance, so much we don’t know what to do with it all.

Fishing is catchy, Jesus is catchy, let’s all go fishing, let’s all serve each other without anything to gain, and let’s see what miracles, what fish we might catch...

Amen