
Aquarium Fishing

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

"Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

I'm going fishing!

I have brought along this beautiful aquarium! Do you like it?

I've cleaned all the water in it. I have made the oxygen flow just exactly right! I will put exactly the right kind of fish in it! I have made little figures and decorations so that the fish will be happy all the time. They'll have companionship and comfort.

I'm going fishing!

I will pipe in special music to the aquarium. I paid good money for it! It is soothing and transcendent. It's like the sound of those beautiful hump-backed whales that Joni Mitchell recorded so long ago.

I have made it perfectly comfortable in this aquarium. It cost a lot! But it is worth every penny!

I'm going fishing.

Anybody want to come with me? Do you think it'll work?

Last summer, my son and I went fishing. We went to the beach, which to my mind is still my favorite form of fishing. We had a single fishing rod apiece, and we had caught delicious little minnows. We baited each hook, and we heaved those weighted hooks as far out into the water as we could.

And do you know what we caught?

We caught every thing you can imagine. We had no idea what was out there in ocean. Have you ever been to the ocean? Have you seen what is under all that water?

It's amazing!

And we caught some of those things. We caught trout, which was great. Because they were what we actually wanted. We wanted to have a good supper. We caught some whiting, and they were tasty, too.

But we also caught strange things. I caught a sting-ray. My son caught a huge shark, and he took up thirty minutes of our time trying to get him in. I caught a catfish which I could not get off the hook at all. We caught all sorts of things, the good and the bad - the beautiful and the ugly.

All in all, we had a great fishing trip.

I wonder what Jesus wanted to catch when he told his companions, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Did he want to catch only the best fish?

Did he want to catch just the fish that were the easiest to pull in? Did he expect to spend an inordinate amount of time with the largest and most unwieldy of the fish - the sharks that prowl all over the ocean looking to devour?

Yes, I think he did. He wanted to catch everything. That's why later he would compare the kingdom of heaven to a huge net cast way out into the water. And that net was so huge that it would pull in everything - the good and the bad, the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares, the beautiful and the ugly.

That's why Jesus went out into the ocean. He didn't stand at the shore like my son and I trying to catch fish. He went out into the deep. He traveled to places that many righteous people would not go. He went into disreputable places. And he caught fish.

And you know what?

He did not use an aquarium. He did not use an aquarium when he went fishing.

Unfortunately, that's the method that many Christians use. We go fishing with aquariums. We make a beautiful space, with the water just right, and the temperature just right, and the food just right, and the interior design just right.

And then do you know what we do? We wait for people to jump in. We take a boat out to sea, carry the aquarium out there and we wait for people to jump into the aquarium.

No, that's not it. That's not the way Jesus catches people. Follow me, said Jesus, and I will make you fish for people. Jesus calls us to go out and get wet. He calls us to use long fishing rods and great nets. He wants us to catch everything. This fishing analogy of Jesus is a great one. We can learn about real evangelism by studying fishing.

"Follow me and I will make you fishers," said Jesus. Fishing takes practice, preparation, discipline. One must learn how to best throw the net, how to make the mouth of the net come open, too. I can throw the actual cast net a long way, but I cannot always make the net come open, so that it will actually form a circle around the fish. One must learn how to cast the line on a rod. Again, some folks can cast a long way, but their accuracy is awful. There may be fish on the right, but they know only how to cast the line to the left. Casting, like discipleship, is an acquired habit; it rewards practice.

Some of the best fishing, of course, is done with a lot of people. One of the nets I like best is the seine, a long net of maybe fifty or sixty or even one hundred feet. It takes three or four people to stand on the shore at one end and hold the net, hold it firmly on land, stand firm. Another three or four people, or maybe more, venture out into the surf, straight out into the ocean, with the other end. They walk until they are almost over their heads, and then they turn.

But they turn a particular way. They turn against the current, so that the current forces fish into the net. This is hard work, dragging a long net against the current. But it is the best way to use the current. One of the great elements of the seine is that it brings in everything; it is not selective.

I remember one seining trip when we were out in the ocean hauling with all our might; we could feel the vigorous tug of fish actually hitting the net. Our hearts raced. But once we were back on the beach, we found not a single fish. What had happened? We searched the net and found a single hole, one tear; through which every fish had escaped. The net had not been properly prepared. Someone had missed the maintenance. The net had a hole in it.

Discipline requires keeping the net mended, hanging it up to dry cleanly after every expedition, moving it carefully.

Fishing is also patience, isn't it? It is waiting, maybe trolling along some Georgia lake or maybe standing out in the ocean

waves with a single line strewn out into the sea.

Fishing is noticing the weather, watching the wind and the clouds. Fishing like the gospel dear friends, like the gospel fishing is always practiced in context. It does no good to sit at one lake and wish I was on some other lake. It does no good to stand at the ocean and wish the weather were different. On that day, in that place, I fish in context, according to what the conditions are. So it is with the proclamation, and the living, of the Christian gospel. Our context is this time and this place. Know where the wind blows; watch the clouds.

The New Testament image of fishing is a great net. Over and over again, the kingdom of God is a huge net cast over different numbers of people and species. We now, in the Church, are the artisans of the net, the keepers of discipline, endurance, and patience. But the net itself is the great grace of God. And, of course, our fishing -that net- is not designed to trap people against their will. It is designed to attract people into this marvelous embrace of God.

Finally, it is part of our discipleship to fish for others. It is evangelism, plain and simple. It is serving the poor, plain and simple. It is healing the sick, plain and simple. Evangelism means spreading good news. Wherever you have said something good, healthy, uplifting, loving, you have evangelized. You have gone fishing! Jesus said, "Follow me," but his statement did not end there. He wanted the Sons of Zebedee to keep fishing. He said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. To follow Jesus is to fish. It is not creating a beautiful aquarium for folks to jump into.

Go out and use all that great equipment that you got as a child, or you got for Christmas, or you inherited. There's a lot of great fishing equipment going unused these days!

Follow me, and I will bring you into the net? No, follow me and I will let you drag the net. I will let you cast the net, mend the net, care for the net. Follow me, and I will let you go out into the deep, even up to your heads. Follow me, and I may make you struggle against the current. Follow me, and I will send you into places of great peace and relaxation, and also great joy and excitement.

Follow me, said Jesus, and I will teach you how to proclaim, by word and example, the good news of grace, the good news of the kingdom.

AMEN.

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