

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-23

January 27, 2008

The Rev. Peter C. Jacobson, STS

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't much like fish. And I don't much like fishing. I remember going fishing with my father as a young boy. By my recollection, we almost never caught anything. My memories of fishing are of long boring days, waiting and waiting, with precious little to show for it. Once I remember, my dad did catch one little fish. Unfortunately, as it lay at our feet at the edge of the water, our family dog trotted over and gobbled it up.

But that was just as well for me, because as a boy I didn't like the taste of fish. And the truth is, I still don't. I've had fish fresh from the ocean, and prepared by a chef, and I guess on a couple of occasions it tasted "ok," but even then, I found myself thinking that I would really prefer some chicken or a nice steak.

No. I don't like fish, and I don't like fishing. And the truth is, an awful lot of Lutherans don't like fishing! At least not the kind of fishing Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel. You know, the kind where you fish for people. We Lutherans might enjoy an afternoon on a lake or river waiting for the big one to bite, but ask us to be fishermen like Simon Peter, and Andrew — call us to follow Jesus and be "fishers of men," and all of a sudden we tend to clam up. Talking about our faith, sharing our own experience of God's love, telling others about Jesus, inviting them to church — that just doesn't seem to be our cup of tea — or coffee.

Many non-denominational or "evangelical" congregations are known for having their members out in the community talking about their church and its activities, sharing about how Jesus is in their lives, and bringing the Gospel of Christ. And some of those congregations have experienced great growth in numbers. But one needs to ask: "growth in numbers of what? Authentic Christian disciples? Or just consumers of slickly packaged, tenuously Christian spirituality?"

I suspect it's always some of both. It's interesting though, there is increasing doubt about whether those mega-churches are actually forming many new Christians. The grand-daddy of all evangelical mega-churches is the non-denominational *Willow Creek Community Church* in suburban Chicago. Most all mega-churches have patterned themselves on Willow Creek, and have adopted their pattern of what they call "entertainment evangelism" and seeker-friendly services. After a multi-year qualitative study of its ministry as well as 30 other churches, Greg Hawkins, executive pastor of Willow Creek, recently released their findings in his book entitled "*Reveal: Where Are You?*" (2007). And you know what they discovered? The one thing that Willow Creek and these other mega-churches thought they were doing was making new disciples. But their startling conclusion

was that that was precisely what they *weren't* doing. They've been attracting huge crowds, but they've not been making stronger disciples.

And of course, one could talk about of the shortcomings of some of the heavy-handed methods used by some evangelical churches — how many people are turned off by such fishing techniques? Kathleen Norris reacts to one evangelism program being pushed which was telling people to use summer social gatherings as opportunities to convert people. Norris writes:

[G]oing up to people at a picnic and asking "Do you know the Lord?" [is] a good way to get yourself stuck with a barbecue fork. And you would deserve it. (p.301)

In Christian charity though, we probably ought to not focus on others faults. We should instead ask ourselves why it is that we Lutherans are so typically uncomfortable in the fishing Jesus calls us to? Why is it that the kind of fishing we usually practice is where we just sit in the boat of the church, and we wait for the fish to jump in?

Well, maybe it's partly because we think of fishing for people — we think of evangelism itself, as a kind of imperialism — trying to get others to be just like us. Or we think that evangelism is as a kind of emotional manipulation — trying to get someone to have a particular kind of emotional life-changing experience.

Perhaps we think of evangelism as being what pushy, self-righteous Christians do — forcing themselves and their style of faith on you — without respecting you and your beliefs and your own situation in life. Trying to get you to go to *their* church, rather than your own, because *their* church is where it's really happening, with the band, the big screen projection system, the kid's video-game play area, and the latté coffee bar.

But of course, that's *not* evangelism. That's *not* the kind of fishing for people, that Jesus is talking about here, or anywhere else. Indeed, that is what pastors usually call "sheep-stealing" — or maybe we should call it "fish-stealing."

Getting people to come to your congregation, from some other congregation, is *not* evangelism, even though studies show lots of mega-churches grow precisely because they attract people who are already Christians from other congregations. They tend to grow, not from true evangelism, not from forming new Christians. They grow out of a "bigger-is-better" mentality — as in, "our congregation is bigger, so it must be better."

I hope we are turned off by that mentality, and don't fall into the trap that suggests evangelism — fishing for men — is about getting people to come to our congregation *from* other congregations. Because the truth is, *evangelism is isn't about our congregation*. Evangelism is all about the Gospel! The word evangelism comes from the root word "evangel," which is translated "good news." Evangelism is about sharing good news with others. Evangelism is not about coercing someone into something. Nor is evangelism good news about our

congregation being better than someone else's . Evangelism is sharing the good news **about Jesus**. The good news that Jesus came to fulfill, as we heard in our Gospel today: *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and the shadow of death, light has dawned.”* St. Matthew is quoting from our First Reading, where the prophet foretells the coming of the Messiah, saying, when this, the Anointed One comes, there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. The prophet declares:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, on them light has shined. . .The Lord has increased [their] joy, they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest. . .for the yoke of their burden, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken!

Jesus came to be Light for those living in darkness. Jesus came to break the burden, the yoke under which people strain, so that they will be free — free from whatever oppresses them.

Being turned off by some unhelpful ways of evangelism then, must not keep us from sharing the good news of Jesus. Richard Neuhaus expresses it like this:

*[T]he proclamation of God's love in Christ is **the most important thing** the Church does, because it is what she does uniquely. If the Church did not do this, nobody would. . .She. . .is sustained in being by God's love in Christ, and **love is either shared or lost.***

What we have we are obliged to share. Others have a right to it, even if they don't know that. . . .Others have a right to know, so that they might have an opportunity to believe. . .To spare other people the chance to accept or reject the most important truth about themselves is not a course of love, but of contempt. It is an act of arrogance, deciding that others will not have an opportunity to [believe].

(Death on a Friday Afternoon, pp.171-2)

Love is either shared or lost. And the most loving thing we can do is share the good news of Jesus.

Jesus is the Light that has dawned in our world — the Light that can never be overcome, or diminished, or extinguished. And this Light is for **all** people — especially those who are living in darkness. Jesus is Light for those who are living in the darkness of fear — fear of loss of job, fear of family stress and situations, fear of illness and death. Jesus is Light for those who are living in the darkness of alcoholism and drug abuse. Jesus is Light for those who are struggling to emerge from the darkness of physical or sexual abuse. Jesus is Light for those who live in the shadowy twilight of promiscuity, or adultery. Jesus is Light for those who are afraid of the past, afraid of the present, or afraid of the future. Jesus is Light for those who live in that gray uncertainty between just barely making ends meet, and

being homeless, hungry, and desperate.

Evangelism then is not ultimately about getting people to come to our congregation — it's about caring for people so much, that we want them to have the Light, in the darkness of their lives. Evangelism is about loving others so much, that we want the Light to shine in their lives. If we share the good news of Jesus, we don't ultimately have to worry about numbers. God will take care of that. ***We just need to share the good news!***

In his book, *Reading the Signs*, Pastor J. Kalas writes:

*Most of our witnessing is likely to happen in passing moments of conversation — those occasions when we show, in relatively minor ways, who we are and to whom we belong. I think of a suburban woman who was playing tennis with her good but quite secular friends. In a conversation break between sets she began referring to something she had read that morning. It would have been easy to say, “I read something this morning.” Instead, with no attempt at [appearing super-pious], she simply introduced one word: “In my **devotional** reading this morning.” It was not a major soul-winning engagement. It was, however, a true sowing of seed. By a word, she had opened the door for . . . further conversation.*

Perhaps our greatest problem. . .is that. . .we are so possessed of the idea that we must say something dramatic and far-reaching that we fail to say the small, immediate and potentially significant thing. . .

The issue is not that we should become more aggressive about sharing our faith. It is that we should be more sensitive to the needs of the world around us, and more sensitive to the subtle prodding of the Holy Spirit . . . To be sensitive to the Holy Spirit must mean that we will be more sensitive to people and their pain; to be more sensitive to people ought to make us more open to God and his purposes.

Jesus calls us — you and me — his body in the world — his hands and feet and mouths in this world — to follow Him, to proclaim with Him: “*repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” He calls us to share good news of a great joy that has come, and is coming to all people — that a Savior has been born for us.

That's what evangelism is all about. It's about us fishing for men and women and children, by sharing with them, the good news that the hope and promise of Jesus, is ***for them.***

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.