

3 Epiphany Sermon The Rev. Megan Dembi

When I was young, my dad, my siblings and I would sometimes take trips out to Lake Lowell. In spite of the name Lake Lowell was actually a reservoir, and it had several canals that run in and out of it to get water back and forth from local farms. But even though Lake Lowell was man-made, it was home to several types of fish—not good fish, mind you—mostly garbage fish and catfish. But for fairly newly emigrated people from Romania still working towards the American dream, it made sense to spend some time out at Lake Lowell. It was a cheap way to have some fun and catch a snack.

Now I was young enough that I don't entirely remember the details of the finer points of fishing, but I remember it going a little something like this. Us kids shared a fishing pole, and we would take turns holding it while our dad would put a worm on the hook. Us older kids could try casting the line out ourselves, being careful not to accidentally catch the hook on something as we whipped the fishing rod behind us and then shot it out, letting the line fly and land in the water. We'd reel it in a bit and then wait. If we were lucky, a fish would become interested in our bait. If we were really lucky, it would try to eat the worm and clamp down on the hook. And if we were really really lucky, we'd yank the pole and reel that fish in, at which point our dad would remove the fish, throw it in our bucket, and we'd repeat the whole process.

So for anyone that knows nothing about fishing, that's a basic rundown of how it works, from someone that knows only slightly more than nothing about fishing.

Now Simon and Andrew would have known a lot more about fishing than I ever did. They were fishermen by trade, so they would have had to have been able to catch a lot of fish in order to make a living off of it. And it probably would have been a pretty weird experience for them when they were out fishing on the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus the carpenter from the hodunk little town of Nazareth came walking by and yelled out to them "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Imagine if Pat went down to Elverson hardware and told Bob to abandon the store and follow her instead—to travel Berks County with her to teach people about God. I'd be pretty impressed if Bob decided to follow her (and I'd be pretty impressed with Pat for even asking), but I honestly doubt that would ever happen.

The situation that Simon and Andrew found themselves in would have seemed just as unlikely aside from one big difference. It was Jesus asking Simon and Andrew to give up their livelihood to follow him. Even though Pat is a pretty great person, she isn't God incarnate. So instead of asking Jesus to calm down and think through what he was asking of them, Simon and Andrew immediately stop what they are doing, leave their boat and all their fishing equipment behind, and follow him. Soon after Jesus asks the same of James and John, and they too instantly stop what they are doing, even leaving behind their own father in the boat, and begin following Jesus. These four men were willing to give up their livelihood without a second thought in order to become followers of Christ.

And this serves as a good lesson for us of how we should prioritize our lives—of how our relationship with Christ should take precedence over our work or even our family and how important it is to be willing to follow Christ no matter the circumstances in our lives. But the really interesting part of this story is what Jesus is calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John to DO. "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

As I mentioned earlier, I have pretty limited knowledge of fishing, but I think I know enough to read between the lines of what Jesus was asking. In order to properly fish, there are a couple of things you need. First off, you need to go somewhere where there are actually fish. If you try to fish in a swimming pool, you aren't going to be terribly successful. Second, you need the right tools, a net or a fishing rod or even a spear depending on your preference. Third, you need bait. You can have all the right tools, but without bait to attract the fish you aren't going to have nearly as good of a catch. And lastly you need to have some luck on your side, because even in the right place with the right tools with the right bait, you may not catch anything.

Fishing for people to become followers of Jesus requires the same basic things. First, you need to go somewhere where there are actually people. If you tell the story of Christ to an empty room, you aren't going to be terribly successful. Second, you need the right tools. But like with fishing, the right tools can depend upon the person. Each person has unique gifts that they can use to help others become followers of Christ, whether that's a charismatic personality, a kind and listening ear, or even a quiet disposition so that speaking openly and boldly surprises people, each one of us have gifts that can help us lead others to Christ. Third, we need bait. And I don't mean bait like fancy keychains we can hand out that say "Jesus loves you" or free Starbucks coffee or anything like that. I mean something that would truly and deeply attract people to Christ—personal stories about how our faith has transformed our lives, good work in the community and helping the less fortunate, being kind to people even in their darkest moments. Those are the kinds of things that draw people into wanting to learn more about Jesus. And finally we need luck, because even if we are in the right place with

the right gifts and the right good deeds, people may still turn away from the good news of Jesus Christ. But the last thing we want to do is be the kind of fisher of people who sits in a boat empty-handed in the middle of a swimming pool complaining because no fish are jumping into our bucket.

Just like any good fisherman, we shouldn't give up just because we come up short sometimes. And just like any good fisherman, we shouldn't expect fish to always come to us. For us to become fishers of people, we need to think about how we got caught in Christ's net in the first place. We need to consider what people in today's world need in order to come to know Jesus for themselves, especially when so many who claim to follow him don't follow his example. We need to think about what we ourselves can do in order to invite people to follow Christ. And then we need to actually do all of those things. Jesus did not tell his followers to come to believe in him and then to simply nurture their own personal relationship with Christ. He told them to go out and share the good news and actively invite others into the fold, to go out and fish for people. So let's gather our gear, get in our boats, and go out into the waters of the world seeking out those who have yet to become followers of Christ, and invite them in. Amen.