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It’s All About the Catch!

My Grandpa had a pond in the northeast corner of the pasture. At first it was two “twin” ponds, lined up from north to south. Sometimes after church on Sunday we would go out to the farm for Grandma’s fried chicken. Then in the afternoon my sister, my cousins, and I would ask Grandpa to take us fishing. He would send us out to catch grasshoppers or dig for worms, and when we had enough bait he would load us into the back of his pickup-- which had cattle guards because sometimes he hauled calves. We would drive out to the pond and bait our hooks. At first, we used bamboo rods, watching for the bobber to go under water to tell us we had a fish on the hook. As we grew older, we learned to cast with rod and reel, trying to see how far we could throw the line without getting it caught in the bushes and cattails around the pond. Grandpa only had one rule about fishing. “You catch it, you clean it.” So, when the fishing was done we would join Grandpa behind the well house; he taught us to clean the catfish. Then we would take our catch into the house so Grandma could fry it up with cornmeal and serve us a supper of catfish and hash browns.

One summer the cattails were taking over the northern pond. Grandpa decided to dredge it out and remove the small piece of ground between the ponds, making one larger pond. To do that he needed to lower the water level in the pond. That summer my Dad, sister and I waded in the north pond, pulling a seine between us. We caught so many fish that after they were cleaned we froze them. That summer we ate a lot of fried catfish, so many that I had enough to last me a long time!

In our text today Simon and his companions have fished all night. Unlike my experience, they have been out in a boat, casting a large net over the side and pulling it in with their catch. This was no Sunday afternoon activity but hard work. Boats often worked in pairs, pulling the net between them to catch large schools of fish. This work was their livelihood. The fish they caught was not simply to feed their own family; it was to sell at market to provide for the things their family needed. Except this time they have caught nothing.

They are tired and weary from a long fruitless night. But the nets have to be cleaned and then hung up to dry. It is as they are washing their nets that Jesus comes to Simon Peter and asks Simon to row him out a short distance from shore. This is not Simon’s first encounter with Jesus, for Jesus has been in Simon’s home where he healed Simon’s mother-in-law of a high fever. (see Luke 4:38-41) Many others who were ill had also been brought to Jesus and were healed.

So, when Jesus asks Peter, Simon Peter, to row the boat a short distance from shore, Peter obeys. He is present as Jesus teaches the crowd from the boat. Perhaps he already recognizes Jesus as a teacher sent from God who is able to heal people. But when Jesus tells Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch,” Simon protests. Jesus may be a great teacher; Jesus may be able to heal people. But what does Jesus know about fishing! Simon Peter protests, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing!” But because Jesus has healed his mother-in-law, because he respects Jesus as a teacher and healer, Peter agrees, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

So that is what they do, and they catch an abundance of fish, so many that the nets begin to break. Peter calls for his partners in the second boat to come and help; together they pull in so many fish that the boats begin to sink.

Peter’s response is similar to Isaiah’s in the Old Testament passage we read today. Isaiah said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” In our New Testament text, Simon falls at Jesus’ knees and implores him, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” In the divine Presence neither Isaiah nor Simon feel worthy. They are aware of their own mistakes and sinfulness. But in both passages God’s call does not depend on the purity of the recipient. God comes to us as we are. God provides the remedy.

Jesus tells the fishermen, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” So, when they bring their boats to shore, they leave everything behind and follow Jesus.

Often when we talk about this story we focus on the disciples. We talk about what it must be like to be willing to leave everything behind to follow Jesus. We wonder if we would be able to do that. We talk about their courage, their faith. We may talk about giftedness. What qualities is Jesus looking for in his disciples? Perhaps we even see the disciples as heroes, maybe even as super heroes of faith.

Super heroes are enticing. Pop culture seems to love super heroes. I see it on the playground as children choose super hero powers in their games with each other. I see it in the popularity of Marvel movies and video games. We all want super heroes who have the power to solve all our problems. Sometimes we read of people in the Bible and think of them as “super heroes” somehow different, closer to God or more powerful than we are.

But these disciples were not super heroes. They were ordinary people, just fishermen, people perhaps a lot like us. Because none of us are super heroes with special powers; none of us are worthy. God doesn’t call us because we are worthy. Our Creator calls us because we are God’s beloved children, created in God’s image and likeness, and God loves us.

It really is as simple as that. This story is not about the disciples. It is about Jesus and God’s power shown through Jesus to draw people to himself. Yes, the fish were a great catch, an abundant catch. But the real “catch” was the disciples, who were so drawn to Jesus that they willingly left everything behind to follow and be with this teacher who knew God, and could heal, and even knew where to find the missing fish.

Jesus shows us a God who seeks the lost, as a shepherd searches for a lost sheep. Jesus shows us a God who waits patiently for wanderers to come home, and then runs to greet them, throwing a big party in their honor. Jesus shows us a God who refuses to throw stones at a sinner, who touches the untouchables, who speaks to the shamed and eats with the shunned. Jesus shows us a God who is willing to walk among us, in all our unworthiness.

So if it’s not about the disciples, not about us, what does Jesus mean when he says, “from now on you will be catching people”? This is not a call for us to become super heroes. I think it is an invitation to join Jesus as he draws all people to himself, expanding his circle to include people from the fringes, the vulnerable, the poor, also the strong and able. You see, it’s not about how worthy we are, how gifted we are, but about how very much God loves all people.

Jesus himself tells us what he is about. When he spoke at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19) He told the people that today this scripture was fulfilled in their hearing. It all sounded good until he reminded them that God had also sent prophets to the outsiders, to the widow of Zarephath and healing to the Syrian enemy, Naaman.

Jesus calls us to follow, learning from him, following his example. To catch people is to welcome the stranger, and feed the hungry, to visit the sick and clothe the naked. It means praying for our enemies and doing good to those who would harm us. It is to seek God’s Jubilee, God’s shalom, to put things right. It means offering forgiveness, even when we do not feel forgiving. Not because we are super heroes. Not because we can solve every problem. Not because it makes us worthy or gives us merit. But simply because we are God’s children; God’s love draws us in and bids us follow. We love because God loves us, and not just us, but everyone, good and bad alike. And that is the greatest “catch” of all.