

## “Throw Out Your Nets”

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

February 10, 2019

[Isaiah 6:1-8](#)

[Luke 5:1-11](#)

In the world of jokes, fishing jokes are a large sub-genre. Everybody has got a joke about fishing, or more specifically, about fishermen. I even found a website called [bestfishingjokes.com](http://bestfishingjokes.com). There, you can find jokes like this one:

Two men were fishing on a pier. The first man started telling the other one that the night before he caught a trout that was over 3 1/2 feet long.

The second man replied, “Oh yeah, well I was here 2 nights ago and I hooked something huge. After a 30 minute fight I finally pulled out an old lantern and the thing was still lit!”

The first man said “You’re lying. I can’t believe that.”

The second man said “I’ll tell you what – you knock a couple of feet off your trout and I’ll blow out my lantern.”

Fishing jokes often are like that – they are tall tales. Fishermen are known – fairly or not – for stretching the truth a bit about their fishing. Here’s another joke:

After an unsuccessful day of fishing, a pastor picked out three big fish in the market. He said to the man behind the counter, “Before you wrap them, toss them to me, one by one. That way I’ll be able to tell my congregation I caught those fish and I’ll still be telling the truth.”

There's just something about fishing that seems to bring out the exaggerator in people.

"Did I ever tell you about the fish I caught once that was *this* big?"

"Or, how about the time that I was fishing with my buddies and we caught so many fish that the nets were beginning to break? There were so many fish that we filled two boats and the boats even began to sink!"

Yeah, likely story. Sounds just like those jokes, except that last one was real. That last one is the story that we read in our Gospel lesson today. It seems that Simon and James and John were out fishing one night, but not having much luck. They would fish at night because then the fish would come toward the surface where the warmer water was, and it was easier to scoop them up in their nets. But this night, they caught nothing. They were surely quite exhausted and disappointed. Actually, this was their livelihood, so not catching any fish was not good at all. This was not just someone who is out fishing for fun and didn't catch anything. These are people who depend on fishing to pay the bills. And Simon says, "we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." Jesus came along and told them to fish in a little bit different place. Now Jesus was not a fisherman. Simon and James and John did this for a living. Jesus telling them to fish in a different place would be like a surgeon telling an electrician what kind of wire to use. It would be like me telling another guy how to part his hair. No, Jesus wasn't a fisherman, and here he was telling these *professional* fishermen how to do their jobs. They might be forgiven for politely refusing his suggestion, but that's not what they did. Simon said, "OK, we've been at this all night and have nothing to show for it, but we'll try it your way." When they hauled in more fish than even two boats could hold, they got an idea of who Jesus was. Jesus had been teaching them from the boats, but I don't think he wasn't teaching them about fishing techniques. Simon called Jesus "Master" when He was teaching. After they nearly sunk their boats with all of the fish, Simon

called Jesus “Lord.” Now, Simon knew the truth. Now, he knew who Jesus truly is. Now, he bowed down before Jesus and proclaimed his unworthiness.

It sounds a bit like Isaiah. Isaiah speaks of the glory of God, of God’s holiness and majesty, and he says of himself, “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” But God says to Isaiah, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And Isaiah responds, “Here am I; send me!” Jesus tells Simon, “Don’t be afraid – it’s time to start fishing for people.” Isaiah and Simon – and so many others throughout history – declare their unworthiness, and God says, “that’s not a problem.” God knows exactly who we are. We are, as Martin Luther declared, simultaneously righteous and sinful. We are servants of God, living into God’s call on our lives. We are here to follow God’s lead. We are here to go where God sends us. We are here to listen and obey when Jesus says, “throw out your nets,” even when we feel unworthy and even when we don’t feel like trying something new.

Did you notice that, at the beginning of the story, the fishermen were washing their nets? They were cleaning the weeds and debris off of their nets and storing them away. They were *through* with fishing for that night. They were tired and demoralized from a long night of catching nothing, trying to finish up their tasks so they could head home when Jesus came along and sent them back out into the water. Do you ever feel that way at your work? You’ve shut down the computer and are grabbing your coat when someone pops their head in and says, “oh, I’ve got this one last thing I need you to do today.” Do you cheerfully reply, “I’d *love* to help you right now”? Probably not. I wonder if there’s a bit of anger or sarcasm in Simon’s voice when he says “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. *Yet if you say so*, I will let down the nets.”

Yet Simon Peter does what Jesus commands, and the result is miraculous. They catch so many fish that two boats cannot hold them. This is a life-changing catch of fish. These guys have

made it to the big leagues now. They can sell this enormous haul of fish for a large sum of money, and then who knows what can happen. Except that's not what they do. Notice what verse 11 tells us: "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left *everything* and followed [Jesus]." Jesus has called them to a new life – "From now on you will bring in people instead of fish" – and suddenly what was so important is old news. Their boats, nets, equipment, this enormous load of fish, their careers – they leave it all behind, and follow Jesus in an entirely new life.

And God is still calling. God calls us like God called Isaiah and Simon Peter and James and John and like God called Moses and Abraham and Noah and Nehemiah and David and Mary and Elizabeth and Hannah and Naomi and Ruth and so many others. God calls, and so often, we don't answer, at least immediately. Just like Isaiah and Simon, we say, "No, God...we're not worthy." And there's some truth to that. We *are* sinful people in a sinful world. As Isaiah said, we are people of unclean lips living among other people of unclean lips. But God longs to blot out our sins, remembering always that we are created in God's holy image, made for God's calling in this world.

There is so much variety in the the stories of the Bible. God calls people to so many different callings, such a diversity of tasks. And yet, we find ourselves saying, "we've been fishing all night and haven't caught a thing...why should we try again, even if in a different place?" We think that we know better than God how to run the show and so we keep on doing it the same old way, rather than following God's new call for each of us. Or maybe we're content with the lives we currently lead and don't want to risk being called to something new.

We have to be open to God's call on our lives. Sometimes, we think about "call" as something only for ordained ministers, but God has a call for each of us. We have to be ready and willing to respond to that call. We have to be willing to try new ways of doing things, to throw the

nets out in a different place, no matter if we think it makes sense or not. We – as followers of God, as Presbyterians, as First Presbyterian Church – we have to throw the nets out wherever Jesus tells us. We have to be willing to risk failure. We have to be willing to do what is right in the face of those who will doubt us. We have to be willing to be daring and bold.

When the father of Origen, a third century theologian, was arrested for being a Christian, Origen, then only 17, was passionate with the desire to follow his Dad and share in glorious martyrdom. His mother pleaded with him not to go, but the headstrong boy did not want to listen to reason. His quick-thinking mother did what she could. She hid his clothes. Though Origen stormed and protested, she wouldn't reveal where they were hidden. He couldn't leave the house, and so he was unable to volunteer for martyrdom.

Isn't it interesting? Origen was brave enough to be martyred, but not brave enough to go outside without his clothes.

Are we the same way? Are we brave enough to say that we are willing to die for the Gospel, but not willing to risk embarrassment for the Gospel? Are we more concerned about what someone will think of us if we invite them to church than about growing the kingdom for God? Are we too worried about how someone will respond to us to tell them about our faith?

Are we tired of throwing the nets out and catching nothing, but not quite sure if we should throw them out again when Jesus says so? It takes courage, it takes perseverance, and it takes willingness to be open to God, but we know that God can and does use people like us – sinful people doing our best to live holy lives.

So, listen for the voice of our Lord. Listen for guidance, direction, and inspiration, and then, throw out your nets. Amen.