

January 22, 2017

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Matthew 4:1-12

### **Following, Fishing**

“Let men get a net.” This was one of the more oddly innocuous sentences in the first grade reader that I used as a teacher in Tanzania, where four years my husband and I worked at an elementary school, teaching Tanzanian children English. That’s some time ago now, but it had a great impact on me. As you can infer from the sentence, “Let men get a net,” the reading textbook, which we were given to use, which were issued by the Tanzanian government, was decidedly phonics based, grouping words together by the same sound, in this case short “e,”: “let,” “men,” “get,” “net,” and then stringing them together into sentences, sometimes strange declarations, made stranger because they clearly weren’t written by someone whose first language was English. “When,” my husband and I wondered, “would one ever actually use the phrase, ‘Let men get a net.’ ” We sort of doubted that’s how you would translate what the fishermen, just down the hillside, hard at work on shores of Lake Victoria, were calling out to one another: “Let men get a net.” Although it was true that they were using nets.

I bring this up because nets appear in the gospel reading today, in the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. Before they were disciples, those first followers were fishermen. “Come and follow me,” Jesus says to Simon Peter and Andrew, who were casting a net into the sea, “and I will make you fish for people.” And then Jesus calls two more brothers, James and John, who were mending a net.

Because I did not grow up in first century Palestine, nor in twentieth century Tanzania, a net is not the implement I think of when I think of fishing. When I think of fishing, the tool that comes to my mind—maybe it’s also the implement that comes to your mind—is a hook.

I think a hook might be the kind of tool that churches use, at least some churches, maybe all churches, sometimes, when they extend the metaphor, as Jesus does, when he invites us to follow, and fish for people. Sometimes, when the good people of a church think about fishing and following Jesus, about calling others to be followers of Jesus, sometimes, I think, the tool that we think we need is a hook.

Hooks have their uses, of course. My daughter was recently working on a writing assignment for school and she told me she needed help with “the hook.” “What do you mean?” I asked, and she looked at me with surprise, with mild irritation and some impatience, with the exasperated forbearance that twelve year olds can so perfectly aim at their parents, “You don’t know what a hook is?” she said, “It’s something you need at the beginning to grab the audience’s attention.” As a matter of fact, while the terminology initially caught me off guard, I do think about hooks—on a weekly basis. Many people here do, not in regard to sermon intros but on a larger scale, with regard to who we are, and how we say that. We think about our beloved church, which like so many churches and institutions, faces challenges. We wonder: how can we catch people’s attention?

I think it’s problematic, though, if we translate Jesus’ call to be “Fish with hooks.” I think it’s problematic, if we who would be followers of Christ view fellow humans as creatures swimming senselessly beneath us. I think it’s problematic if we who would respond to Christ’s call believe it is our job to drop a line with a lure. If that were the case, when someone comes and puts this strange thing in their mouth, they’d find it has a barb. That’s not what we’re about,

when we are welcomed to the communion rail, when we take the host, the physical promise and gift of God's grace, upon our lips, and in our bodies. The bread of life is not bait and switch.

The tool that we're told about in the gospel story wasn't a hook, it was a net. Ponder how that metaphor illustrates, opens up the understanding of what we do, and how we do it, when we go fishing as followers of Jesus. We don't have a string to yank, but an expansive implement of many intertwined fibers, and more than one, even in this short gospel story there is not just one net, Simon Peter and Andrew had one, and James and John had one, or even more. And as those paired names indicate, it takes more than one person to use a net, it takes several people to cast it out, and to gather it back in. And when you use a net, you are not limited to just one fish, as with a line; a net gathers many fish at a time, fish of all shapes and sizes and no doubt other things, too, all sorts of unexpected things, things to sort through. And the net needs that, too. It's a tool that requires mending, maintenance and repair. You have to take care of nets, fix their holes, untangle their knots. All these aspects of net fishing vividly, fittingly, describing for us how Jesus calls us to be followers, and to call others followers, creating, as we do, networks between us.

That's what you become caught up in, when you become part of a church: with that person, who sat near you in worship, or at a meal, whose children you watched grow, or who watched you grow, who rejoiced with you, or mourned with you, who was there when you were vulnerable, who was someone with whom you could be vulnerable. This is the work of churches, especially, to be with the vulnerable, to be for the vulnerable. Time and again in the Bible we hear God's call to care for the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the one from another country, the one who is hungry, the one who is sick, the one who is in prison. God calls the church to care for, to tend and repair, that none are left without a net.

There's yet another kind of fishing that they do in Tanzania. This also is a metaphor for us. This other kind of fishing is not done not with hooks, or nets; I suppose you could call it a modern innovation, it's called blast fishing. A small explosive, a homemade bomb, is constructed out of materials that are inexpensive and readily available. The bomb is ignited and tossed into the water; when it explodes every living thing within a radius of the blast floats to the surface, while down below irreparable damage is done to coral reefs. Blast fishing devastates the ecosystem as a whole, ultimately and inevitably including the very people who do it. Blast fishing is against the law and dangerous and still being done. How terribly, how accurately, it describes another way to work: to utilize the cheap and readily available materials of short term gain and personal advantage, of ominous pronouncements and selfish promises; lobbing explosives of ill will, denigration of the other, lack of self-control.

It is our work, it is the work of the church, to witness to another way. "Let men get a net." "Follow me," Jesus says, "and I will make you fish for people." For people. Not to hook them, but for them, on their behalf, for humanity, for its benefit, which is also yours, for a life of purpose, for a life that is a calling,