

Here is one of the most well-known phrases from the Bible: “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” It is at the center of our Gospel lesson today and I am going to attempt to make this passage new to you. . . . with God’s help.

Let’s set the scene: Jesus has begun his preaching ministry and as of yet does not have his band of disciples. He arrives at Lake Genesaret. The crowd is so large he asked Peter to take him out in his boat so he can preach. Peter agrees.

We do not have every sermon of Jesus captured in the Gospels; but we have two distinctive types – those outside to large crowds and the sermons he said inside of a home or synagogue. The second type is conversational. The first type – the large crowd version – is said with simple sentences, such as this: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.* The reason for this is because of the size of the crowd. The front row, on the shore of the lake, would hear Jesus’s words, turn around, and repeat exactly what they heard him say to the rows of people behind. (This is not a game of “telephone” at camp where third graders sit in a circle and whisper a sentence into the ear of the person next to them and laugh at how silly it becomes.) Jesus would say this: *Blessed are the poor.*” And that phrase would be passed back through the crowd. Then he would say, “*For yours is the Kingdom of God.*” And that would be passed back.

In today’s lesson, Peter had a front row seat to how this messaging works. He was anchoring the boat in place while Jesus was teaching. He heard the original message – *blessed are you* – and then had time to ruminate on what was being said. I think it reminded Peter of fishing with a net. One casts the net into the water, waits for it to sink, and then pulls it back in. Jesus too was casting his net – *blessed are you* – and waiting for it to reach the fish, metaphorically speaking, and then he would pull it in. Then, Jesus would cast another phrase and wait for it to reach the depths of the crowd. I think this was a major connection point for Peter.

Speaking of Peter, I do not believe this story in Chapter 5 of Luke’s Gospel was the first time Peter met Jesus. I think he was familiar with him and knew him to be a famous rabbi. And this is where the story makes an interesting turn. Normally, teachers like Jesus would ask the boat captain to bring him back to shore where he can collect his offering for teaching and talk with the people. But this day, Jesus did the opposite – he asked Peter to row out to deeper water and go fishing.

Fish need oxygen in water to breathe. Warm water holds less oxygen, but at night, when the lake water was cooler, fish come near the surface. This is why Peter was fishing at night (and caught nothing, by the way). Now, in the heat of the day, the fish have gone to deeper water where it is cooler (and thus more oxygen). Jesus asked Peter to go back out but this time to go into the middle of the lake where it was the deepest. This requires rowing out (energy), the lowering of the net all the way to the bottom (more energy), and then the task of pulling the net back up into the boat (even more energy). It is surprising that Jesus didn’t go ashore to see the people. It is perhaps more surprising that Peter agreed to take him out fishing in the deeper water.

Speaking of surprises; when Peter did this, the net was so full that he couldn't pull it in. He called another boat and the two of them struggled to bring that many fish into the boat without them sinking. That leads us to another surprise in the story. Peter didn't jump up and down in excitement and say, "I'm taking the family to Disneyland!" ... because of course there was no Disneyland back then. But the point is, they had so many fish that he could take some time off and rest. Another reaction would be to make Jesus a permanent part of his fishing crew and they'd all be rich! Yet Peter, seeing the fish, and what had just happened, he fell at Jesus's knees and said, "Depart from me; I am a sinful man." Jesus replied: Do not be afraid, from now on you'll be fishing for humans.

This story tells me that Jesus is not changing who Peter is; he is taking Peter for all of his life experience and will be repurposing him to cast a net that gathers in humans. This tells me that Jesus is still doing this today.

When I was twelve years old, I thought I was going to be an Episcopal priest. My dad was in our local, Seattle-based School for Ministry at the time and was about to be ordained. A year later, a moratorium was placed on his entire ordination class (because there were two women, and the diocese had not decided yet on what to do). I didn't understand moratoriums; I just figured if the Church didn't want Dad, they wouldn't want me. My vocational aspirations turned from ministry to law. It was similar, in my mind, and I thought I might be good at it. In college I majored in pre-law. I took a year-long internship at the state Attorney General's Office and worked on my application for law school. In my senior year of college, Jesus gave me a dream – it was like Ebenezer Scrooge who saw Christmas future; I saw my future as a lawyer. I was working 18 billable hours a day and was miserable (and yet could do nothing else that earned me that type of income). Jesus said there is another way. I decided to follow it.

My parents had both retired from teaching and bought a small Christian bookstore. They were having a lot of fun and spreading God's peace through books. I thought, *if they can do business, maybe I can too*. I tucked my fancy pre-law degree into my back pocket and went to work for a commercial airline who, at the time, was the largest cargo hauler in the world. I learned about management and how to see things globally (different time zones and the like – the company never slept). And, wouldn't you know it, for each position and job that I have had, I have used my experience in ministry. Just the other day in the office, the copier jammed. I rolled up my sleeves and fixed it. Someone walked in and said, "What's priest doing fixing a copier?" I told them at the AG's office, my first role was to fix the copier. I worked in sales for a home electronic retail company specializing in audio and video products. Someone was surprised that I know so much about tech that I was able to get our services online. ... they wouldn't be surprised if they saw me selling the equipment we now use to bring the Living Christ to those outside the church. Speaking of outside, we have people who attend our 10 a.m. service at their 3 pm teatime in England. One of my assistants is in California. Our Parish Administrator spends most of her week north of Tampa. I have learned how to manage, globally, our interconnected parish.

Here's the point: God uses our experience to spread the net of God's love, forgiveness and peace. God will repurpose our experiences in this earthly kingdom to spread the Kingdom of God. Jesus didn't change Peter's life experiences; he repurposed them into casting a net of love and

forgiveness in the name of God. If God did that for Peter, and for me, God is doing that with you too. Whatever your occupation is/was and your vocation, God will take your experiences and use them to help cast the net of God's love and forgiveness.

Jesus said to go out deeper. Are you ready to go a little deeper with me on this message?

Peter fell at Jesus's knees and said, "Depart from me; I am a sinful man." Sin, in this case, I believe is not participating as well as he could have in the Jewish faith tradition. In other words, Peter may have run from God. I ran from God too. When I saw the fear of not being ordained because my dad wasn't, I ran. But God didn't give up on me. God didn't give up on Peter either. (And this would not be the only time Peter would run from God, by the way; he'd end up denying Jesus.) Jesus replied: Do not be afraid. From now on, your net will be catching people.

God takes our life experiences and uses them in but, here's the surprising thing, God even (or especially) takes our broken places, our weaknesses, our sins and uses them to help cast the net of love and forgiveness. I know this to be true because I spent time this week reading the pastoral letters attributed to Peter and his sermons captured in the Book of Acts. His central theme is this: no matter who you are or what you have done, God's Kingdom – God's grace, forgiveness and peace – is bigger than what you've done. God's net is so large it can reach those who have run far away. God's net of grace is stronger and larger than any human sin (including denying God). Peter says that God forgives unconditionally and freely. He knows that God loves everyone (he used to think it was just males in the Jewish faith). He also tells us to stay strong, stay with the faith even when it's difficult because the world is going to try to break you down, the world is going to say the only one you should care for is yourself. The world is going to say that but to remain in God's net of love and continue to cast his grace and peace to others.

For us in our day, God uses those places where we are weak, or broken, or where we have little or no faith and God will build us up to throw the net for others – to listen with a compassionate ear, to help those in need, to pray, and to invite people to share in the love and the joy you have found here; to bring others into the fellowship of Christ. Blessed are you who are poor in spirit for yours is the Kingdom of God!

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