

Sermon for the third Sunday after the Epiphany (The Sunday of Bethany's Annual Meeting)

St. Mark 1:14-20

Grace, peace, and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

“Net Growth.”

Where are all the fish? Where have all the fish gone? That's a question that church has been asking for the last several years. As we look around, the number of people coming to church services has dwindled. We can chalk that up to a few things of course. Population decline in our community in the last generation is one I can thin of right off the bat. In the last year many are staying away because of the virus. Thank God we have reached some of those folks through our inter-net presence. As a pastor I lost track of the number times I heard that we need to do something and do it quick to get more people back into our pews so that they will put more bucks in the offer plate. Is that what it is all about? That sounds more like the saving or preserving the institution. Where has that gotten us? We are right back at the same place we started. Where are all the fish? And where have they gone to? Maybe we have been fishing with the wrong net.

With this idea in our minds let us get into our gospel reading for the day from Mark chapter one, the 14-20th verses. Jesus uses the fish image for people when He calls some fishermen to follow Him and become His disciples.

“Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me and I will make become fishers of men.' And immediately, they left their nets and followed Him..”

What does all this mean? Who were these men and what did this new way of fishing mean? How do we fit into this story? What kind of net do we need? And are we seeing any of this “Net Growth?”

So let us dig in this rich rich gospel. Who were these men? From the account they are named Simon and Andrew and they brothers working as commercial fishermen along the Sea of Galilee. In just a short bit The Zebedee brothers, operating another fishing enterprise will heed the call of Jesus. Jesus is going to give them a new livelihood, “Fishing for peqaple.” What is going to look for them? First these fishermen are going to be disciples of Jesus. They are going to learn from Him about the breaking in of the Kingdom of God. Then these fishermen would then become the foundational Apostles for how all the future fishing might be carried out. They will become the first pastors and Church planters. They will show us pastor how to do this. They will be fishers of people through the Holy Ministry. In a sense this would apply to the whole Christian Church today, Pastors and Lay People alike since we are all involved one way or another in the Churches mission.

On this day in particular as we gather for our annual meeting, we might think of how all our elected leadership and the committees and ministries we support all work together to support the churches work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not only that, everyone of us in our work, our personal life and witness, with our network of friends and relatives and neighbors – can be part of bringing others into the churches net.

So that is how we fit into this endeavor. But before we can be fishermen we need to be disciples first. Each one us had to be fish before they could become fishers of people. Yes, you and were caught in the

net of the gospel. And give thanks to God that you have! Remember being caught in this gospel net is not based on how good you are, or how hard work, or how nice looking you are. For you have caught and God the great fisherman of all took one look at you and said, "This is a keeper." You are a keeper no matter your faults or sinfulness. This all by grace. A gift freely given that we have been brought into the church. This has not been done by our work, it is all God's work. Christ's work in saving us.

Christ took the burden of our sins and carried it all to the Holy Cross. Christ work on the cross gets the job done for you and me. The forgiveness of our sins is by Christ's blood and the shedding of it alone. He has conquered death for us winning the victory for you in the Easter resurrection. God has shared this gift of grace with you in the waters of Holy Baptism. Through that water that you have become little fishes marked with the Cross of Christ.

So, Jesus said, "Follow Me and I will make you fish for people." OK Jesus, where are the fish? They are right outside our doors. OK, Jesus, I invite, but why aren't they coming in? Well, to put your mind at ease, it is all God's work. In John Chapter 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus that Spirit blows where it will. You hear the sound but you don't where comes from and or where is it goes. In other words you cannot predict how the Holy Spirit is going to convert or draw them into the net. The Sacraments, The Word are all means of grace, and as the Augsburg Confession puts it "works faith when and where God pleases in those who hear the Good News that God justifies those that believe in the gospel."

Then we are often tempted to use a different net. Remove crosses, Stop this Law-Gospel preaching. Give them what they want to hear. That might bring them in and put more bucks in the plate. Right? But do those methods bring salvation. We just might unwittingly affirm folks in their lost state and make them feel everything is alright.

How about this. Let us use the net that Christ Jesus has given us. It is the gospel net that saves us from our sins. It the preaching that way Jesus did it, "The Time is fulfilled, Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at Hand."

There is our net. If you look at the net, doesn't it look like a bunch of inter-connected crosses? Let's use that net and really use it. And leave the results up to God. Of course that means too we will need see every person out as one for whom Christ died for in His love... TO have concern and to be ready to walk with them in times of trouble.

Will there be this kind of net growth? Will the fish come swimming into the net of God's love? Oh yes they will. We have seen it in this place. Maybe not in big gang buster numbers. People are being saved. But again remember the work of salvation is through God's life saving work.

It is time cast this net out, the gospel net, the message of salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ. It that that Christ like love for others, our neighbor that will call the fish in. "The Time is fulfilled, repent and believe in the gospel." It is this voice that continues to call us into the mission sea of of this community, and the world and gives it success. Follow me and I will make you fishers of Men. It is Christ's net. And He will give it growth. The Gospel Net Caught you. And it catch others. Amen