

Working on My Fish Story 3 Epiphany A

Fishing stories. There are many out there. They may go under another name –sea stories – but they all have one thing in common – a dramatic, sometimes life changing event occurs in the life of the storyteller.

Most have heard of “Moby Dick” or on the softer side, “Anne of Green Gables.” They each have their sea stories, life changing events that affected the lives of the young and old. We like to hear of stories that grip the heart and move us to the edge of our seats. These are stories that excite us and motivate us to share the wonder of a “big catch” with whoever will listen.

The men called by Jesus to be his companions in the way were asked to embark on a “fishing journey.” The first Christians to be caught by our Lord were not strangers to fishing and catching many of them with a net. Yet in order to encounter a new “fishing story,” and experience a greater catch than they could imagine they were called upon to leave behind what they knew. They were called upon to use the “net” of the gospel, their teacher as the “bait” and “fishing” as a metaphor to gather people into the “sea” of God’s kingdom. What a tale that has been. Men and women of all classes and walks of life, have gone to the ends of the earth to proclaim God’s search for humanity. It was no tall tale but the story they told that changed the lives of both the teller and the listener. The bait used to hook their hearers was the story of forgiveness, the story of loving kindness, the story of seeking justice embodied in one man.

I think of the impact that these story tellers had on the lives of millions of converts. The tellers of their “fish story” were telling their story as they told how they became the first “fish caught” in God’s net. Once caught, they left everything to follow the “fisher of men.” That fisherman in turn taught them how to fish for others. Their change was a radical transformation. Some of them who were professional fisherman later after Jesus had gone tried to go back to their old life. They could not go back.

When I entered the Navy I knew nothing about fishing for salmon, “steelys,” as they were called in Lake Michigan. I had no equipment so my mentor gave me a list to buy: a shimano reel, monofilament line with a medium amount of strength and an almost 8ft rod, called an “ugly stick.” What I forgot about fishing is that you

need a lot of time on your hands and faith that some day you the fisherman will get a “hit” and the hook will go deep into your prize. My friend was so dedicated that he went as far as drilling holes in ice and setting up a tent to wait for his prize during the winter. I fished more for the social time fresh air than for the prize. Some say you have to let the fish know you are hungry enough to wait them out. One has to be hungry enough to bring them in and keep casting the hook or the net.

I lasted all of three times waiting for my “fish story.” And so I don’t have a story to tell you. I did not have the “hunger” or the “hook” to keep casting my rod. To become a fisher of salmon would require me to change my lifestyle. I was not willing to do that. Later, I realized it had little to do with my experience, my equipment or my experience. It was all about me and the bait I used. Cheap bait used on smart fish don’t get you much! To get the fish you have to use good bait and be willing to enter into the world of those fish. That takes discipleship. Jesus gave himself as a model and we must follow if we also are to be fishers of men.

Have we missed the boat that will take us fishing? I was having lunch this week with Jim Gettel, former canon to Bishop White and now a church consultant. He said that the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels, has realized that despite the 100 ministries and thousands of people who attend, they must go back and revisit what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. On Willow Creek’s homepage Bill writes: “we’re big enough for you to blend in and investigate the claims of Jesus Christ anonymously, if you choose to. But if you look closer, you’ll find that in many ways we’re small. In fact, we’re actually a network of small groups. And if you’d like to develop authentic and enduring relationships with others, then you’ll be glad to know that new groups are forming all the time.

Together, we’re striving to become the kind of church described in the Bible—a church with relevant teaching, heart-felt worship, honest friendships, constant prayer, and compassionate care for those in need. In short, we’d like to have the kind of contagious Christianity that can influence and encourage the entire community, one life at a time.”

What I learned so long ago about fishing can be applied to the sea of humanity. If you quit too soon the human fish you befriend will miss out on finding out how much God has made a difference in your life. They will never get to hear your “fish story” unless you hear their hunger and are willing to throw out some good bait. God has provided us with all we need to go fishing. And the bait is above all the most precious prize we have to share with our “fishy” friends. The bait is Jesus Christ, the bread of heaven. The hook is the “fish story” about a life that gave hungry people something to eat. We who have tasted of the bread of heaven are hooked by the person of Jesus Christ. Now it is our turn to go fishing and feed others as we have been fed.

We can meet lots of fish in our journey. In a city of 70 thousand there are many new fish that swim our way. How do we make the “fish story” we tell real and convincing? How can we convince the other fish in the sea of Rock County that we smell like fish, we swim like fish but we have food that fish like to eat? Perhaps we could share our fishing stories and how we became “hooked” by the Great Fisherman.

When I tell my fishing story of how I came to faith in Jesus Christ I want people to know they are important to me and that they have value. The story of Jesus the fisherman made me feel important and valuable. He loved me and fed me and gave me what I needed to know to fish and feed others. He leads me to other fish that hunger for God that I might know I am not swimming alone. He continues to show how I can feed the human fish who swim into my life and help them get hooked on the bread of life. This is the bread that came down from heaven so if any would eat they would not hunger again.

Perhaps you are content with being anonymous as Bill Hybels wrote to his church. Yes, you too can be anonymous here. Perhaps you are looking for a smallness in a church. There is a “smallness” to Trinity that people like until it comes to volunteering for Pancake Supper and Seder Dinner we will come and get you so won’t be anonymous. There are some small groups where “fish” can be fed but those “fishing holes” are dwindling and we need new ones. I hope you will not be content to eat fish food forever but will feast on the bread of life. My prayer is that we will smell like a fish, swim like fish looking for good bait, and bring a school of fish hungry to taste the goodness of God. Amen.