

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, April 10, 2016
Text: John 21:1-19

What's the Catch?



**First United
Methodist Church**

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

203 Wisconsin Avenue | Madison, WI 53703

608-256-9061 | www.fumc.org

The risen Lord stands on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee at sunrise and calls out to the disciples fishing in a boat about one hundred yards offshore, “Catch anything?” That is a question all fishermen hate to hear when they have been “skunked” all night long. Every time the disciples have checked their nets, they have been empty.

This is the fourth resurrection appearance of Jesus in the Gospel of John, counting the first one to Mary Magdalene in the garden, then to the disciples huddled behind locked doors, a return visit to accommodate Thomas’s doubt, and now here back north in the home territory of Galilee. We think that the disciples would begin to recognize him, but maybe the light is too refracted and the distance too great. They answer, “No, we have been out all night but no fish to show for it.” Jesus calls back, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.”

That is a curious detail, to cast the net on the *right* side of the boat. Well, as best as I have been able to discover, the typical fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee was big enough to carry about ten fishermen, with maybe three oars per side and a mast for a sail. It was flat on the bottom and without a keel so that they could get in close to shore. The hull came to a point at both the bow and the stern, like a canoe, not squared-off in the stern like a rowboat. That meant that the rudder had to be off to one side toward the back, and I am making a left-handed assumption that it was on the right side. Most fishermen were right-handed, and steering the boat’s course would be easier using the right hand. So, it would have been customary to cast the nets off the left side in order to avoid any entanglements with the rudder and the tiller.

Consequently, when Jesus calls to the disciples to cast their nets off the right side of the boat, he is telling them to do something unusual, something different from the customary. Be willing to be unorthodox, to risk entanglements, and you will catch your fish. They do it, their nets fill to overflowing with fish, and one of the disciples cries out, “I know who he is! He is Jesus the Christ!” Here is another miracle of abundance just like the turning of water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, just like feeding the masses seated on the hillside with a few fish and a couple loaves of bread. The power he had when he walked the earth still is his in this new state of being.

The catch is so great that when the disciples row into shore they hardly can drag the nets behind them. And when they get to the beach, they open the nets for all to see . . . 153 fish, records John, all caught off the other side of the boat. Why 153? That is a strange detail and a peculiar number. Some have said that there were 153 disciples at this point in history. Others have suggested that it might represent the number of tribes and kingdoms in the known world. Still others have shown that it is the total of all numbers from one to seventeen added together, but to make what point? Maybe it is just a number to represent an abundant catch that almost breaks the nets. There lay in the sand all of the fish in their vast variety.

Years ago a group from the congregation I served in Rockford took a trip to Mexico to visit the home church of two of our stalwart members, Jerry and Elda Garcia. We drove to the border and then took a bus to Pachuca, stayed with their family members and friends, worshiped at the Methodist church, ate terrifically hot food that brought tears to our eyes, and learned a great deal about their way of life. We also spent time in Mexico City and an overnight in Acapulco. Even back then, it was a bit dangerous to travel to the coast; we had to pass through a police check point on the way into town. We stayed at a motel across the street from the ocean beach.

Early in the morning I got up to take a walk on the beach before breakfast. I saw a group of about thirty people huddled around what I soon discovered was a fishing net on the sand. A fisherman had waded out into the surf, cast his net toward the open sea, and then hauled it in, catching an amazing variety of sea creatures – fish, to be sure, but also sting rays, jelly fish, squid, and a whole array of marine animals that I never had seen before and hoped that I had not eaten in the seafood medley the night before. What a catch! It was huge and varied on Acapulco’s beach, and we can assume the same was displayed on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

So, if we follow the guidance of Jesus and cast our nets to the other side of the boat, the uncustomary side, what will be “the catch” for First United Methodist Church here at the heart of Madison? When we are courageous enough to cast our nets into unknown waters instead of relying on conventional wisdom, what variety and abundance will we find?

When we are at our faithful best, we as a congregation cast our nets toward the poor people of our town. Some of it results in what we expect. We do a lot of work to feed people who do not have enough to eat. We try to provide clothing and toiletries and, when we can, backpacks and sleeping bags. And, we offer spiritual sustenance, as well.

But, as we have listened carefully to those who seldom get heard, we have learned that one of the great needs of people existing on the streets is foot care. Why, of course! Walk around all day in ill-fitting shoes or boots, one pair of socks for the week, at best, with no place to bathe, and it takes a toll on one’s soles as well as one’s soul. And so, we are negotiating with area doctors to provide some kind of foot care when we draw people into our building for food and encouragement.

And then, we have discovered children and their parents sleeping on our doorstep, and it has challenged our assumptions about the needy. Yes, there are men who are homeless, and women, too, but also children. And so, we have had to cast our nets in a new direction to serve as we hear God’s call, extending our hospitality to meet the needs of displaced children and their families. If we simply were to play it safe and fish only in familiar waters, we would not be doing this, but Jesus calls us to do unorthodox things and cast our nets in uncustomary waters.

We also hear Jesus calling to us to cast our nets toward those disinterested in the church, or disgusted with it, those people of every age, but especially the young, who say, "I am spiritual, but not religious." Who wants to be religious when they experience the Church hurting people, either clergy preying on children instead of praying over them, congregations excommunicating people because they are different from the norm, people using religion as an excuse to hate, to wage war, to build walls instead of open doors?

Jesus does not say to Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after they have shared a Lord's breakfast of fish and bread, "Go and start the Church." No, he says, "Go and feed my lambs." If we feed the lambs of the world with God's love and justice and mercy and goodness, then the "spiritual but not religious" folks just might discover a community within which to grow spiritually. The call is to offer an alternative vision to both the way the world does things and the way the Church has done things.

An alternative vision . . . it takes imagination. There is an old Charlie Brown dialogue I have carried around in my head for years, apparently just for this moment. Lucy, Linus, and Charlie are lying out on a hillside gazing up at the clouds, and Lucie says, "Aren't the clouds beautiful! They look like big balls of cotton. I could just lie here all day and watch them drift by. If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud's formations. What do you think you see, Linus?"

And Linus answers, "Well, those clouds up there look to me like the map of British Honduras in the Caribbean. That cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor. And that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen. I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side."

"Uh huh," responds Lucy. "That's very good. What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?"

"Well, . . . I was going to say I saw a duckie and a horsie, but I changed my mind."

The Church needs to see more than duckies and horsies in this world if we are going to be a serious actor on the world's stage. We need to offer an alternative vision to the spiritual but not religious, to the well-degreed academics who think they are too smart to believe, to the rich who cannot imagine that there is more to life than what they own, except perhaps to acquire what their neighbor owns.

"Cast your nets on the other side of the boat and see what you will catch." Remember that the risen Christ said that to Saul in a dramatic episode on the road to Damascus. Saul was the persecutor of followers of The Way, the first generation of Christians, finding them, charging them, and sending them off to Jerusalem to trial. As Luke tells in Acts Chapter 9, Saul is driven to the ground by an enveloping brilliant light that blinds him. He is escorted to Damascus, where after three days Christ sends Ananias to restore Saul's sight, baptize him as "Paul," and deliver the godly command that Paul testify to the Gentiles that Jesus Christ is God's son. Saul had been trolling for Jews following Jesus; now he is to fish for Gentiles who want to follow in the light of Christ. "Cast your nets on the other side of the boat and be emboldened by what you catch."

When this congregation casts its nets to draw in all people, not just some, when we reach beyond race and creed and gender identity and political allegiance, not to draw them into the institutional church, though we will welcome everyone who wishes to become a member, but to draw them into the embrace of God, then we are fishing in sacred waters.

Being drawn into the embrace of God . . . unless that sounds too soft and cuddly, it is good for us to hear what Peter Storey told a group of us clergy on retreat last week at Green Lake. Peter Storey is a retired Methodist minister and bishop from South Africa. He was the prison chaplain to Nelson Mandela and others during the horrors of apartheid. Storey often was thrown into prison, monitored closely by the police and the military, and a target of death threats, along with his family members. The apartheid government despised and vilified him.

He said that that was hard, but when it all switched in South Africa and apartheid was ended and many of his friends took over the corridors of power . . . "Hello, Peter, good to see you in the hallways of the legislature" . . . "Peter, old boy, you're looking good after all you've gone through," it became harder. He said that the Church must keep a prophetic distance from those in power in order not to be co-opted. "When the Church is excluded from the corridors of power, it truly is free."

So, perhaps in an effort to both affirm our net casting into unpredictable waters and to maintain a critical distance from the corridors of power, I wrote this letter to the governor which I will hand deliver this week:

"Dear Governor Walker:

Thank you for lowering the state and national flags on Thursday, March 31st, in memory of Tamara Grigsby. Our congregation at the First United Methodist Church was honored to host the memorial service at which your declaration was read and many public officials spoke of her inspired service to the community on all levels. Her commitment to protect children, uplift the poor, and include the outcast is precisely what we are trying to do as we answer God's call to love our neighbor.

If there comes a time when you, as Governor, and the State Legislature, decide to dedicate yourselves to these same goals, be assured that you can depend on our best and most faithful efforts. In the meantime, we will continue to do all that we can, in collaboration with other faith communities and not-for-profit groups, to make Wisconsin a viable place for all people to live.

Sincerely,

Phil Blackwell

(Lead Minister, First United Methodist Church)”

Sometimes we just need to cast our nets off the other side of the boat, as unconventional or counter intuitive as that may be, into the waters of the poor, the skeptical, the hostile, the disinterested, the disenfranchised, and the powerful, and see what catch God has for us. We do it as an act of joyful obedience and in anticipation of amazing results. Amen.