

YOU'RE A FISHERMAN

MATTHEW 4:18-22

On two occasions, Cheryl and I have enjoyed a vacation week at a quaint, charming little boathouse apartment jutting right out into picturesque Lake Seneca – one of the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. On our first trip up there, I decided in advance to become a fisherman. I don't come from a family that has any fishing heritage whatsoever. My father was neither a fisherman nor his father before him! I had fished only a handful of times in my life, but I was enticed by peaceful images of casting a line into some quiet stretch of water surrounded by leafy trees. I could already feel the tension and stress of life melting away. In preparation for this great adventure, I bought and read the book *Fishing for Dummies*. That was a great decision, because it assumes the reader knows absolutely nothing about fishing which was a safe and altogether correct assumption in my case. I went out and bought a couple of rods and reels. I learned all about bait. I dutifully practiced casting off the deck in my back yard and successfully hooked the oak tree. We had a wonderful vacation at the boathouse on Lake Seneca and we did catch some fish. Not a lot, but some. Our daughter, Kelsey, caught the most fish, but I want you to know that I caught the biggest fish of all that week: a nice foot long bass which I actually filleted myself, Cheryl grilled to perfection and we all ate with feelings of immense triumph.

This morning I'm concluding a series of messages on missional metaphors found in the Bible. The fact is that every follower of Jesus has been called to mission whether or not you ever leave central Ohio, cross an ocean or learn another language. The word "missional" captures that all important truth. Being missional simply means being available to point people to Jesus for salvation and transformation with your lips and your life every day and in every situation. Now there is a very real connection between fishing and being missional. It was Jesus who first made that connection by talking about fishing in a metaphorical way. Let's look at the Bible passage now that bears that out. The context is Jesus – very early in his ministry – inviting the men who would become the group of twelve disciples. This morning I'd like to ask and try to answer this question: How is fishing like being missional? First of all ...

BOTH REQUIRE PATIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE.

I learned some things about fishing that week of vacation. For one thing, if you like fast paced activity with quick and constant results, don't take up fishing. It requires lots of patience and perseverance. My opinion is that a lot of people take up fishing because it gives them an excuse to do something else: be outside... enjoy nature... goof off. You could say fishing is just being lazy purposefully. Of course, there are the people who get quick results. They throw in the line and almost immediately a fish jumps on it. But that's the exception not the rule. Fishing can be downright discouraging a lot of the time. It can be the wrong season of the year, the wrong time of day, the wrong bait, the wrong rod

or reel... whatever. Successful fishing demands that you keep on fishing with patience and perseverance and not get discouraged.

Reaching out to lost people with good news of who Jesus is and what He's done for them is like that. It requires patience and perseverance. Sure, there are times when it takes very little effort to lead someone to Jesus. God has so prepared his or her heart that becoming a follower of Jesus is like catching a fish in a tank with a net. But that's the exception rather than the rule. Most of the time, there's a process in becoming a follower of Jesus and for many people it can be a lengthy process. You discover you have to pray repeatedly for someone to become a follower of Jesus. You discover it might take months and even years to cultivate carefully a relationship with that person. It might involve numerous conversations some of which are frustrating and discouraging.

Reaching out to lost people can feel like nothing is happening at all. Just like fishing! Here's the difference, though. Many times when you're fishing nothing is happening. All the fish are on the other side of the lake or on vacation themselves! But it's different in being missional. God says He will not allow His word to come back to Him without eternal effect. He says, "It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it." (Is. 55:11 NLT) God uses a variety of contacts, conversations, experiences and events to bring a person to Himself. You might encourage someone to become Jesus' follower right at the very beginning of that person's journey towards God, or somewhere in the middle or at the end. I believe every person that I've had the privilege to pray with to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord had been brought there by a loving, gracious God and I just happened to be at the right place at the right time. It may take many months – even many years – so don't get discouraged. Don't quit and give up. Keep on praying for the lost people in your life. Keep on intentionally building relationships with them. Keep on looking for opportunities to share with lost people what Jesus means to you and why. Your efforts are not wasted.

An old man was walking the beach at dawn and he noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the ocean. He caught up with this younger man and asked him what he was doing. The answer was that the stranded starfish would die if left out in the morning sun. "But the beach goes on for miles and there are so many starfish," said the old man. "How can your effort make any difference?" The young man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it safely back into the waves. "It makes a difference to that one."

As a pastor, I've had the distinct privilege over the years to hear about and see the spiritual journey of so many people. What I've seen is this: God Himself is like a patient, persevering fisherman. He gets his hook into your life, but He will often let you swim up this little stream of life experience or down that little river of life experience. Occasionally, He'll give you a tug to remind you that He's there.

And then, at some point in time in some set of circumstances, He sets the hook and begins to reel you in. How is fishing like being missional? Secondly ...

BOTH REQUIRE WISDOM.

I learned that principle in the book *Fishing for Dummies*. The author stressed the point that if I wanted to learn how to fish, I had to learn some stuff. In other words, I had to develop wisdom. I had to learn about the best times of day to fish, what areas in a given body of water fish usually prefer, when to cast and when not to cast. Successful fishing apparently comes from developing an eye for the right moment. I must have missed the right moment a lot of times up there at Lake Seneca, because there were long periods of time when I didn't catch any fish. Most of the fish we caught during that vacation week weren't actually caught in Lake Seneca. Fortunately, there was a national forest nearby with stocked ponds and these turned out to be much better places to catch fish.

Whether it's catching fish or pointing people to Jesus, you can only ever gain wisdom through actual experience. If you want God to help you learn how to reach lost people with the good news about Jesus successfully, it will require wisdom. You have to learn some things. There are times when a lost person will welcome the truth about Jesus; there will be other times they will resist it. There are times when they will be receptive; there will be others their hearts seem hard. Wisdom here involves observing and being sensitive to what makes a person tick so you can approach him or her in a way he or she understands. Wisdom here involves a proper sense of timing – what to say and when to say it, what to do and when to do it. How is fishing like being missional? Thirdly ...

BOTH REQUIRE THE RIGHT “BAIT”.

Before I read *Fishing for Dummies*, I had no idea of all the different kinds of bait out there. It's incredible! There's all sorts of live bait: worms, minnows, crawfish, insects. Then, there's artificial bait with exotic names: plugs, chuggers, stickbait, jerkbait, spoons, spinnerbaits and jigs. There are all sorts of preferences, prejudices and superstitions when it comes to bait and catching fish. You see, fish are pretty picky when it comes to bait. It has to be the right bait at the right time or just forget it! We were told by the locals up there at Lake Seneca that the very best bait was a small fish called a sawbelly. We bought a bunch of sawbellies and failed to catch even one fish with them. We learned the hard way that the old, reliable night crawler or earthworm worked best on that trip.

There are many good way to point people to Jesus. Here's two important principles to remember. One, God has many ways to reach lost people. He has an almost infinite variety of spiritual bait at His disposal. Unless it's unethical, don't write off any method. Two, God is most apt to use your own unique gifts and personality to help you to reach out to the lost people in your circle of influence. For instance, here are six kinds of spiritual bait God can use.

You might call the first kind of bait the confrontational approach. I think of it as “the Billy Graham, right between the eyes, get right with God or else” approach. Not many Christians have this gift and a lot of people don’t respond to this approach, but it can most definitely be effective. It’s the ability to speak the truth boldly to lost people and challenge them to follow Jesus. Secondly, there’s the intellectual approach. Some people need to hear the good news of Jesus in a very rational, logical way with lots of evidence. I think of Lee Strobel’s books, *A Case for Christ* and *A Case for Faith* as good examples of why it just makes sense to be a follower of Jesus. A third kind of bait might be called the testimonial approach. Some lost people really respond to the story of how God is at work in the life of a follower of Jesus. They want to know why and how following Jesus can transform their own everyday lives. The spiritual fisherman or fisherwoman doesn’t challenge or argue. The testimonial approach just shares what Jesus means to a person personally and why.

A fourth kind of bait might be called interpersonal. Warm, people-oriented followers of Jesus often use this approach with lost people. Everyone needs to use this kind of bait to some extent, but some just specialize in it. Long talks over cups of coffee. Listening patiently to a friend’s problem without trying to fix him or her. Sharing a meal together or inviting someone into your home. A fifth kind of bait might be called invitational. These followers of Jesus just have a knack for knowing how and when to invite someone to a worship service, an outreach event, or a Christian concert. And then, finally, there’s the service approach. These kinds of Jesus’ followers just love to serve others. It’s how God has wired them up. They notice needs in the lives of lost people others don’t see and find great joy in meeting those needs. These spiritual fishermen and fisherwomen express compassion and caring through action of some kind. How is fishing like being missional? Fourthly ...

BOTH REQUIRE WILLINGNESS NOT CREDENTIALS.

I like Mark Twain’s definition of fishing: “Fishing is a jerk at one end of the line waiting for a jerk on the other end.” Fish could care less who’s trying to catch them. It doesn’t really matter if you’re a jerk or if you’re nice, if you’re rich or poor, educated or uneducated, a fishing expert or a reader of *Fishing for Dummies*. It’s doesn’t require credentials to catch a fish, just willingness! I believe followers of Jesus get hung up at this very point. All too often we unconsciously assume that only professional evangelists like a Billy Graham, or pastors of churches or missionaries who go overseas have the right, or the ability or the credentials to point people to Jesus. Wrong!

Nothing could be further from the truth. The very men Jesus called to be his group of twelve disciples proves the point. Not one of them was a religious professional. Not one of them was a rabbi or a priest. Several of them were literally fishermen by occupation as we saw from our text today. One was a tax collector. Another was a political operative. None of them were from rich or

influential families. The story of the spread of the Christian faith over some twenty centuries now is very revealing indeed: all God needs is ordinary followers of Jesus who are willing to be used by and for Him. God can do anything through people who are extraordinarily surrendered to Him. The single greatest requirement to be a good fisherman is willingness. The single greatest requirement to be a good spiritual fisherman or fisherwoman is willingness. How is fishing like being missional? Fifth and finally ...

BOTH REQUIRE ACTION.

For one year I had a valid New York state fishing license. I don't have an Ohio fishing license. That's because I've rarely gotten around to fishing in Ohio in the last 28 years! I still have two fishing rods and reels. I still have a tackle box with hooks, lures and other gizmos in it. I still have the book *Fishing for Dummies* somewhere. Yep, I'm quite the fisherman, to be sure! But in reality you and I know better, don't we? Unless I actually get out there and fish, I'll never learn how to fish and I'll never catch any fish. Fishing requires action. I need to actually do something to be a successful fisherman. I need to fish!

Have you ever heard the old expression: "It's time to either fish or cut bait"? In other words, there's a difference between sitting around cutting up and preparing bait and the actual act of fishing. Fishing requires you to put the bait on the hook and put the hook into the water. There's a difference between preparation and action. How true that is at a spiritual level, too! When it comes to pointing people to Jesus for salvation and transformation, there has to come a time when you move beyond talking about it, reading about it, preparing for it and actually going out and doing it. You swallow your reservations, you get out of your comfort zone, you take a risk and you reach out. You get intentional and act.

I love the reported exchange between D.L. Moody – the great evangelist of the 1800s – and another man. This guy criticized Moody for the way he pointed people to Jesus. Moody listened courteously to this man's objections and then asked him, "How do you do it?" In other words, how do you point people to Jesus? The man was immediately embarrassed and mumbled that he didn't do it at all. "Well," said Moody thoughtfully, "I prefer the way I do it to the way you don't do it."

How do you get started in pointing people to Jesus? Begin praying for the specific people in your circle of influence – the people in your family, the people in your neighborhood, the people you work with or go to school with that don't know Jesus in a personal, saving way. Look for any opportunity to cultivate and grow those relationships. Learn how to share verbally what Jesus has done for you simply and briefly so you can be ready to share that with someone else. The best way to learn how to fish is just to fish. The best way to learn how to point people to Jesus is just to begin pointing people to Jesus. Won't you make mistakes? Of course, you will! Will you fail at times? Sure! But, if you're patient

and persevering, if you gain some wisdom over time, if you learn what kinds of spiritual bait to use, if you're willing above all else, and if you get out there and act, I know God will use you to point people to Jesus for salvation and transformation. Jesus says that if you're His follower, you are – like it or not, accept it or not, agree with it or not – a spiritual fisherman. The real question is this one: what kind of a fisherman or fisherwoman are you, really?

All of this has personal and individual application. It also has application to this church. Come out this afternoon to the Northland Festival at 4:30 pm and be part of our joint, community worship service. We're going to be fishing! Pick up that Care Form today and tell us that you'd like to be a part of our re-vamped Wednesday night club ministry. We're going to be fishing here every Wednesday night starting September 12! If a fisherman never fishes, is he really a fisherman? If a church never points people to Jesus, is it really a church?

Once upon a time there was a group of people who called themselves fishermen. They lived in a place where streams and rivers abounded and fish swam in abundance. Week after week, month after month, year after year, the fishermen held meetings and talked about their call to fish. They discussed the abundance of fish out there and how to fish. Over and over again, they defined what it meant to fish, defended fishing as an honorable vocation and declared that fishing was indeed the primary calling and task of fishermen.

The fisherman put together costly national and worldwide events to discuss and promote fishing, to hear about new fishing equipment and to learn what new, more effective fishing bait had been discovered. The fishermen appointed committees, hired staff and held more meetings to define and defend fishing. They researched what new streams and rivers should be considered for possible fishing in the future. But nobody actually went out and fished. Large and elaborate buildings were created for the purpose of teaching fishermen how to fish. Courses and classes were created on the needs of fish, the nature of fish, the care and feeding of fish, and how to approach fish. Many of the teachers had earned doctoral degrees in fishology. But the teachers didn't fish; instead, they taught fishing. Year after year, students graduated and were given fishing licenses. But the students didn't really go out and fish either.

After one stirring meeting in which the necessity of fishing was preached, one young fisherman left the meeting and actually went fishing. The next day the young fisherman reported catching not one but two outstanding fish. The other fishermen were appropriately overjoyed and began to honor the young fisherman for excellent work. They scheduled appointments for him to share his experience of fishing success with others and tell other fishing clubs how to do it. Soon, the new fisherman quit fishing in order to have time to speak about fishing and to serve on the General Board of Fishermen International where his considerable experience could benefit one and all. The application, dear friends, is yours to make! Are you really a follower of Jesus if you never point anyone to Jesus?