

Try the Other Side

Have you heard about the husband and wife who went up to the lake on a weekend fishing trip? Just the two of them? When they returned, the woman told their neighbor, “I did everything all wrong *again* this time. I talked too much. I talked too loud. I used the wrong bait. I reeled in too soon.

And I caught more than he did!”

It doesn't sound as though this man has had a very successful fishing trip. And neither have seven fishermen, who've fished all night long with nothing to show for it. Let's take a closer look at these seven disciples of Jesus, in the narrative from John's Gospel that we read on this third Sunday of Easter.

All of them probably started out as fishermen. Now you know that all of the twelve were second-career disciples. They came from different occupations. Matthew, for one, was a tax collector. But of the seven we hear about today, most or all were fishermen. Seasoned fishermen. Fishing was how they'd made

their living back in the day, before they'd met the Lord. Before they met the One who'd called them to be fishers of *people*.

But when he died, their hope of being able to fish for people died too. And there was guilt. Their abandonment and denial of Jesus filled them with guilt. Along with resignation and despair. A number of them—led by Peter—have gone back to Galilee and to their former vocation. Fishing.

They've gone back to being fishers of *fish*. They've gone back to what they did before. And they had their own particular ways of going about this business of fishing. For instance, they always dropped their nets to portside—to the left side of the boat. Most of them are right-handed. Their right arms are stronger. If they cast their nets to starboard—to the right side—it would be more difficult to haul in the catch.

But this morning at the lakeshore, as the water's surface mirrors the pearl-pink of the eastern sky, we glimpse the faces of the seven: haggard with the weariness of a long night of fruitless labor. They're tired. They're disappointed. The last thing they want to hear—from a solitary figure on the beach—is a lesson on how to fish!

They're independent. They're self-reliant. How like them we are—we who are surrounded by a culture that prizes rugged individuality and self-sufficiency. Like those first disciples, we like to do things on our own. Without any help. Without interference from anyone else!

But this stranger on the shore says: *Hey, guys—caught any fish?* And then he suggests that they let down their nets on the *other* side of the boat. Just a few feet from where those nets have been all night long. He tells them to *try the other side*.

They're probably thinking: *Who the heck is this person? And what does he know about fishing anyway?*

These veteran fishermen are fishing the way they've always fished. These seven are doing what they know. They've worked in the boat for a long time.

Now, since the time of the earliest Christian communities, a boat has symbolized the church. Like those first disciples who worked in a boat, many of us have worked in the church for a long time. Just like those fishermen, we in the church have become partial to our own particular way of doing things. Our own traditions. They make us feel secure. They're what we're accustomed to. They're what we know. We like to say: *We've*

always done it this way. When we hear a suggestion for a different approach, sometimes we say: *We've never done it that way!*

But doing the same old things over and over in the same way can get discouraging. Because when you do the same old things in the same old way, you get the same old results.

Have you been casting your nets in the same way in the same place all through what may be beginning to feel like a long night? Does it seem as though you don't have much to show for it? Does it feel as though you've just been spinning your wheels? Do you think you're at a time in your life when you can't do things any way other than the way you've been doing them?

Maybe you're thinking: *Preacher, you can't teach an old dog new tricks*. But I'm not so sure that's true.

Let me tell you about Trooper. He was our son's dog. Our grand-dog. And he *was* a grand dog. A rescued yellow Lab mix. Trooper was a canine senior citizen when he and his family moved into a new house. But even though he was a big fellow—nearly a hundred pounds—and even though he was getting on in

years, Trooper learned how to go out a doggy door. And come back in. For the first time in his life!

Many of us are getting on in years. Many of us are nearing or have already reached retirement age. That is, the age that *used* to be considered retirement age. The age at which our parents and grandparents settled into rocking chairs on their front porches and just watched the world go by. But all that's changing. Seniors have much to offer twenty-first century communities: all the benefits of maturity and life experience and wisdom. Due to increased life expectancy and economic factors, many are doing things retirees didn't *do* a generation or two ago: working and volunteering and engaging in mission. Leading active, productive lives.

Even so, change isn't easy for us. We like our comfort zones. We've gotten used to our safe harbors. We want to do things the way we've always done them. And sometimes it's hard for us to break out of that mind-set.

But—thanks be to God!—there is One who helps us. One who speaks to us. Even if at first he seems to be a stranger drawing near to us. Revealing himself to us. Opening our eyes so that we recognize him. We recognize the risen One.

And when we do, we're ashamed. So ashamed, so guilt-filled that—like Simon Peter—we cover ourselves. Because we've treated him as though he really *were* a stranger. We've acted as though we didn't know him at all. And when things got tough, instead of staying by his side, we've deserted him. We don't deserve to be forgiven.

But grace is never about what we *deserve*, is it? Incredibly, he forgives us for everything we've done to him. Just as in Galilee he forgives these fishermen. Jesus offers words of invitation. Words of welcome. Words of tenderness. He feeds us. Nourishes us. Sustains us.

And then he asks a question: *Do you love me?* For every time Peter—and we ourselves—have denied him, Jesus asks: *Do you love me?* Of course, we answer: *Yes, Lord, you know I love you.* But *saying* you love him is not enough. At Golgotha, Christ has *shown* you just how much he loves you. Now he asks you to show *your* love to *him*. He has work for you to do!

God has done a mighty work in raising Jesus from the dead. Today, God challenges you and me to be a part of God's resurrection work. God who has done something new in Christ Jesus is challenging us to do something new.

Christ calls us to step out of our comfort zones. To sail out of our safe harbors. To try another way. To try the other side.

Jesus' suggestion to try the other side is a clarion call to believing communities who've been casting their nets on only one side of the church walls. The inside. And don't have much to show for it. All across the theological spectrum, churches are struggling. Attendance is down. Membership is dwindling.

But, my brothers and sisters, hear me when I tell you that Jesus Christ is not going to give up on the church he loves—because the church is an earthly foretaste of his eternal kingdom! He calls us to make disciples. He calls us to be fishers of people. And clearly, the people we're fishing for are not on the inside of the church walls. Christ urges us to try the other side. The outside.

A few years ago, at a community event, I saw a woman wearing a tee shirt. And on her tee shirt were these words: *The church has left the building*. Not *Elvis* has left the building. *The church* has left the building. Inside these walls is where we worship. Outside these walls is where we serve. To be a faithful church—a vital, vibrant, thriving church—we have to step outside.

Outside these church walls are ministries to which our Lord is calling us. You and I show our love to him by caring for his sheep and by feeding his lambs.

There are lambs to feed—little children to feed—not far from here.

According to recent statistics on child hunger, “children in rural communities are most likely to be [hungry]. Forty-three percent of America’s counties are rural, but they make up almost two-thirds of counties with high rates [of child hunger]...a quarter or more of children...in South Carolina” face hunger... For some kids in South Carolina, there’s little or no food at home. Often their only meals are the free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches that they get at school. On weekends and in the summer, when school meals aren’t available, hungry children are dependent on Backpack Programs and Summer Food Service Programs. And as you know, the Fairfield Community Food Bank strives to feeds children and families in need.

How can *you* be a part? How can you cast *your* nets on the other side?

The Gospel tells us that when these fishermen cast their nets on the other side, they catch a hundred and fifty-three fish. It's been said that they catch a hundred and fifty-three different *kinds* of fish. Every kind of fish in the known world of their day and time.

I think the Evangelist wants us to understand that when we *try the other side*, we bring Christ all kinds of people from all kinds of places. I think that when we try the other side, we begin living into obedience to his command to make disciples of all nations.

So, beloved, if the night has been long and dark, if weeping has lingered, trust in the One in whom a joyous new day is dawning. Live in the presence and power of the One who is turning your mourning into dancing. Dare to be a part of what God is doing in Jesus Christ—and in *you!* For today, Christ calls you to follow him. And he gives you all you need to stay by his side. Always.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.