

Sunday, January 25, 2026

Sermon: “Gone Fishing”

Matthew 4:12-22 NRSV

Where we are going in today's message: Want to land a big one next time? Jesus has some advice on where to aim your next cast.

In 2013, a German angler named Marco Liebenow caught something extraordinary off the coast of Norway: a 513-pound Atlantic halibut. It was so enormous - nearly 9 feet long - that he and his three fishing buddies couldn't bring it into the boat. They had to tow it to shore. The struggle to land it took over an hour and a half. When it finally came to land, the fish was a contender for the world record.

Most fish wranglers would be happy with an 8-pound rainbow trout. But 513 pounds?

The story is more than just an angler's dream. It is a picture of the unexpected, exhausting and awe-inspiring nature of fishing. And it sets the stage for understanding a curious and powerful phrase in today's gospel reading.

In Matthew 4, Jesus begins his public ministry. He calls his first disciples - Simon Peter and Andrew, then James and John — by issuing a startling invitation: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” It is a phrase we have heard so often that it's in danger of losing its punch. What does Jesus mean by that? And just as importantly, how does he intend to transform people who are extraordinarily average into competent fishers of human beings?

This isn't just about evangelism; it is about formation. It is about what happens to this motley crew of fishermen, as much as it's about casting a net for future converts. So, Jesus' call is about discipleship and the journey this entails.

Let's explore this by looking more deeply into what fishing really requires - and how those very qualities describe what Jesus develops in us as we follow him.

Any seasoned angler will tell you that fishing isn't for the impatient. It demands waiting, watching and wanting - wanting to believe there is something unseen just beneath the surface.

In much the same way, building relationships and influencing others spiritually takes time. More than 90 years ago, Dale Carnegie published his groundbreaking book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. His premise - that you can change other people's behavior by changing your behavior toward them - was revolutionary and still resonates today. Carnegie emphasized principles like showing genuine interest in others, listening well, avoiding criticism and offering sincere appreciation. It sounds strikingly like what Jesus does with his disciples. He calls them to follow — not because they are polished or perfect, but because he knows they can become something more through his shaping.

What if we applied Carnegie's insight to our spiritual walk? What if our patience with others reflected Christ's patience with us? Just as Jesus says, "I will make you fish for people," Carnegie might say, "You can influence others not by pressure, but by kindness and presence."

When Jesus calls us to follow him and says he will make us fish for people, he's telling us upfront that this isn't quick work. Human hearts don't change on command. The process of reaching someone - truly reaching them - takes time. You may have someone in your life for whom you've been praying, whom you've been encouraging and loving for years, and yet they still seem unreachable. Fishing reminds us to keep casting. Keep praying. Keep trusting. The catch isn't yours to control, but the faithfulness is.

And before complaining too much about how tedious fishing can be, remember that patience applies to yourself as well! Our own spiritual growth as disciples doesn't happen overnight. Jesus doesn't expect instant maturity. He invites us to keep following, and if we do, he promises, "I will make you ..." (v. 19). He is patient with us, and we are called to be equally patient with ourselves and others.

There is a fine line, as comedian Steven Wright notes, between fishing and standing on the shore like an idiot. Smart fishermen know their environment. They study tides, water temperatures and habits of the fish. They don't just cast randomly; they read the waters.

Jesus calls us to be willing, but also wise. We are not sent out blindly. As fishers of people, we need to understand the context in which others live - to learn their stories, their fears, their doubts and their cultures. To love others well, we must know them.

When Paul preached in Athens (Acts 17), he didn't begin with Hebrew Scripture. He began with the Greek poets and the altar to the unknown god. This is what you call knowing the hole you're fishing in.

Jim Wallis of Sojourners once told a story in an interview that shortly after settling into Washington, D.C., they decided to establish the extent of their mission field. Where was the fishing hole? They looked at a map, penciled in an area of 10 square blocks around their offices, and said, this is our target audience. These are the people we want to reach. This is our fishing hole.

Being fishers of people means not expecting everyone to come to us or even to be happy about our presence with our fishing gear and tackle. Rather, fishing effectively for people probably entails going to them, listening well and offering Christ in a language they can understand.

A pastor tells the story of being on sabbatical in Istanbul for several months, staying in a mission facility on the Asian side of the city.

One day, a tall, ebullient evangelical pastor from Sweden breezed into the mission. He and his wife and children took a suite and settled in. He confided in our colleague that he was there to preach the gospel, and he intended to go out on the streets and start preaching.

This was ill-advised on so many levels that it was difficult to know where to start with this man. He was reminded that Turkey was 99% Muslim, and that it was fast turning away from the secular

model endorsed by Ataturk and was rapidly returning to traditional Islamic views. If he persisted with his plan, he would surely be arrested.

He decided not to stand on the shore and look like an idiot, as Wright puts it, but to survey what opportunities there were for being a fisherman in Istanbul. And within a fortnight, he'd left, returning to Sweden.

If we don't fish where there are fish, then we aren't doing much more than drowning worms.

That 513-pound halibut mentioned above was no easy lift. Marco Liebenow couldn't do it alone. It took a team. It took an hour and a half. And even then, they didn't haul it into the boat - they had to tow it to shore.

Evangelism, discipleship and kingdom work are no different. Fishing for people is not solo work. Nor is it easy. It takes spiritual strength, emotional endurance and partnership.

We may not face the cold waters of the North Atlantic, but the emotional tides of gospel ministry can be just as daunting. People are not always eager to be "caught" by grace. They resist. They drift. Some seem so far off course that you wonder if your prayers are even reaching the right ocean.

But we're not casting that net alone. The apostle Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6). Paul knew that as part of the church, engaged on behalf of Christ's mission on earth, we're part of a much larger effort than anything we might do as individuals. Evangelism, justice, compassion - these aren't solo expeditions. They require spiritual strength, emotional endurance and most of all, community.

The late President Jimmy Carter continued volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, hammer in hand, sweat on his brow, even when he was well into his 90s and battling cancer. When asked why he still worked on building houses, he said simply, "My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I can, whenever I can, for as long as I can." This is fishing with strength and endurance.

Millard and Linda Fuller, the founders of Habitat for Humanity, began with the radical idea that every human being deserved a decent place to live. They didn't wait for perfect conditions. They just started building. Hammer by hammer, house by house, community by community, they fished for people, one front porch at a time. They built hope with two-by-fours.

Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and a committed Christian, could have chosen a quiet life after law school. Instead, he chose to enter the "deep water" of racial injustice and mass incarceration. In a TED Talk, he said, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." This speaks to the heart of gospel fishing - seeing people not by their sins but by their God-given worth.

Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And that's exactly what these modern disciples have done. They've endured skepticism, fatigue and even opposition. Yet they press on. Because fishing for souls takes time. Sometimes years. Sometimes decades. Sometimes it takes building houses or marching in protest or simply listening well. But it all requires patience, a knowledge of the waters, strength and endurance.

When we carry one another's burdens, when we pray for each other, when we hold fast to hope for those who are drifting - that is the strength of a faith community. This is why Jesus sent the disciples out two by two, and why the church is called the body of Christ. We need each other. We fish better when we fish together.

Fishing is, in a sense, an act of faith. You throw a line or net into waters where you can't see what lies beneath. You trust that something is there. You act on hope that is not yet seen.

Have you ever had a day of fishing when you thought you were going to get skunked? You start to collect your gear and put stuff away. When you're done, you face your pole. The bobber is still floating idly. You decide to try one more cast and swap out the worm for a Mister Twister Curly Tail Grub lure. You make your final cast and start to reel in the lure. WHAM! Your line gets hit and

you've got a big one - only possible because you made a final cast. You just never know.

When Jesus says, "I will make you fish for people," he's also saying, "Trust me." Trust that Jesus knows what he's doing even when results are slow. Trust that he knows where to cast the net. Trust that your obedience matters, even when you don't feel successful.

Faith means throwing the net one more time, even when the last cast came up empty. It means speaking a word of encouragement, even when you don't know how it will be received. It means showing up, even when the waters feel still and silent.

In Luke's version of this story (Luke 5), Peter casts his net again at Jesus' word even after a night of catching nothing. And the net nearly bursts with fish. That's the power of obedience, even in uncertainty.

When Jesus calls the disciples, he's also asking them to leave something behind. Peter and Andrew leave their nets. James and John leave their boat and their father.

Fishing for people isn't about using others to build our influence. It's not about dragging people into our boat. It is about releasing control and trusting that Jesus is the one who calls, catches and ultimately draws people to himself.

It also means letting go of what's familiar. The disciples left the tools they knew. They left the safety of their trade. Jesus not only changed their destination, but he also changed their identity.

Following Jesus will do that. You may find yourself in unfamiliar waters. You may be asked to love people you don't understand. You may be invited to go deeper than is comfortable. But don't worry, Jesus is out-front leading the way. And, as impossible as it sounds, Jesus also has your back.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "There are far, far better things ahead than any we leave behind." Like the children in Lewis' stories who step through the wardrobe or sail to the world's end, we, too, are

called into a bigger story that requires courage, trust and the willingness to love beyond our comfort zones.

These disciples could scarcely know that Jesus would get them out on stormy seas and assail their craft with such violence that they feared for their lives. They were scared silly! Remember that story? If you live in a hurricane zone, you know that there's no one more scared than a sinner in a cyclone. These hardened sailors were in a gale of gigantic proportions, fighting high swells that threatened to swamp their boat and send them all to a watery grave. One of them probably thought, "Lord, I signed up to fish for people, not to be food for fish!"

The disciples forgot that Jesus was resting in the boat this whole time, a picture of tranquility in the eye of the storm. When we follow Jesus, we won't often be wading through shallow water. We are going to find that life gets dicey sometimes. But there's good news! Isaiah puts it this way: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (Isaiah 43:2).

Perhaps the best takeaway from this text is that Jesus promises to make something of us ("I will make you ..."). If Jesus were to say to us, "I will make something of you," that's a promise we would take any day of the week. And that is precisely what Jesus is saying: "I want to take your life and make something of it. But you need to do something for me. I need you to follow me, and if you do, I will take your life with all the broken dreams and tattered remnants of failure and good intentions, and mold, shape and fashion something impressive!"

So maybe you don't feel like a skilled fisher of people. Maybe you have cast nets and come up empty. Maybe you're tired. Maybe you don't have your own tackle and gear in order. That's okay. Jesus doesn't say, "Get to work." He says, "Follow me."

And he will make you.

He'll give you patience. He'll give you understanding. He'll give you strength and faith and companions along the way. He will

give you what you need to love people well, and to draw them toward the shore of grace.

So cast your net. Trust the process. And let the Maker make you into someone who changes lives. Alleluia, Amen.