

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 21, 2024 (3rd Sunday after Epiphany, Year B)
Mark 1:14-20

One of my favorite church signs said this: “Be fishers of people. You catch ‘em, He’ll clean ‘em.” It’s a classic. It refers to today’s gospel, one of the most familiar sayings in the New Testament, DIRECTLY calling us to be an evangelizing church. “Fishing for people” is our MISSION, and we KNOW it. And yet, we don’t seem to be sure what “fishing for people” MEANS.

Imagine a fishing CLUB where the members just sat around swapping fish stories about the big one they landed, and the whopper that broke away, but they never stepped into a BOAT or cast their line in the water. What kind of a FISHING club would that be, whose members were content to admire the TROPHIES on the wall, but never actually went FISHING?

A lot of CHURCHES are like that. They sit around bragging about the days when their boat was FULL of fish. They look BACK NOSTALGICALLY on the days when the main purpose of their church was to go fishing, to reach others for Christ. But they never actually GO fishing anymore; they merely TALK ABOUT fishing.

Other churches don’t even talk about FISHING; they just talk about their BOAT. They worry about repairing and improving their boat. They wish their boat was bigger. They wish they had more workers. They worry about having the right equipment. But they never actually go out on the water and set the hook. That’s not what we’re ABOUT as a church.

Our mission is to “BE FISHERS of PEOPLE. You CATCH ‘em, HE’LL clean ‘em.” That’s our main PURPOSE as a church, so our main CONCERN should be what kind of BAIT to use. Maybe WORMS won’t work when you’re fishing for PEOPLE.

Actually, we should take a lesson from the fishermen JESUS called. THEY didn’t use BAIT at all. That’s not the WAY they fished. They used nets.

A little girl I know was going fishing with her dad. Her mother asked her what she liked about fishing, and she said, “I get to spend time with my dad.” A pastor I know said he likes to fish because he can spend time with his friends. That’s what fishing with a NET does: it takes SEVERAL people, working TOGETHER, to handle a net. It’s a COMMUNITY thing.

As I showed the kids, each person has to do their part. It doesn’t matter if there’s one or SEVERAL GOOD fishermen in the community, drawing people in; if everyone ISN’T holding their part of the net, the fish get away. We are called to be holy, not a HOLE in the net. Or worse, if there’s a “cold fish” in the community, slashing around, saying mean things about people and complaining about what the team is doing, then no matter HOW many “warm” fishermen you have, that ONE person will drive the fish away. Fishing is a COMMUNITY effort.

And community is what sets the church apart. It’s WHO we are. The church’s entire existence is based on Christ’s words, “where two or three are gathered, there I am also.” It touches a basic human need in all of us—to belong, to connect.

But the connection isn’t just thinking alike or having similar experiences; it’s sharing a connection of FAITH. It’s belonging to something bigger than us – MORE than that, it’s belonging to SOMEONE — bigger than us, yes, but WITH us. That spiritual connection to God, and THROUGH God to each other, is DEEPER, and draws us CLOSER, than we can IMAGINE. It gives life MEANING and HOPE.

We are a community of God’s love. And WHO we ARE as a church is also what we DO as a church. We fish for people by SHARING God’s love, by giving of ourselves, by welcoming them into the community of believers. THAT is our fishing net. We cast it out together to draw people closer to God.

There's an interesting story about Jerry Rice. He's widely considered to be the greatest wide receiver in NFL history, and often called the greatest NFL player of all time. He played for the San Francisco 49ers for 15 years, 1985 to 2000, and 5 more years after that for other teams. He's a Hall of Famer, and you would THINK he came from some LEGENDARY college team, but he DIDN'T.

He was once asked, "Why did you attend a small, obscure university like Mississippi Valley State in Itta Bena, Mississippi?"

Rice responded, "Out of all the big-time schools (like UCLA) to recruit me, MVSU was the only school to come to my HOUSE and give me a PERSONAL visit."

Those big-time schools recruited through cards, letters, and advertisements, but only ONE coach came to MEET Rice, and showed him PERSONAL ATTENTION. Cards and letters are nice and they're meaningful, but they can only GO SO far. And advertising is IMPERSONAL. It makes a DIFFERENCE in this world to meet people eye to eye, and INVITE them to be a part.

If a HANDSHAKE can do THAT, imagine what GOD can do. As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea. He approached them and invited them PERSONALLY to be a part of his mission. He went a little further and he saw two more brothers: James and John. He went up to them extending the SAME PERSONAL invitation, and they followed. It's the PERSONAL touch that ATTRACTS us. It makes a DIFFERENCE.

People LONG for a connection, to BELONG to something, and even MORE, to belong to SOMEONE. They WANT to be caught in God's love.

I've talked with many of you about what brought you to First Lutheran when you first moved to the area. Your stories are about someone reaching out to you and inviting you to church or some activity or Bible study here. If it meant that much to you, it means that much to other folks too.

That's what this church has ALWAYS been about. We are a COMMUNITY of GOD'S LOVE. And our calling is to CAST that NET of God's love, and draw people IN. "BE FISHERS of PEOPLE. You CATCH 'em, HE'LL clean 'em." Amen.