

“PERHAPS IT ISN’T ABOUT THE NETS?”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 22, 2017

Text: Matthew 4:12-23

Last week I talked about fellowship. Today’s topic is evangelism.

This Sunday’s gospel is where Jesus got the ball rolling. He said to Simon and Andrew, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Old translation: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Or, as one recent translation says: “Follow me, and I will teach you how to catch people instead of fish.”

I would like to help you hear that verse not as inviting us to entrap people, but to help people. Not to take away liberty, but to preserve.

It all turns on a decision about the origin, and the implications, of the Greek word for fisherman, “halieus,” which comes from the Greek word “hals,” or “salt.” I disagree with the lexicons, which all say it is because fishermen plied the seas, the saltwater oceans. I think it comes from their association with salt itself. Before the days of refrigeration, going back as far as we can in history, commerce in fish was entirely dependent upon and always associated with salt. Salt is what saved the catch. Salt made fish, which rots in three days, something which could be bought and sold. In the days of Jesus, fish from Galilee could be eaten in Spain!

When Jesus said he would redirect the work of some fishermen named Simon, Andrew, James, and John, and make people the object of their efforts instead of fish, he was stepping into a river of interpretation that runs through the Old Testament before it gets to the shores of Galilee.

He made them think of once in the Old Testament when the Lord said (through Jeremiah) that he would get a whole bunch of fishermen and have them go fishing for sinners, to snag them; and he

would also enlist hunters to track down sinners. And he was going to “teach them,” he was. And he did not mean it in a nice way. See Jeremiah 16. Once I catch all of them, the Lord promised, “I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations.” Ouch.

The word “fisherman” is not used often in the Old Testament, and I think this is the passage that would have come to mind when Jesus employed it. God was going to put hooks in the cheeks of sinners and catch them. They could run, but they could not hide any longer.

Now, although Jesus stood in that interpretative stream, and although he used an image from the OT for what he was about to use these four men to accomplish, I am certain that Jesus did not mean to imply that his disciples would serve as bounty hunters in the kingdom of heaven project.

Yes, they would work for God, under Jesus’ supervision. No, they would not seek to capture and control people, bring them in for punishment.

Quite the reverse! Jesus was going to gather and gather people, but it would not be for control and punishment of evildoers. It would be a liberating and saving gathering, which would create communion. Rather like when a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one gets lost, you know, that sort of thing. That is the gathering Jesus would enlist them into. Not “search and destroy” but “search and rescue.”

So, when Jesus called those disciples, he had a different analogy in mind than setting traps for

people, hooking them in the cheek, or casting a net to take away their life.

Here is where the pun comes in. And I could be wrong, because I'm never found support for my theory, even from Fred Danker, the most knowledgeable NT Greek scholar in the world, the editor of the top current NT Greek lexicon, published by the University of Chicago, who was a friend of mine. I asked him and he said my theory is dubious, so there you go. I think I'm right.

The pun is this: the word for "fishermen" in Greek is ἄλιεῖ. In English, the word "fisherman" comes from the word "fish," as you would expect. Not so in Greek. In Greek, the word "fisherman" comes from the word for . . . salt. That's right. Salt. I think people called these men ἄλιεῖ because of what they did with the fish they caught.

They were salters. As in, "You are the salt of the earth," which comes only a few verses after Jesus has turned fishermen into fishers of people. Which verse goes on: "but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."

Back to our story. Jesus was walking away from his new little hometown Capernaum, through the industrial district, when he saw two commercial fishermen, Simon and Andrew. Yes, they were commercial fishermen. They caught fish in the Sea of Galilee, dried them and salted them, and sold the fish far and wide. How so? What made that a lucrative trade? The presence close by of a major source of cheap salt: the Dead Sea, a mere 100 miles to the south, close to the great market of Jerusalem. You may well imagine that many a donkey or camel carried a freight of salt to the north, along the Jordan River, and a freight of salted fish down the same route, to the marketplaces of Jericho and Jerusalem.

(Jericho was an estimable city close to the Dead Sea. The oldest known fortified city in the world, by a margin of 4,000 years! Yet no fish were ever caught in the Dead Sea!)

My point is this. If fishing could be lucrative only when there was a plentiful supply of salt nearby, perhaps when Jesus said he would turn these ἄλιεῖ into people who would do the same thing to people that they did to what they caught in the lake, maybe he was—ironically—saying that he would get them to help him "save and preserve" people! They would "salt" people the way they were used to "salting" fish.

The task of evangelism is not to snag people into joining our congregation, or make them do anything at all they don't want to do. "Take from us, Lord, the desire to control the freedom of others," went an old prayer from an earlier hymnal. It is no triumph at all to get a lot of people to belong to our congregation, if their experience is neither life-giving nor liberating.

And we accomplish that how? By making sure that "evangelism" is in fact not about the law, about hunting down bad people so they can do penance, but about gospel, which is entirely about the promises God offers to all people: grounded in the forgiveness of our sins, the gifts of peace and freedom and life and light; the power to become children of God, born of God.

It's tricky using the imagery of Jesus in this story. One can't push any of the metaphors too far without losing Jesus' point. (For example, it would be quite improper to seek a pun in Matthew 10:1, where Matthew says "Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." (Hmm, "cure.") But if we want to do evangelism as Jesus did it, we will be sure that we offer people not fire on their heads or a net around their feet, but peace in their hearts and light

on their path. Otherwise, we will be the blind leading the blind.

Yes, we commit “outreach” here at Bethlehem. No, it is not about entrapment, it is about preserving people through offering to them the light and life we ourselves have found to be a good preservative, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If I had the time, I would now take you over to the second reading, where we could spend a couple hours discussing how Paul the apostle saw outreach. Suffice it to say that the power in our proclamation of the gospel is neither our great wisdom nor the powerful effects we are able to produce (both of which are more like nets or traps)—but in the subtle and even contrary life-giving message of Christ crucified and risen for the sake of the world. Amen.

