

Throw Out the Net – John 14:1-14

This is a story about fishing. I always get a little jittery when they start talking about fishing because, quite frankly, I am not a good fisherman. I have never figured out what lure works with what fish, or what bait to use, or where the good fishing spots are. I simply go out, throw out a line and pray something will bite!

In this passage, the disciples catch 153 large fish at one time. I doubt I have caught 153 fish in my lifetime, and that includes the minnows I caught as a boy! Good thing this story is not about shaming the poor fishermen among us!

So what is this story about? John 20 seems to have wrapped everything up and ends with these words:

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Yet we have another story, and it is a fisherman's story. Now usually when we hear a fisherman's story we take it with a grain of salt: "How big was that fish, really?"

But this is a Jesus story, so we must take it seriously. Why was John prompted by the Holy Spirit to add this story to the end of his Gospel?

First, look at how the section we read today ends. It says, "This was the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead." (v. 14)

The key to understanding this part of the chapter is to see that it ties in with the resurrection appearances. It is the third appearance, making the appearances complete.

And notice what happens in this chapter. Jesus calls out to the disciples who are in a boat fishing – though not very successfully. Jesus calls out instructions to them, telling them to throw their net out on the other side of the boat. When they do, they suddenly have a great catch of fish. Question: would a ghost, or spirit, give instructions about fishing? Not likely.

Second, this stranger on the beach has a fire going and he is grilling fish on it. Once again we are prompted to ask, would a ghost or spirit start a fire and cook a meal over it? No likely.

Finally, Jesus eats with the disciples once they have grilled some of their own fish and have joined him at the fire. You know what I am going to ask: does a ghost or spirit eat broiled fish, or any kind of food for that matter? Not likely.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Jn 20:30–31). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Yet on three occasions we have Jesus doing what a spirit or ghost would never do. The point of the story, at least on one level, is to verify the fact that Jesus is really alive. He has resurrected from the dead.

It does not seem that people had a hard time believing Jesus really died. That is a 20th century phenomenon where people want to say Jesus only swooned or revived in the cool of the cave. That is because these so-called scholars never saw a crucifixion. Everyone in John's day had seen crucifixions and they knew no one walked away alive.

In John's day the greatest temptation would be to believe Jesus came back as a ghost or a spirit. They were very superstitious in those days, and even the disciples struggled with this one. Remember when Jesus walked to them on the water as they were sailing across the Sea of Galilee? They thought Jesus was a ghost and they were terrified.

John wants us to know that Jesus' resurrection was a bodily resurrection. Though Jesus was given a resurrection body, he was very much alive. The disciples could touch him and even see the scars from the crucifixion. He was no ghost. This was important for the early church to understand. For the promise of the resurrection, besides the completion of the work necessary for our salvation, was that we would have a body like Jesus' resurrected body when he returns to take us home. We will not be ghosts or spirits floating around. We too will have bodies that can fish, make fires, cook and even eat.

That is the message of this passage.

But it is not the only message. Typical of John, there is a message we can see on the surface. But if we look closer there is usually something more going on. That is true in this passage as well.

When Peter and John first met Jesus, he called them from their nets and boats and said, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." (Mark 1:17)

Then for three years Jesus taught these fishermen how to become fishers of men. Through his example, through his teachings, through his instructions Jesus was molding these men into fishers of men. This would be the task he would leave with them when he ascended back into heaven.

So what does it mean to be a fisher of men? That is a gruesome picture of a hook in the side of someone's mouth. What did Jesus mean?

To be a fisher of men is to be someone who shares his/her faith and invites others to follow Jesus as well. Some might call the fisher of men an evangelist, or a soul winner, or a sharer of the Gospel. Those titles seem to be intimidating to many people, so maybe the words of N.T.

Niles may be easier to understand:

“Evangelism is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”²

So Jesus is reminding Peter and the other disciples what their main purpose is to tell others about Jesus and his death and resurrection for their salvation. They are to invite people to respond to that story of redemption, giving them a chance to say “yes” to Jesus. Notice what happens in this story. Jesus sees that their efforts have been fruitless, and after a long night of fishing, they caught nothing.

Then Jesus tells them “throw out your net on the right side of the boat and then you will find some fish.” (v. 6).

Sure enough, when they are with Jesus, following his instructions, they catch a great net full of fish. It says there were 153 fish. These were true fishermen – they had to count all those large fish so they could tell the story to others!

But it has been suggested that even that number has meaning. It was believed there were 153 types or species of fish in that body of water. The disciples supposedly caught one of every species in the lake. The message is, the net of the Gospel is to include all peoples. It is not exclusive to one race, or colour, or language or socioeconomic background. The Gospel is for everyone, and no one is to be excluded. That is why we are told that despite the great catch of fish, so large the men had trouble hauling it in, the net was not breaking. The net of the Gospel will never break – it can handle everyone.

So the deeper meaning of this story is that we all are called to be fishers of men. We are all called to share our faith with others.

I was reading an article this week from Crosswalk ministries and they suggested four ways we can be fishers of men.

1. Find where the people are.

Now I have already confessed that I am not a great fisherman, but this first piece of advice makes sense. As the article put it, “You don’t catch fish in a barrel.”³ You have to go to where the people are who need to hear about Jesus. Good news, they are all around us. Bad news, we seldom see them as people who might need the Lord.

As a pastor, I spend a great deal of time in the office. In fact, during COVID I have spent more time than ever. The hard part about this is that I very seldom have non-Christians in my life. Someone once commented that it must be nice to be able to spend all your days with Christians. They found it hard to work in a secular setting with unbelievers.

² N.T. Niles, “That They Might Have Life”

³ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/ways-christians-can-be-fishers-of-men.html>

In one sense it is nice, and easy (usually). But if Jesus followers are called to be fishers of men, then I am in the wrong place. Seldom do non-Christians come into my office and let me share the Gospel with them. It has happened – one day a lady from the church brought her sister-in-law from Calgary to the church to meet me, and this lady was not a Christian. We chatted, and the conversation turned to Jesus. Before she left my office that day she repented of her sins and invited Jesus into her life.

But that does not happen very often....

More likely the story will be like Donna's. Donna was working out at the gym and there she met someone who was willing to share his faith with her. Today she is a child of God because that person threw out the net in obedience to Jesus.

2. You need to cast the net... and be patient.

The one thing I have noticed about avid fishermen is that they are patient. They do not throw out a hook, reel it in and say, "Time to move on." Once they have their spot they will spend hours working it.

Casting the net requires patience. People may not respond to the Gospel message immediately. Handing them a track and walking away usually does not work. You need to patiently wait, living a godly, loving, kind life. If you are thrashing around, angry and anxious and suspicious of everyone, there will be no fish around you to be caught. This is just my opinion, but I am afraid that is exactly what those two pastors in Calgary have done by insisting they get arrested. Non-Christians are not getting close to that action.

But people who patiently show love and kindness will be successful as fishers of men. As someone has correctly said, more often than not a person is drawn to you before they are drawn to Christ. This is why we are called to live holy lives in an unholy world.

3. Catch them before you clean them.

This simply means that we should not expect non-Christians to live like Christians. It is Jesus who transforms them and reshapes their lives through the work of the Holy Spirit. Too many Christians are insisting people accept all the Christian values before they become Christians. And guess what happens? Non-Christians stay far away from these "judgmental" Christians.

We should not be surprised by the behaviours of those who do not know Jesus yet. When Jesus comes into their life then they will be changed; but not before. So love them as they are, not because they measure up to what you want them to be.

4. Focus on casting the net, not on counting how many fish you caught.

Jesus simply said to the disciples, "throw out your net." He did not say, "Great job, you caught so many fish." Neither would he have said, "What lousy fishermen" if there were only a few fish in the net. You see, it is Jesus who determines how many fish will be caught. I believe Jesus

knew there were 153 fish in that net before the disciples counted them. Jesus knows if the net will catch anything every time you share your faith. It is up to him, and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, to determine the catch. We throw out the net, share our faith, give people a chance to respond, but it is Jesus who will determine the catch.

This week one of our members had to visit the doctor. Well, actually, many of our members have been visiting the doctor, but one shared how they were at the doctor this week and had a remarkable experience. To make the visit more pleasant this person started chatting with the office staff and nurses providing care. One of the young ladies noted on the chart that this person happened to share the same birthdate as she did. She was much younger than the patient, and when she was asked if she was married and had a family, she said she was married, but the husband left when the second child was born.

It was clear life was not easy for this lady. She shared it was about to get more challenging as the ex was moving into town because he was required to provide support.

The church member asked if this lady was a church girl? She said she tried to be! The patient said he was a church man. And then, prompted by the Holy Spirit, that patient asked if he could pray for the young lady. She said "Yes," and there in the doctor's office the member prayed for this lady and her family. Tears streamed down her face as he prayed. Tears also came down his face. Since this doctor's office was not in town, the member suggested a church this lady could attend. It happened to be near to her house, and she said she would try to attend when restrictions were lifted.

The net had been thrown. God knows when that medical staff will come to faith in Jesus, but the seed has been sown. The net was thrown.

This morning we hear the voice of Jesus giving us one command: throw out the net.

How will we respond?