

CAST IN, CAUGHT UP, CALLED OUT & CARRIED THROUGH

An Epiphany 5c, Feb. 4, 2007 Sermon by Dan Stern

During Jesus' day, there was a flourishing fishing industry on the Lake of Gennesaret, also known as the Sea of Galilee. It's quite possible that a catch at deeper levels of that lake might have been extremely good, good to such an extent that nets might have torn and boats might have capsized. Times have changed. The big-eyed, roundish-flat St. Peter's fish, unique to the waters of Lake Gennesaret, is pretty much gone now. And though some fishing still takes place there, that 700 foot-below sea level lake is more a resort place with mineral hot springs for vacationing Israelis than a place for real commercial fishing.

And since whole species of fish are disappearing quickly around the world now, it got me to thinking: maybe we should try to see this whole fishing thing from the fisheye's point of view. The People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, pushing strict vegetarianism, tell us fish are smart, interesting animals with their own unique personalities, just like the dogs and cats we share our homes with. They quote a marine biologist, who states, "I wouldn't eat a grouper any more than I'd eat a cocker spaniel." Not being a strict vegetarian, I admit to having snickered a bit at first when I read that. But then I came across a couple of news items this week, one, about an endangered species of smallish porpoises who always get caught up in the nets of commercial fishers off the Gulf of Mexico, and are dying off, one by one. Nowadays, who can't, who doesn't, identify with dolphins and porpoises? Which in turn, reminds me of the Prairie Home Companion joke – Why did the dolphin try to commit suicide? Because he'd lost all sense of *porpoise*! The other article reminded me of today's Jesus story. It seems that a school of herring recently got caught up in fishing nets near Oslo, Norway. But all these little fishies refused to give up without a fight, and by together swimming hard down toward the depths and away from the trawler, managed to sink a 63-foot boat. Nothing quite like it has ever occurred in previous known history. Maybe a few had escaped nets before, and signaled to the other herring that it was time for unified nonviolent resistance to their oppressors. Fish, apparently do have excellent memories. In any case, the Norwegian commercial fishers were no match for Herrings of the World United. So they had to cut both their losses and their nets. All the people on the boat survived, and, presumably, so did all the herring.

I was once at a lake in the North Cascades that had such an abundance of rainbow trout in it, even for a rookie like me with only a hook, piece of cheese, stick and fishing line, it was virtually impossible not to catch at least one.

I suspect I wasn't the only rural child who occasionally went fishing in the early Sunday AM hours. Then later the same morning in Sunday School, I tried to memorize the 23rd psalm, getting the part about the shepherd's tools, 'thy rod and thy staff' confused with a fisher's tools – saying 'Thy rod and thy reel, they comfort me.' They do comfort. At least many of us associate fishing with relaxation. And Jesus, whose livelihood didn't directly depend on fishing, was the one who in today's story seemed the coolest and most relaxed about it. But to become anything more than an R & R rookie at fishing, one needs to get over some fears, and go where the fishing is best. Notice that in the story Christy read to us, the fisher folk Jesus approached had been fishing from along the shoreline in shallow waters. It was Jesus who recommended going out onto deeper waters. It's likely that they were afraid to do that; rough storms commonly occurred there, and in

those days, most people didn't know how to swim. Commercial fishing to this day is considered the most dangerous occupation of all. People die out there on open seas all the time! And yet at those deeper, far-from-the-shore places, the catch may still be overwhelmingly great. "God is not for those content to paddle around in the shallow end," says Kyle Childress. "Jesus Christ calls us out into the deep, where we come face to face with who God is and who we aren't" Scary there at first, but in the long haul, fruitful.

It can be scary too at those times when we meet God face to face, and have to decide what to do next with our lives. At first, we may say, in effect: "Don't look at me, God! Leave me out of the danger and the glory, the greatness and the power, for I am unworthy of it." Simon the fisher, who later became Peter the disciple said it when he saw that overwhelming catch of fish: "Leave me be, Lord, for I am sinful." The prophet Isaiah said it: "Alas, I am a man of unclean lips." The Apostle Paul said it: "I persecuted the church. I am the last one to deserve this abundance of grace." You may recall my telling you a couple weeks ago of how even Albert Einstein felt inadequate and ashamed, and of the cracked pot that couldn't carry a whole load of water to the master, and so felt disabled, not like a whole and normal pot should. Scarcely anyone who does anything good in life always feels good about his or her own ability and self-worth. When good things happen among us here at Broadview Church too, we don't always know what to do. We're still surprised when the catch, so to speak, is at times overwhelmingly great, when God is truly and remarkably at work among us. It's true that we can't do anything good apart from God and apart from others. But we are repeatedly called by God through Jesus to recast our nets in yet deeper waters, and to catch or get caught up in the ever-surprising abundance only God provides at those deeper places in life.

Of course, deep places tend to be dark places until we get used to them. Even if you're a fish, if you've always tended to swim near the surface, it will likely take time to adjust to the ocean's depths. It's also possible that before we can even get to those deeper places of purposeful clarity in life, we may need to toil awhile at that which seems inconsequential or even purposeless. It must have seemed that way for Simon Peter and the other fisher folk, who toiled with their nets along shallow waters the whole long day, and likely many other days before that one, catching nothing whatsoever. There will be times in our lives when it feels as if nothing's catching on for us either. We may feel discouraged, as if we're accomplishing nothing, as if the work we do is fruitless, mindlessly-repetitive, overwrought or out of balance. We may be tempted at such times to quit trying to do anything good at all; so little good seems to come of our efforts. But even the greatest of spiritual giants experience times like these. Remind yourself, if you can, that frustrating, seemingly inconsequential times in our lives may actually be pregnant preparation times for something more; they may be 'dark night of the soul' times, which of necessity precede 'clear light of God's glory' times.

Over the long haul, though, as writer Frederich Buechner puts it, the 'deeper places' are "where the world's deep hunger and our own deep gladness meet." It's ultimately for the purpose of spreading gladness and joy that we are seeking to become more fully aware of each person's interests and talents at this church – (have you turned in your Interest Inventory form yet? Please do; you'll find it on our website www.broadviewucc.org and in the January 2007 *Steeple News* – because if you let the rest of us know as clearly as you are able what you love to do in life, you're far less likely to get nagged about and pushed into doing those things you don't love to

do. Notice too that when Jesus calls the disciples, they leave the inconsequential old pre-Jesus kind of fishing behind. We can hardly ever say 'yes' to one thing without saying 'no' to something else. We need to be able to say both yes and no at the right moments in life. To do so gives life both depth and clarity of purpose.

Thus Jesus invites us here at Broadview Church to recast our nets. In a real sense, he changes the subject, saying anyone can catch fish. But what about people? Do we know how to do that? I'm not crazy about employing a metaphor of getting caught up in a net and dragged into a boat, gasping for air, but it is worth asking, "How are we doing with the spiritual catch? Who do we talk to about our faith, and how?" Joan invited us at our lectionary study group this week to consider the following: If suddenly struck dumb, how would we share with others about what's important to us? "Preach the gospel," said St. Frances of Assisi. "Use words if necessary."

If we leave all else and say yes to Jesus' call, and with him, cast our nets in deep-water places, our lives will be immeasurably enriched. If we let ourselves get caught up in the good news, others get caught up in it too – and it will end up being people, not fish, that we 'catch'. Thus we'll be empowered to carry through over the long haul with a life that matters, that has depth and clarity of purpose. Thanks be to God, and Amen.