



“Fishing is a Group Project”

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Fishing was one of my favorite things in life as a child. It was right up there with bike-riding, swimming, tree-climbing, and riding on the tractor with my dad as he worked in the fields.

As most of you know, I come from Iowa, a landlocked state, with few fishing holes, and a short fishing season. That is, unless you like ice fishing. So my recollections of fishing are not as exotic as the type described by Joe Foss¹ and Curt Gowdy on the ABC TV series, “The American Sportsman,”² but I gained enough experience fishing as a child to sense what all of the fuss was about among the most avid outdoors persons.

I’m not sure exactly how old Marlene and I were or what the occasion was when our dad took us fishing for the first time. We were probably four or five, and the season was summer—probably mid July—when there was a bit of a lull in the field work and my dad felt like he could take it easy on a Sunday afternoon.

Mar and I quickly learned that Dad had rules about fishing, and that if you didn’t abide by them you weren’t going fishing again; so we learned the rules and happily complied. With apologies to David Letterman, here are my dad’s top ten fishing rules:

10. Fish have to be tricked onto your hook, so you need bait.
9. Only town people buy bait. Country people find their own.
8. Dads are too busy to hunt for bait. Kids find bait.
7. Fish like earth worms.
6. The best time to find worms is when it rains.
5. A coffee can with loose dirt makes a good home for worms.
4. Kids have to put their own worms on their own hooks.
3. Everyone has to be careful how they cast their line.
2. Fish have ears, so you have to keep your mouth shut if you want to catch them.
1. If you catch something, and want to keep it, you have to clean it yourself.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_American_Sportsman

² <http://www.videouniversity.com/curtgowdy.shtml>

When I was a kid I thought, in my own five-year-old sort of way, that my dad's fishing rules were some kind of proto-Title IX gender equality in sports statement, but I later learned that his rules were largely based on the fact that he was too cheap to buy a fishing license. In Iowa, at least when I was a kid, children under 14 didn't have to have a fishing license, so if we put our own worms on our own hooks, did our own casting, took the fish off and cleaned it ourselves, then *we* were fishing. *He* was not. And we were in no jeopardy of being busted by the game warden.

I also learned that some of Dad's fishing rules were designed to preserve what little peace and quiet he found in life apart from sleep. If we kept quiet, sat still, and minded our fishing poles, we not only caught fish, but Dad also got to read his Sunday *Des Moines Register* in peace.

II

Based on my childhood experiences, I gained a sense that fishing was a solitary sport, and a kind of individual spiritual practice. It wasn't until I was a little older that I realized that in most places in the world and throughout most of human history fishing is a team sport; it requires a whole ensemble of players (for the musicians among us); and those whose livelihoods depend on fishing don't always find it as spiritually nourishing an activity as I did as a child.

I remember, for example, meeting the sister-in-law of my high school guidance counselor, Mr. Bergstrom, one Saturday when I arrived at the family home to baby-sit for his son while he and his wife, Pi, and her sister, Tran, from Seattle, went out for the afternoon.

Meeting Tran left a big impression on me. I was 15 years old at the time and had not met many people born outside of Iowa, much less outside of the US, and I had never before met a professional fisher. But there was Tran, a real live fisher-woman from the Pacific Rim, right in the middle of my land-locked state, and she had the pictures to prove it.

Before the family left for their Saturday afternoon outing, I was invited to see a photo album that Tran brought to share. As I thumbed through the pages, I saw this beautiful, petite young woman decked out in tough-guy fishing gear, including a full body rain suit and hat, heavy rubber gloves, steel-toed rubber goulashes, and safety goggles.

Each picture helped complete the overarching narrative, describing how boatloads of smelt were harvested from the Pacific each summer. Tran's photos revealed an elaborate net, and a cable and pulley system used to distribute and retrieve the smelting nets. There were scenes in which the load was dropped into a holding tank which funneled the catch onto the conveyor belt, along which several workers sorted off the rogue fish and sent them back to sea through the evacuation hatch.

It didn't take long for me to realize that smelting was a huge production, that it extracted hard labor from the fisher people, and that despite all the fancy rigging it also required a huge labor pool to harvest enough fish to make the work profitable. Nets could lift the catch, but machines couldn't replicate human discretion in determining what was smelt and what was not, which fishes represented money in the bank, and which fishes were rogues in the catch that needed to be thrown back.

I learned from Tran that she had not only just gotten off the boat that fall, but that she had been working on the smelt boats for about seven years. Knowing that her sister, who then lived in my home town, had chosen other options, and that smelt fishing looked like extremely difficult work, especially for such a small person, I asked her what inspired her to keep doing that work. She said that lucrative summer jobs were hard to come by in Seattle, and that by working every day for three months on the boat she made enough money to pay her living expenses for the other nine, while she worked her way through college and graduate school.

I guess the memory of meeting Tran and learning about her experiences on the smelt boats back in the late 1970's hung in my memory, so that twenty years later when I visited Seattle for the first time and saw the harbor where many fishing boats are anchored, the up-close and personal pictures of Tran's smelt boat came back into focus, and I was again humbled at the immensity of the task that commercial fishing represents.

III

Today's gospel lesson is a helpful reminder that Jesus was in the fishing business, that he spent a lot of time with fishers, and that fishing was anything but the solitary sport and private prayer practice that I found it to be as a child. For Jesus and his friends, fishing was literally and spiritually a group project.

For Jesus' disciples and for modern sea-faring, fish-consuming cultures, fishing was not a solitary activity done by disconnected individuals. It was not an endeavor pursued by individuals using rods and reels, who sat at respectful and quiet distances from each other, waiting for a fish to bite. No, sea fishing in Jesus' day, and in our own day, was and is (by and large) a group project conducted for the benefit of the whole community, and ultimately for the whole people of God.

Fishing was and also still is central to Jesus' identity, and to the identity of those of us who strive to learn from and follow his teaching. The metaphor of fishing, for example, was so symbolic to Jesus' mission that in the first century Jesus himself and the "Jesus movement" were identified with the symbol of a fish. Modern marketing people would say that fishing was part of Jesus' brand identity and that the fish itself was his logo.

Until the early fourth century when Constantine, Emperor of Rome, declared Christianity the state religion, Christians experienced tremendous persecution and met in secret for worship in the catacombs (storm drains), where they hoped to avoid the authorities and

others who persecuted them. The church deacons guided worshipers to services by marking each junction in the catacombs with a fish symbol. The mouth pointed worshipers to the congregation's gathering place. At the close of services, worshippers reversed their steps in the direction of the fishes' tails.

Also, for you language-lovers, the Greek term, "ichthus," which means "fish," is also an acronym for Jesus.

- ♦ **Iota** is the first letter of *Iesous* (Ιησους), Greek for Jesus.
- ♦ **Chi** is the first letter of *Christos* (Χριστός), Greek for "anointed".
- ♦ **Theta** is the first letter of *Theou* (Θεοῦ), possessive form of Θεός "God".
- ♦ **Upsilon** is the first letter of *Huios* (Υἱός), Greek for Son.
- ♦ **Sigma** is the first letter of *Soter* (Σωτήρ), Greek for Savior.

Roughly translated, then, the acronym ICHTHUS means, "Jesus Christ God's Son is Savior."³

IV

I realize that not all of us have a high doctrine of Christology, which is to say that not all of us believe that Jesus was divine, but I suspect that virtually everyone in this room affirms that Jesus was one of the great teachers of all times, and a person whose lessons are worth learning from and whose life is worth emulating.

To be followers of Jesus, then, is to affirm that we are all fishers. We are all in this group project together. We are not here fundamentally to fish for ourselves. We are not here primarily to engage in a solitary spiritual activity. We are not here for the sole benefit of our personal spiritual growth, or for our personal salvation.

No, today's gospel reading reminds us that **we are primarily here because Jesus calls us to be here**, and **this calling is one that we share** with a room-full, indeed a world-full, of people. We are called into the church, and from the church into the world, to participate in God's grand group project, to understand that our own wellbeing is intertwined with the wellbeing of others, and to strive for our own growth even as we nurture that growth with and for others.

If we're paying attention, we also pick up on the fact that the fishing business to which Jesus calls us is counter to the culture in which we live. Like the Delta smelt,⁴ we fish people are discovering that our habitat, indeed our very lives, are threatened by circumstances not of our making.⁵

We live in a time and a culture that promotes self-interest over the common good. For church members, this means that we must resist the influence of the larger culture

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys>

⁴ http://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/delta_smelt.htm

⁵ <http://www.delta.dfg.ca.gov/baydelta/monitoring/delta.asp>

that encourages us to enter into community largely for the sake of meeting our own personal needs, rather than pursuing a more balanced sense of concern for ourselves and others which Jesus promoted in teachings such as “the Golden Rule,” which is to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mt. 7:12).

We also live in a place and a time in which the myth of self-reliance is propagated over against Jesus’ ideal of interdependent relationships. The American ideal of “rugged individualism” is expressed in Hollywood characters like John Wayne or Scarlet O’Hara and has seeped into Western Christian piety like herbicide runoff into our Central Valley lakes and streams.

Jesus counters this myth of individualism with his communitarian approach to piety. He called his disciples in clusters and sent them out two by two. In today’s gospel, for example, we read about Jesus calling two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew, and then James and John. Then in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle reminds this early congregation that each of its church members is part of the body of Christ, and that all members are essential parts of the whole.

So, the fishing business is not an easy business to be in. It’s hard work. As we’ve observed, Jesus’ fishing operation promotes mutuality over self-interest. His operation is built on a sense of interdependence, rather than the myth of individualism. We also learn from Jesus that his fishing business is not primarily a business. He was not making or selling a commodity. He was, by contrast, promoting a different kind of economy that frowns on consumerism and promotes parity for all and stewardship of the resources that God has entrusted to us.

To be sure, **we live in a place and a time in which everything that’s tangible is framed as a commodity**—as something that’s for sale (that can be bought, had, and consumed). Nowadays, even intangibles like spiritual practices, experiences, and beliefs are framed as commodities.

In America today, the commodification of spirituality is expressed in phrases such as, “We’re church shopping,” to describe a person’s or family’s quest for a spiritual home.

How we talk about “success” is another sign of the degree to which Christianity has been commodified in our time and culture. Do we evaluate our success by the number of pastors on staff, the number of cars in the parking lot, and the number of programs on the church website? Or, do we evaluate our achievements based on whether people’s lives have been transformed, and whether our neighborhood is any better off because we have been on the corner of Birch and Grove for over 50 years, or alive and kicking in Hayward for nearly 144 years? Or do we realize the need for both numerical, spiritual, and social transformation, and understand that they are intertwined—that you don’t have one without the other, and vice versa.

V

To be sure, there are many deterrents to the health of Jesus' fishing ministry, and to the wellbeing of local congregations, as we learn from scripture and as we observe in our contemporary culture. Fishing is a demanding adventure that requires us to develop personal and group skills in order to be more effective and resilient—skills that are the spiritual equivalent of knowing how to bait our own hook and how to recognize a rogue fish on a commercial boat.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is in many ways a kind of "fishing guide" for Christians. The first fishing lesson that Paul offers in the book is stated in today's epistle lesson, where Paul addresses the problem of divisions in this early congregation.

Clearly, as we learn from this first chapter, divisions had emerged in the congregation as a result of the lines of authority and communication within the community had become balled up—sort of like a fishnet and fishing lines that had been mishandled by novices.

The remedy for this difficult situation, Paul says, is for the Corinthians to remember who is captain of the boat they were on—Jesus—and to take their direction from him, rather than from subordinates.

Another overarching lessons that we might learn from Paul's Corinthian fishing guide is that internal challenges in the church are a normal part of life in boat, and that if we lean into them, study them, pray about them, stay open to new insights, get outside advice, and heed whatever epiphanies affirm Christ's leadership and advance his mission, then we will ultimately build up the church, and each of us as members of it.

This is good news, especially to those who have a personal aversion to group projects, and even to those of us who don't. Thanks be to God for sending Jesus to captain our boat, and to give us these and other helpful fishing lessons. Amen.