

"A FISHING TRIP TO REMEMBER"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 7, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

Some of you may remember hearing about the man who showed up at church one Sunday morning with his ears painfully blistered. At the door following the service his concerned pastor asked him what had happened and the man replied,

"Well...pastor...I was lying on the couch yesterday afternoon watching a playoff game on TV and my wife was doing some ironing nearby. I was so "in" to the game that when she left the room...leaving the iron near the phone...and the phone rang and keeping my eyes glued to the television, I grabbed the hot iron by mistake and put it to my ear."

And, "so how did the other ear get burned?" asked his minister.

"Well, pastor....I had no more than hung up when the telephone rang again..."

Now, there's a man who was really focused...so caught up in watching the playoff game that he didn't know just what he was doing. Such things do happen...

DEVELOPMENT

Today's scripture lesson is about the disciples of Jesus and how they had lost their focus. Confused, weary and in need of a break, their pain and their disillusionment must have been beyond belief. They had seen their Master put to death on a cruel cross between two thieves. It must have been the lowest point of their lives. After all they had invested in following Jesus...including three years of their lives...now it seemed to be all over. They were "out of focus"....I'm sure.

But then the women went to the tomb on the first day of the week and came back with the word that the stone had been rolled away and that He - their Master - was alive. Now each of them had seen Him with their own eyes, but still...it must have been a bit too much for them to take in...emotionally and intellectually. They wanted to believe, but it was like a dream. Too much...too soon.

They were trying to sort out all of this when Simon came up with the idea that they go fishing. Quickly, all agreed. Certainly an evening out on the Sea of Galilee would help clear their heads and help them get focused once again. It must have sounded to them like the perfect remedy for their stressed-out souls. And so they grabbed their nets and untied their boat and pushed out on the lake. But unfortunately, they fished all night without any luck. That does happen. Not a nibble. Their nets were empty. Their frying pans would go unused.

Just as the day was breaking and they were ready to call it a night, they saw this stranger on the beach. He called out to them, "Have you had any luck?" "Fraid not," was their reply. "Cast the net on the other side of the boat" called the stranger of them, "And you'll find some". They followed His instruction and a few moments later their net was teeming with fish...153 of them! And the disciple, John, turned to Simon Peter and said....the stranger on the shore...

"It is the Lord. It is the Lord!"

And always impulsive, Simon Peter, jumps into the water and heads toward shore, while the more reserved disciples steered the boat in. In those moments that

followed some amazing things were to happen. Let me tell you about them.

TIME TO CONFRONT HIS DISCIPLES ABOUT THE FUTURE

We like to interpret this episode, this incident as a special moment for Jesus to confront His disciples about what lay ahead and this is why He is out there on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee interrupting their little fishing party.

It was time for them now to come to grips with what He needed them to do, what He was asking of them. He had given them ample time to assimilate some of the mind-boggling experiences they had been through...but now the time had arrived for them to get on with the work He had called them to do. They wanted to retreat to their nets, but He had bigger things and bigger plans in store for them. There are those moments in life when Christ comes to us and confronts us in order to take us...to pull us, yes...from one dimension of life to another, to a more important one.

James K. Baxter tells a most unusual story...indeed, something of a parable, really....about a man in Australia who decided that life was just too difficult for him to bear. He ruled out ending his life by suicide. Instead, he went out and bought himself a large corrugated iron tank and fixed it up with all of the necessities of life. He even put a crucifix on the wall to remind himself of the Messiah-man and to help him pray. And there he proceeded to live a solitary, blameless life...uninvolved...inside this huge tank, but only with one hardship.

It seems that every morning and every evening a volley of bullets would rip through the walls of his corrugated iron tank and the man sustained several bullet wounds. The walls of the tank were pierced with many holes that let in the wind and the daylight and some water when it was wet outside. He would plug up the holes and curse the unknown marksman who was doing this. When he appealed to the police, they weren't much help and there really was very little he could do on his own about the situation.

Slowly he began to use the bullet holes for positive purposes. He would gaze out through one hole or another and watch the people passing by - the kids flying their kites, the lovers walking hand in hand, the clouds slowly passing overhead, the flight of birds, the flowers in bloom, the setting sun, the rising of the moon. And in observing these many things, he would forget himself. Looking "out", he always felt better about himself and things...

The day came when the tank rusted and finally fell to pieces. He walked out of it with little regret. As he did, there was the man with the rifle standing outside. He said to the man standing there,

"I suppose you will kill me now...but before you do, I would like to know one thing. Why have you been persecuting me? Why are You my enemy, when I have never done you any harm?"

The man laid down his rifle and smiled at him and said,

"I am not your enemy." And the man who had come out of the tank saw that there were scars on the other man's hands and feet....and those scars were shining like the sun! It was the "Messiah" - man!

Now, I hope that none of you get hung up on the thought of Jesus shooting a gun. What you have here is a parable. Christ comes to confront us when we would shrink back from responsibilities. He comes to confront us when we would flee back "to our little nets" rather than march forward toward our destiny. Christ comes to confront us when we would sulk in the shadows rather than stand in the sunshine of service. It may be a word. It may be something we read or something we hear. It may be a look on the face of some other person...

The disciples, as I understand this passage, simply wanted to go back to their fishing...to their boats, but Jesus comes to them here in this account and confronts them. Their ministry is not over. Indeed, it is just beginning.

A CHALLENGE TO CHANGE THEIR LIVES

We see in this a challenge...a challenge to change their lives.

Visit the scripture scene again. The boat has now pulled up to the shore. A charcoal fire is burning and they're gathered around it...some sitting, some stretched out, perhaps some are standing. Even though the disciples recognize their Risen Lord, they are still a bit confused and disconcerted by all that has happened. While they are lost in their thoughts, we're told that the Risen Christ takes some bread and breaks it and gives it to them. Then also the fish. Then He turned to Simon Peter and asks one of the most famous questions in all Scripture. "Simon Peter...do you love Me?" Three times Christ asks this question of Simon Peter (once for each time Peter had denied Him). Peter replies,

"Lord, you know that I love You". And after each reply, Jesus instructs Simon Peter to feed His lambs and then to tend His sheep, to feed His sheep....

This is Christ's way of focussing Simon Peter on his real mission in the world....but go back with me to those earlier days when Jesus first recruited Andrew and Simon, to when He told them He would make them fishers of men. Now He is challenging them to continue with that journey on which they first set forth. Not that their prior lives as fishermen was unimportant, but from here on they would have a different kind of calling.

Christ was asking them to forget themselves and to center their lives in ministry to others. And that was the beginning. That is a challenge that Jesus is still offering to His disciples even down to this day.

Sociologist and evangelist, Tony Campolo, once spoke to a group and asked this question, "Is it a sin to own a BMW?" Then he added,

"If Jesus had forty thousand dollars, would He buy a BMW or use that to feed or to house the needy in the Third World?"

That's a tough one, but that's the kind of question we would prefer not to even think about. It's a challenging question....even a disturbing one. People can get crucified for asking questions like that. However, one woman was so struck by Campolo's talk that she wrote his ministry a check for the same amount that she had paid for her new custom drapes in her home and her gift helped to build three houses down in Haiti.

It is so easy in this affluent society for us to forget who we are and what Christ has called us to do. It's so easy for us to become so preoccupied with our work, with our families, with our needs that we forget our essential call to "go out" and "to feed" Christ's sheep. There are people with needs all around us - needs for things, but also with needs for love and for recognition and for the lifting word of encouragement. Most of all, needy to know that God loves them. Who will share Christ's love with them if we do not take it upon ourselves to do so? Jesus is confronting His disciples and He challenged them here in this lakeshore setting, just like He continues to challenge you and me...to minister to His lambs and to His sheep.

HE ISSUES A CALL

Then Jesus does one more thing. He gives His disciples a call. And it was the same call that He gave them at the beginning of their discipleship. Do you remember what that call was? It was quite simply, "Follow Me!" And this is the final instruction for them before He leaves them. "Follow Me". And remember this, He does not send them out into a hostile world all alone. He goes ahead of them. The "eastern" shepherd always went ahead of His sheep. Like a commander leading His troops into battle. Like an explorer leading his party into the unknown, He takes the first step and those who would be His followers come after. That is what gives Christian living its radiance and its joy.

The Risen Christ comes to each of us to confront us with how we are living our lives, to challenge us to focus not just on our own needs, but on the needs of others, and finally to say to us what He said to those around that charcoal fire centuries ago on the shore of the Sea of Galilee: "Follow Me".

How do you respond? Are you willing to heed His summons...to sell out, "lock, stock and barrel" to follow. Quietly He comes to confront us, to challenge us, to call us to more active discipleship.

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Gabriel stood in meditation...as though he saw a flaw in the Master's plan. And he said,

"Yes...but Master....hold on...suppose after a while Peter forgets and John loses his enthusiasm, and what if their successors, down there in the 20th century... get so busy, and so taken up with other things...or so timid that they do not have either the time or the courage to tell others....what will you do then?"

The voice of Jesus answered quietly and confidently,

"I haven't made any other plans. I'm counting on them!"

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness in these moments, O God...to
Your spirit...to Your healing presence as we remember others in
our prayers...

Confirm within each of us the feelings, the decisions, the intentions
of this hour....at work within us.

We know that there are those disturbing moments of life when You come
to each of us...confronting us, challenging us, calling to us to follow You.
Help us to respond to that call with enthusiasm...with a desire to put our
lives on the line....where they will count for something lasting, something
significant....for like Peter, we confess our loves for You and for Your way.
Lead us on, O Lord....to higher levels of service. Deepen our commitment to
Christ.

For the race is so short, really....even at its longest and we, as
followers of The Christ, would try to run it well and always to Your glory.
In His name and spirit, we now pray.....

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