Towson Presbyterian Church

January 22, 2023

Matthew 5:1-11

Rev. Joel Strom

“Catching People”

You can almost feel the exasperation in Simon Peter’s voice, right, after Jesus encourages him to put his nets out into the deep water. *Really? Seriously? We’ve caught nothing all night and I am exhausted. Yet if you say so, I’ll give it a shot.*

So, Simon Peter, James, and John head out to deeper waters, throw their nets overboard and soon enough they’ve caught so many fish that there boats begin to sink. The catch is ridiculous, and it seems that Simon Peter realizes he is in the presence of someone who is tapped into the power of God in a startling way, which leads him to then look inward, and acknowledge that he is not the person he wants to be.

And Jesus’s response is fascinating - he doesn’t ask him to change or go get his act together and then come back. Instead, he says to him, “Do not be afraid. From now on you will not catch fish. You will catch people.” And Peter begins his journey of following Jesus. And as a follower of Jesus, a high priority of that calling will not be to *catch people*. It’s to bring people into this new movement that is forming around Jesus. Basically, Jesus is telling Peter that he will now be about evangelism.

And we’ve talked a fair amount about the word “evangelism” over the last few years at TPC, and we have also noted the baggage that comes with it.

The word evangelism comes from the Greek word *euagellion,* which means “Gospel” or “Good News.” The *euagellion*/Good News of Jesus Christ, and the verbal form of the word means to bring or announce Good News. It’s a good word, but unfortunately the word *evangelism* can also conjure up ideas of confrontation, and forcefully pushing beliefs on someone, and being a part of a conversation where you quickly get the sense that this is not as much a conversation about faith but a lecture.

And Jesus’s use of the phrase *catching people* is an interesting phrase, isn’t it? If we’re to look at it from one angle, it can have a slightly forceful feel to it. We’ve talked at TPC about wanting to a “welcoming” church but also an “invitational” church. We want to be a church where we invite people to explore faith with us. And the phrase *catching people* can be read as kind of uninviting. You can hear that phrase and think, well that doesn’t sound very respectful of someone. Being caught doesn’t sound inviting.

Last weekend I was in my home state of Connecticut for my great-aunt’s funeral, and I had worked with her at my grandfather’s hardware store for 9 years, and she for 35 years. Parsons Paint & Hardware was the epitome of a “Mom and Pop Hardware Store.” It even had a certain smell to it. When I walk into Ayd Hardware this past Friday, which is down on York Rd. and right by where I live, I take a deep breath and say, “Ahhhh…hardware.” Old mom and pop hardware stores have a certain smell to them. Every inch of space was used at Parsons Paint & Hardware, and sometimes as were ringing up a sale we’d wipe off the dust from the package and say with a smile, “the dust is free.” I worked there throughout high school and college.

My grandfather had a phrase he would use when the parking lot and store were empty, and I was looking for something to do. As he walked through the main floor and up the steps to his office, he said to me more than once, “Hey Joel, why don’t you get the hook out.” What he meant by that was we needed a large pole with a big hook on the end that we’d stick outside, and when someone walked by, we’d *catch* them and bring them in.

Now obviously he was joking, that hook didn’t exist, but I imagined it existing. It was a fun image to think about. And that image can describe the challenge of one way of looking at the phrase *catching* *people*. Was Simon Peter, and are we, asked to catch people and bring them in to the church without any care or concern for the person itself? It doesn’t sound very compassionate, and it’s a little pushy, too.

This gets at the heart of *why* we want to reach out beyond our doors, and it also gets at the heart of evangelism. Is the point of evangelism so we can just get people in our pews on a Sunday morning so we can feel good about ourselves and know that we matter? Is it so they can start giving financially so we can keep paying the light bill? Is that it? Now to be clear, we do need to pay our bills. But more than that, we believe that giving financially is a healthy practice. It can lead to joy and gratitude. And when we give to God, and to the mission of a church, we are trusting God with our finances, which is very healthy.

But the question before us, and the question that rests at the heart of evangelism is do we reach out to people so they can meet our needs … or so we can meet theirs?

As Jesus speaks to Simon Peter on the lake of Gennesaret, he says, “from now on you will be catching people.” Let’s look at that phrase from a different angle.

This same story is also found also in Matthew and Mark’s gospel, but in those stories, Jesus says, “Follow me and I will make you *fish* for people.” Not *catch*, but fish. And Luke, from today’s reading, uses a different Greek word than the one translated as fish.

When Jesus says to Simon Peter that he will be *catching* people, he’s using the Greek word *zogron*. It’s translated in our Bible as catching, but if we were to look at the literal translation of *zogron***,** it means “to catch alive” or “to take alive.”[[1]](#footnote-1) When *zogron* is used in other contexts in the New Testament, and it’s rare, it’s used to describe something that is meant to live and be alive. It’s to take something and breathe life into it. Which is very different than catching food to simply consume it.

So, when someone fished with nets, you caught fish that were alive, but those fish would soon be dead. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus seems to be saying to Simon Peter that he has previously caught fish so they would die. That was the whole point. But now he is inviting him to catch people so they would live andcome alive. The word *zogron* is used because it describes a very different action than merely throwing nets in the water in hopes of gathering up some fish.

So when we look at the phrase “catching people” from this angle and inviting someone to explore being a part of our community of faith, the emphasis is now not on our needs, but on their needs, and their well-being, and their thriving. The point then of evangelism is to invite people into *aliveness*. It’s to invite them into a particular way of life.

And in thinking about *aliveness*, I was brought back to our study of Brian McLaren’s book *We Make the Road by Walking,* way back in 2019. In his introduction to that great book, Brian said this,

*What we all want is pretty simply, really. We want to be alive. To feel alive. Not just to exist but to thrive, to live out loud, walk tall, breathe free. We want to be less lonely, less exhausted, less conflicted or afraid, more awake, more grateful, more energized and purposeful. We capture this kind of mindful, overbrimming life in terms like well-being, shalom, blessedness, wholeness, harmony, life to the full, and aliveness.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

He continues…

*The quest for aliveness is the best thing about religion, I think. It’s what we’re hoping for when we pray. It’s why we gather, celebrate, eat, abstain, attend, practice, sing, and contemplate. When people say, “I’m spiritual,” what they mean, I think, is simple: “I’m seeking aliveness.”[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Now that sounds invitational, doesn’t it? That’s an invitation to be explored, right? And that seems to be close to what Jesus meant when he said the *eaugellion*/Good News of Jesus Christ.

Now, if we hear Jesus’s call to each of us to Peter, and to each of us, to *catch people* so they can come more alive, we’re each left with a question: *what do you hope someone might discover here within our community of faith?* In what way might they *come alive* if they were with us? I think it’s actually a really good question, because it gets at the *why* – why would we welcome and invite others to be a part of our community of faith? And normally in a sermon, I would ask a question like that and then quickly move on to the next part, but today let’s sit with that question for a moment. And I’d like to offer us some silence - only about 20 seconds – so you can try and answer that question.

If an answer doesn’t come during the next 20 seconds, that’s okay. Ask it again later. Here’s the question:

*If you invited someone to come to TPC, what do you hope they might discover and experience here within our community of faith?*

My hope is that they would discover a way of life here that they’re not finding anywhere else.

My hope is that here they would discover a God who loves them on their best days and on their worst days. And they would slowly be becoming more aware of the presence of God in their life.

My hope is that here they would discover a sense of community where we love and care for one another in good times, and especially in the difficult times.

My hope is that they would discover a community of faith that ultimately exits not for our needs, but for the needs of the world. Here at TPC they would discover this this rhythm of living that cares. They would discover a community that looks out at a suffering world and does not move away from that world, but move towards it, with healing and hope.

Each of you has an answer to that question. I know you do, or else you wouldn’t be here. Each of you are experiencing *aliveness* in Jesus Christ in some way.

For that is the *eaugellion* of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Good News.

Thanks be to God.

1. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=1560 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McLaren, Brian D. *We Make the Road by Walking* (New York, New York: Jericho Books, 2014) p. xv [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. McLaren, Brian D. *We Make the Road by Walking* (New York, New York: Jericho Books, 2014) p. xv [↑](#footnote-ref-3)