

FISHING REPORT

a sermon by

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Galveston, Texas

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Text: “And Simon answered, ‘Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.’ And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish....”

Luke 5:5ff

Galveston is a wonderful place for all who enjoy fishing. Some prefer fishing the bay waters; others the gulf. Some prefer enjoying a day on a boat; others prefer a jetty or a pier. Some prefer to fish alone; others with a group. For some fishing is a sport; and, they fish for fun. For others fishing is work; and, they fish for profit.

As a general rule, people who enjoy fishing also enjoy sharing their love for fishing. Yesterday’s newspaper made mention that the fourth Saturday of every September is “National Hunting and Fishing Day.” This began and continues to be “a day to be set aside to recognize and promote outdoor sports and conservation.”

The Bible has a number of stories of Jesus reaching out to fisherman. The telling and retelling of these stories reminds us of the honest humanity of Jesus and of those who followed after him. In the telling and retelling of these stories, there are lessons to be learned in the honest humanity of those who follows Jesus today.

Galveston’s Fishing Report

Among the wonderful features in our local newspaper is the fishing report. This regular column was written many years by the venerable Vince Stiglich. Our community was deeply saddened by the suddenness of his passing on May 29. Today the feature continues with the writing of Joe Kent.

I must admit to being a regular reader of the local fishing report. In this wonderful snippet from our island community, a new resident learns about our weather patterns, the ebb and flow of the tide, and about the people and priorities of Galvestonians.

When I first arrived on the island, I received a fishing report of a different nature. A group of ministers gathered for a meeting about a matter of community interest. As I met these individuals – clergy representing a variety of faith traditions – each had important advice for the new guy.

Some individuals wanted me to know of my predecessors, or perhaps something of our congregation's fascinating history. Others wanted me to know of community-wide activities and events to take place throughout the year. (I think they were actually trying to get me to volunteer to do the work.)

The most surprising bit of advice, which sounded like a fishing report, came from the pastor of another of Galveston's historic congregations. This person wanted me to know that we shouldn't even bother trying to reach out to young families. I was told of the island's shrinking population of families with children; that simply are not large enough families to support even one of our congregations, much less the whole lot of us.

Hear that again, the pastor of another Galveston congregation believes that the population of this community cannot support the work of our Christian churches. Were I to have heeded the warning of that pastor, I would have returned to my office and tendered my resignation as your pastor.

There's a funny truth about fishing reports. For the most part they say more about the person doing the fishing than what they tell about the fish being sought. Fortunately, fishermen (a term that I use to speak of both men and women who are fishing) are known to be persistent, some would say even crazy.

There's an old saying, 'if at first you don't succeed, try, try again.'

Then there another old saying, 'the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again; each time expecting a different result.'

Well, which is it? In the life of this and other Christian churches, is this the time to try and try again? Or is this a time for us to reconsider the old way that we do things; or, at least to begin expecting different results?

How can we know which choice to make – try again, or try something new?

Success and Failure in Business

For many years I was asked that question (Try again, or try something new?) by a variety of small business owners. You see, in my life before I was a minister, I worked as a legal assistant for a group of attorneys in Dallas. My niche in the market was supporting a variety of distressed small businesses. These businesses generally had fewer than a dozen employees and annual gross receipts of less than \$500,000 per year. Many, perhaps even most, of those businesses were restaurants in a trendy Dallas neighborhood.

Over some ten years I watched and worked to distinguish the businesses that had been built with a fatally flawed business plan from other businesses that were generally sound, but operating poorly for some reason.

Some businesses struggle or even fail because they simply missed their market. In recent weeks articles have filled the pages of business journals and newspapers regaling great failure and great success in the automotive world.

The Ford Motor Company did well in recent years with the idea that bigger is better. Ford has sought to increase their global market share through the acquisition of other manufacturers. More than a bigger company, Ford was also building bigger vehicles. In the United States, the Ford line of SUV's included the ever-expanding Explorer and the Expedition.

I'm no expert on the subject, but it looks to me that the Expedition may have slightly more square footage than a double-wide mobile home.

Ford built its marketing plans and profit projections on the expected sales of these large vehicles. The strategy worked all the way up to \$3 a gallon gasoline. By contrast, Toyota has gradually built its market share while keeping an eye on the future. Some years ago Toyota began looking ahead and leading the industry in the development of hybrid technology.

Ford believed that we could afford and would choose to drive their SUVs at any price. Toyota believed that it needed to perfect new technology at any cost.

In recent months, Ford has announced the impending closure of some of its largest assembly plants. The total number of jobs being lost is nearly the population of our island. By contrast, in that same time-frame, Toyota has announced its intentions to build new factories in the United States.

Now, keep in mind that, at best, I am a casual observer of the automotive industry. I am not an expert in this field. This is where I acknowledge that I don't even know how to change my own oil. But, having read more than a few articles and watched these events unfold, it seems as though the people at Ford simply forgot who they are and what they were created to be.

Remember the events that originally propelled Ford's company to their great success. Henry Ford worked to build and sell cars that were affordable, dependable and practical. Today, Ford's cars and trucks seem to have strayed from those principles of being affordable, dependable and practical.

The failure at Ford was a failure to remember who they are and what they were created to be. The success at Toyota was driven by their ability to envision the future and to work diligently and to wait patiently for its arrival.

The Ford Motor Company is in great distress. For them, this is a time to try something new. Toyota is positioned for prosperity and now will continue to work, trying and trying again to reap their reward.

The Foundations of our Faith

So, for the life of this congregation, which is it? Is this the time for us to try and try again? Or is this a time for us to discard the old way that we do things?

We certainly live in a new and difficult day in life of the Body of Christ. There are some who say that there is no longer a need for any organized religion. Many people will tell you that they are *spiritual* but they don't need the church. This idea, no matter how popular it may be, simply is not correct.

John Leith, a fine pastor and among the greatest scholars of our Reformed Tradition, wrote and spoke of the relationship between the individual and the community.

“To be a Christian and to be the church are one and the same existence. Yet it is not simple to conceptualize the relation of the individual to the community or the Christian to the church. Without individuals there would be no community, and without community there would be no individuals. The individual and the community cannot be separated, but neither should they be confused.

The Christian is not first a Christian and then the church. Neither does the church exist first and then the individual Christian. They exist together.”

In today's world, there are many people who say that they exist as *individuals* and so they don't need the church. Such a notion simply is not and cannot be true.

Yes, it is true that God does create each person individually and uniquely in the image of God. And, yes, it is also true that God calls individuals to faith and to knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. But it is also true

that individuals are called together as the church, the Body of Christ, into a community. Without individual Christians there is no church. And, without the church there can be no individual Christians.

In the United States, for some 40 years we have failed as Christians to appreciate for ourselves or to share with others the importance of being the Church. This failure is reflected in the steady decline in the membership, participation and influence of every mainline Christian denomination.

A dear friend of mine, the late Reverend Bennett Aboagye, was a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, West Africa. He came to the United States to study for one year. In that time, Bennett was invited to preach in Presbyterian sanctuaries across our country. After visiting some of our most beautiful and historic churches, he was in my living room when he told of this observation:

“In the United States, the churches are, oh, so great [*spoken with excitement*]! But the people are, ah, so few [*spoken with sadness*].”

A couple of years later, I visited Bennett’s church in Ghana and understood even more of his comment. His congregation had just completed construction of a new sanctuary building. By American standards, the building was primitive. The concrete structure had only one room. There was no electricity, no running water. There were no classrooms for Christian education.

But there were children. The children – dozens and dozens of them – met outside under a beautiful, full cinnamon tree.

The primitive nature of their building simply didn’t matter. The lack of electricity and running water did not matter. The lack of any classroom caused absolutely no concern. These things didn’t matter because the people knew who they were and what they were created to do. They understood that the most important work of the congregation did not happen in their concrete structure. The work of that church was done wherever the people of the church happened to be.

To those people of faith, there was no distinction between the individual Christian and the life of the church.

As your pastor, I cannot help but to wonder what would happen if we adopted an attitude like that. What would happen to us, to this church and to our surrounding community if we embraced the attitude demonstrated by our Ghanaian brothers and sisters?

I say that I cannot help but to wonder what would happen.... But, to be honest, I already have a pretty good idea as to the answer to that question.

Stan Ott, a Presbyterian pastor and nationally acclaimed church consultant, recently wrote of a conversation that he once shared with the late Richard Halverson, also a Presbyterian minister and, at that time, the Chaplain of the United States Senate.

Prior to becoming the Senate Chaplain, Dick Halverson served Bethesda, Maryland’s Fourth Presbyterian Church with distinction. He arrived at a church with maybe 600 members. Some years later he left a congregation of about 2,000. During his tenure as their pastor, the congregation grew not only in numbers, but also in their faith.

While driving to an airport, Stan asked, “What was the most significant thing you did at Fourth Presbyterian Church that brought vitality and spiritual strength to that congregation?”

Stan Ott tells the story in this way:

The question seemed to embarrass him a bit and finally he spoke. I was expecting him to say his preaching or his church staff or some church program but I didn’t anticipate his answer.

His benediction! I thought, Of course! I had heard it countless times. After all that happened in any given church service with music and singing and sharing and preaching, the last thing you heard were his words:

“Wherever you go, God is sending you, wherever you are, God has put you there; He has a purpose in your being there. Christ who indwells you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in His grace and love and power.”

One pastor on this island has told me the work that I came here to do simply cannot be done. That pastor was, and remains, absolutely wrong.

Every once in a while the local fishing report mentions that few, if any, fish are to be found at a particular location. But, a day or two later, there they are – fishermen standing shoulder to shoulder pulling what looks to be an endless stream of fish from the water.

Fishermen know and understand that a particular location may not have yielded any fish *yesterday*, or the day before, or, for that matter, over the previous 20 years. But that fact does not preclude the possibility of finding any fish at that location *today*.

Jesus commanded Simon Peter, saying, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon’s answer acknowledged their long and futile night of fishing.

Any fisherman can understand Simon’s frustration – the emotion that comes from a fruitless night of fishing. But, Simon responded with more than frustration. He responded with faith, saying, “...at your word I will let down the nets.”

Notice the results.

“And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.”

Some of you have expressed your appreciation for some of the ideas and activities that I bring with me into the church. I appreciate your confidence. I assure you that any minister appreciates hearing kind words. I also share your optimism for the future of this First Presbyterian Church. But, in all honesty, my optimism does not trust in my own creativity or ability. I am instead encouraged by the ongoing, visible work of God’s Holy Spirit and by the presence of you, with your talents.

Were I to write a fishing report for Galveston’s Christian community, it might read something like this:

Over the past 25 years, Galveston’s Christians have enjoyed their work fishing for and catching human beings. There has even been a good run or two for most of our churches. But, over the past 25 years, the yield has steadily declined. Some say our waters have been over fished. Others contend the population to be fished has been depleted and will never recover.

Don’t be discouraged. If you can, set out just a bit farther and continue to let down your nets. Be prepared to call for or, if called upon to render, aid when the harvest seems ready to burst your nets and threatens to sink your boat.

Remember, “Christ who indwells you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in His grace and love and power.”

END NOTES