

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 26, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan
“Catch and Release”

Norman Maclean’s novel *“A River Runs Through It.”*

This story, rooted in the life of a fly-fishing family in rural Montana, portrays an activity that gives substance to nearly every scene in the book.

It begins with these words:

“In our family there was no clear distinction between religion and fly fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in Western Montana and our father was a Presbyterian minister and fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen, and that John, the favorite, was a dry fly fisherman.”

The author of this novel was, of course, not the first person to bid others join him in an activity that served as an extended metaphor for life, nor the first to compare fishing with religion.

In today’s gospel reading, we encounter Jesus saying to the Galileans, Andrew and Peter and James and John,

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

“Follow me,” Jesus demanded. *“Follow me in helping people become God’s disciples.”*

This simple, yet profound, command began a remarkable transformation in the Western World.

Like cells dividing, Jesus, the human form of God, became the four fishermen and then the 12 apostles.

- The 12 became 500, the 500 became thousands,
- and thousands became millions.

Serving as a Jesus-kind of fisherman is **evangelism**:

- sharing the Good News by helping others find and live by the power of God’s love.

- It is helping them learn further to share with more people what they have found in our joyous and meaningful faith.

This is easy to say; but **how do we do it?** How do we fish well for people?

Following the example of fly fishing might well provide a useful analogy for the ministry to which Jesus calls us, as he called the first disciples.

It is a necessarily hard task, but quite realistic and honest.

Throughout his novel, Maclean reveals the intricacies of fly fishing as a way of helping the reader better understand the call to bring others to experience the joy and wonders of creation.

Maclean's fly fishermen didn't use boats or guides or sonar but learned for themselves a lot about each particular species of fish they wished to catch.

They had to think like the fish and know its habits, learn what it likes to eat, discover the depth of water in which it feeds, and figure out what it prefers at particular places and certain times of the day and seasons of the year.

The successful fly fisherman purchases the right rod, does everything imaginable to tie the exactly correct fly for each specific situation, practices casting, perfects timing and works hard to attract, hook and finally land the much-desired fish.

Like fish, people exist in many varieties.

So, to become successful fishers of people, we can do well by copying good fly fishing.

First, we develop a desire to find what we seek because we want to share the love we have come to know in the Lord.

We recognize and take into account individual differences, preferences, perspectives and cultures.

We also remember that those of varying ages and generations were formed in distinctive historical eras and consequently often respond differently and have separate characteristic needs.

Those we seek must be approached with the kind of respect and care that honors both their dignity and their particularities.

Following the example of conscientious anglers,

- we share with others the value we have found in following Christ,
- become conscious of where the needs of others lie,
- use appropriate methods,
- take care about proper timing
- and seek repeatedly to learn how other people think and communicate.

As the fly fisherman cannot force a trout to be caught, we also try to draw others into the Christian circle, not by coercion, but by loving attraction.

We constantly study and practice and experiment, as we strive to present the gospel so it can become clear, understandable and meaningful to them.

We find the best method to feed them spiritually so they can grow within the faith.

Ken Kesselus

Maybe for us, the best example of fly fishing comes from the “*catch and release method*,” following the principle that a fish is more valuable in the water than on the angler’s dinner table.

Let us imagine ourselves as Christians engaging others in the faith, keeping them alive, caring for them and teaching them to know the Divine One who loves us all.

Then, imagine respecting them,

- regardless of how they choose to respond to our help in bringing them to a deeper knowledge of God,
- regardless of how they live in the faith we share.

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Is this an appropriate way to engage today’s gospel?

Does it seem like what Jesus means for us to do?

Is it what he intended for Peter and Andrew and James and John?

Certainly, he did not want his disciples to **use** anyone we “*catch*,” but to **embrace** and **serve** them.

The church's task – as fishers of people – is to find the best ways to invite others to Christ, offering them what we have and helping them grow in faith if they choose to remain in our environment.

We can follow Jesus' call by meeting them where they are and fostering ministries and activities that are suitable for their needs.

Eventually, we can offer them the opportunity to serve God and others as they deem best.

Ken Kesselus

We Presbyterians do this because we understand that Jesus calls us into the most precious ministry there is: fulfilling the mission of the church, which we say is

“to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”

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God is calling the people of New St. James, as followers of Jesus Christ, to worship God and to serve the community.