

Have Faith and Be Not Afraid

November 12, 2023

An early image used to depict the Christian Church was that of a boat upon the water. A ship put out to sea. The images of this boat often included a mast that was shaped like a cross. The logo of the World Council of Churches is an example of this today.

This image of the church-as-fishing-boat, is drawn, of course from the lives and livelihood of those Jesus first called to be his disciples.

This call to follow Jesus, to join him in fishing for people, is not an easy sell today; if ever it was. This is understandable, I suppose, given the often coercive and manipulative means toward recruitment that some people and some churches have adopted in the name of Jesus. But thankfully, there are other people and other churches that go about this fishing in a better way; indeed, in the Way, Spirit, and Love of Jesus that is for all people. This is our calling, yours, mine and our congregations'; to follow, every day, in the Way, Spirit and Love of Jesus – reaching out to, caring for, and allying with God's children of all faiths and no faith. We follow this Jesus, who reached out to and allied himself with just such a diversity of people in his day. And it is he who calls you and I and our congregations to do the same now, in our day.

Hearing the gospel story again this morning, we are reminded (and we know in our hearts) that we also have been called to follow Jesus and fish for people in our day (but only to do so by following in the Way, the Spirit, and the Love of Jesus for all people in all their diversity.

Yes, today we are called, as were Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John; as were St. Francis and St. Bridgit; Tommy Douglas, Lois Wilson, and Stan McKay; as were your own favourite Sunday School teacher from years gone by; your C.G.I.T leader, your Guide or Scout leader, whose face you can't quite recall now, but whose name is there just on the tip of your tongue; and after all these years you still are called as were your own beloved grandmother and grandfather, you Mother and Dad, who still you hold now, in memory ever dear.

Yes, you and I are called for Christ's sake to keep-on fishing no matter how great or how small the catch may be; we are called to cast our nets... Nets not of compulsion but compassion; not of self-righteousness but selflessness; not acquiescing to the status quo, nor idealizing "the way things used to be." We are called now, as all God's faithful through the ages have been, "to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly every day with God."

Recently, I have been pondering this image of the Christian Church as a boat upon the water. A ship put out to sea.

There are times when a calm harbour does appear, and we choose to draw into it for rest, re-creation and renewal. And there are times when we feel as though we are being tossed about by strong winds and rocked by high waves. We struggle to navigate these rough seas in our lives, our church and our world, and maybe we bottom out. We get stuck, asking – "Who of us today has the time, the energy, or the inclination to do any fishing for Christ's sake?"

Something I wonder is if the COVID-19 pandemic and all its lingering effects have made this particular image of the Church – as a stuck boat – resonate deeply with

many of us? And as well these days, in many congregations and communities of faith – including, perhaps, McClure, Carlyle, and Radville – this boat-on-the-water we call ‘Church’ finds itself sailing with a weary and much reduced crew. /

I mean, do you sometimes feel like it’s you and a few others who do most of the rowing, while many more seem to have abandoned ship? As our energy wanes, our anxiety rises, and our laments become plentiful. And what is God’s response to our laments, as we bounce around on these waves? Quite simply, it is “Have faith, and be not afraid.” Sorry, that’s God’s answer. / Sorry, not sorry, because that is also God’s gift to us. We who keep asking of Jesus: “Do you not care that we are perishing?” We to whom Jesus says: “I know you are scared that all you hold dear may be sinking. But actually, you are just who I need to come, and help me fish for people – some of whom may be even more swamped than you feel.”

While Jesus’ first disciples were in commercial fishing, on the Sea of Galilee, the experience we most likely have had is with recreational fishing. That is true for me, and the little I have had was mostly with my Dad when I was a boy. We didn’t go fishing often; and most times we didn’t catch much. But let me share with you three of my strongest memories from childhood of fishing with Dad.

The first was on Grant Lake, near Bemidji, Minnesota. Our family rented a cabin that came with a rowboat. One day, Dad rowed himself and I out onto the lake. Then he told me to drop the anchor, which I did. The anchor went over the edge of the boat and under the water. The rope followed after. The rope had been tied to the anchor, but not to the boat. No fish were caught that day. One anchor needed to be replaced.

A second strong memory of my fishing exploits as a boy was when our family went to Lockport, Manitoba for the day. Brad, a childhood friend living across the street came with us. Dad, Brad and I spent a good part of that day fishing from shore. Before heading home, Dad, with a twinkle in his eye, suggested Mom take a picture of him, Brad and me holding up our fishing stringer. I still have that picture. The empty string hangs there in the air. Again, no fish were caught that day. But you can see three wide grins on the faces of Dad, Brad, and I.

The third strong memory I have of fishing as a boy with Dad was at Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba. He and I pitched our tent, rented a motor boat, then headed out on the water for an evening of fishing. Time went by unnoticed. The sun set more quickly than we realized. It soon was dark on the lake; so dark that we could not see the shore. Both dad and I were extremely anxious, and with good cause. Thankfully, we finally did see a light far-off. And there was still gas for the boat’s motor. So, we headed toward the light that was drawing us safely to shore. No fish caught, but Dad and I came home with grateful hearts.

So, as you can tell, I have never been great at fishing for fish. The good news is that, like you, I’m not called to help Jesus fish for fish; but to fish for people. And surely this must be easier; less hard and frightening. Right?

You know, despite our lack of skill and success in fishing for fish, Dad and I were still blessed by the gift of many memories that remained ever-dear. This too, I should think, is a phenomenon familiar to most congregations and most of us whom Jesus calls in our lifetimes to help him fish for people. No matter how challenging we find this ministry and all that might go awry as we seek to reach out to others in the Way, the Spirit and the Love of Jesus, there’s a good chance that we still just might come home

with grateful hearts. I pray, my friends, that this has been true for you and your congregations. For this is how we make and are blessed with strong memories that endure.

So, keep on fishing as long as you can.

The size of the catch is in Another's hand.

"Have faith, and be not afraid."

For the love and light of Christ is given you still, to guide you, and it will lead you home. Amen.

Rev. Ron McConnell