

We're at the mid-point of a 5-week Lenten series on the theme: 'Gone Fishing.' We began this series 2 weeks ago in Luke 5, looking at a story about how Jesus taught a large crowd from a boat belonging to a local fisherman, Simon (aka Simon-Peter). Later in that scripture, Luke describes how Jesus told Simon to row from the shore and cast his nets into the deep waters of Lake Gennesaret. The result was a miraculous catch of fish. Jesus then invites Simon and 3 other fishermen to become his first 4 disciples.

Last Sunday we looked at the same story again, but focused on Matthew 4. And, like many good fish tales, which change depending on who's telling the story, Matthew is different. There's no crowd, Jesus doesn't teach from a boat, and there's no abundant catch of fish. Matthew and Luke do agree however, that Jesus' first disciples were 4 fishermen who dropped their nets to follow him: Simon, his brother Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John.

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Unlike the past two weeks, the reading today does not describe an actual event. This morning's focus is a *parable* – a story – Jesus tells about what *will* happen to good and bad fish when God's Kingdom comes on earth 'as it is in heaven'. The parable of the good and bad fish is actually the last in a series of parables Jesus tells in Matthew 13 to describe the Kingdom of God. [Read Matthew 13:47-50]

At first blush, this reading affirms that Jesus' disciples made the right choice when they dropped their nets to follow him. They are good fish that will escape the torment to come. The bad fish are those who do not respond to Jesus' call and so they suffer unpleasant consequences.

That may be a bit hard for some of us to hear, but if we go back to last Sunday's reading, remember how Matthew says Jesus began his ministry after settling in Capernaum. Matthew 4:17 states: "From that time on Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Now, moving forward to Matthew 13, Jesus tells this parable to let his disciples know the benefits (and consequences) for those who do (or do not) repent. To summarize Jesus' message: 'Turn or burn, 'cause not all fish go to heaven!'

As you might imagine, I sometimes preside over memorial services for people whose commitment to Christ is not all that clear. It's not uncommon for someone at the memorial – usually a 'once removed' family member of the deceased – to amble over to me during the reception. 'Pastor,' they begin, 'I'd just like to ask you, because I'm worried ... 'Was my nephew [or niece, or sister-in-law, or cousin, or whoever], we're they *right with the Lord* before they died?'

What they're asking, as delicately as possible, is whether they will see their relative in the Kingdom of Heaven. Or, difficult as it may be, should they 'let go' of that hope because, well, the deceased is destined for the 'burning furnace' where 'there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'?

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Is that really how we should understand this parable (and others like it)? I've certainly been baiting us in that direction... But now I need 'cut bait' and say that I don't think we'd be all that fortunate to be among the good fish in this parable. Look at v. 48. What happens to the good fish? They end up in a basket (a container)! And what happens when fish are put into baskets (not back into the water they've been swimming in)? They are taken to the fish market to be sold and eaten!

This is a problem that occurs when we read the Bible, and especially parables, without thinking of how Jesus' actual listeners would have heard the parable, and without keeping in mind that Jesus (as a really good Rabbi!) used a variety of teaching methods to describe God's Kingdom.

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In seminary, I learned the difference between exegesis and eisegesis (and no, these are not two types of fish.) Exegesis is the exposition of a text based on a careful, objective, study. The word 'exegesis' means "to lead out of." It means the interpreter resists bringing assumptions into the study of the text, but sticks closely to the text *before* saying anything about its meaning. Exegesis is concerned with discerning the original meaning of the text and therefore takes into account not only the words, but also the social, historical, and cultural context of the text.

The opposite approach is eisegesis, which is the interpretation of a passage based on a subjective, non-analytical, reading. The word eisegesis

literally means "to lead into," which means an interpreter brings their 'pre-texts' or assumptions into their study of scripture. Eisegesis is often so focused with making the point the interpreter wants to make, that the actual meaning of words and the context are simply ignored.

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So here are three exegetical points to keep in mind about this *parable*. First, there are three types of fish in the Sea of Galilee: 1) sardines, 2) a type of tilapia (which is aka: 'St. Peter's Fish') and then something called 3) 'barbel', which is like a catfish [or carp]. In Jesus' day, sardines and tilapia were considered kosher; meaning both of these types of fish were okay for Jewish people to eat. A barbel however, was unclean; so, if you are a Jewish fisherman, you threw barbel away when you caught them.

Secondly, many Bible scholars believe that the "the furnace of fire" mentioned in v. 50, would call to mind an actual place known as Gehenna.

'Gehenna' was literally a burning, stinking, trash heap located at the edge of Jerusalem where wild dogs fought over scraps of food. (When wild dogs fight, their teeth make gnashing sounds.) So, when Jesus talked about the 'furnace of fire' it's very likely that his listeners would be picturing this place where the fire literally never burns out.

Thirdly, Jesus used lots of different methods when teaching: exhortations, parables, rhetorical questions, allegories, metaphors, and sometimes: hyperbole. Indeed, I am among those who believe that Jesus was such a good teacher that he could even use more than one method at the same time! Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration or overstatement to make a point quickly and succinctly. Jesus often used hyperbole to shake people out of complacency; to move them into new ways of thinking. (Like when Jesus says that if our eye causes us to sin, we should pluck it out. If we took that literally there would be fewer Christians with any sight at all!) So, as I said last week, one of our challenges in understanding Jesus is that we don't hear the tone in his voice as he teaches. This becomes a problem when some people read hyperbole hyper-literally.

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So let's take a fresh look at the parable with these three exegetical points in mind. As fishermen,

Jesus' disciples had been responsible for dividing the good fish (the sardines and tilapia) from the bad fish (the barbel), because they couldn't sell barbel in the market. But in this parable, who does Jesus say is in charge of the separating? The angels! (Not humans!) What Jesus is saying is that the fishermen are not in charge, not in control, of choosing between the good and bad fish: God is in charge of that!

In Jesus' day, his Jewish compatriots desperately wanted to determine the fate of those they considered bad fish: Romans, Tax Collectors, Samaritans, Gentiles, Herodians... In fact, at one point in Luke 9, Jesus' disciples ask him if they can 'rain down fire' upon those who reject him... So to an audience that's spoiling for the violent overthrow and punishment of the bad fish, Jesus' message is this: "In God's Kingdom you do not get to decide between the good and bad fish."

This is consistent with Jesus' earlier teaching in Matthew 7:1: "Judge not, so that you will not be judged." Ironically, one of the quickest ways we can fail to be good fish is when we ignore Jesus' teaching and judge other fish as 'bad' instead of trusting God to make the final call.

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The mission statement of our denomination is: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." It's a great purpose statement, but sometimes we place the accent on the last part: transforming the world... transforming *them*... and we overlook the discipleship part. And pretty soon, the world transformation we seek is hard to distinguish from other partisan political agendas. (Evangelicals do this. Social Gospel Christians do this.)

I think we're better off when we place the accent on *discipleship*. When our purpose is being and becoming faithful disciples, the world IS thereby transformed because I (and not *them*) become the focus of what needs the most change. Jesus' parable fits within his overall message that by following him; this is how God will re-shape the world as God intends it to be. So let's not imitate the ways and systems of the world: judging ourselves to be 'good fish' and 'calling down fire' upon bad fish... Let's focus instead on being faithful disciples who listen to Jesus above every other voice clamoring for our attention. Amen.