

IT'S CATCHING

As you know, at the end of every worship service I head to the narthex so I can greet people as they leave the sanctuary. In all honesty, that's one of my favorite parts of this job. I call it a fringe benefit of my ministry, because not only does it allow me to express my fondness for the people who have come to church that Sunday, but it also feels wonderful to be the recipient of lots of affection!

But sometimes, as I reach out my hand or open my arms (because I like hugs!) to greet someone in line, they suddenly pull back and hold out their arms to keep me back.

For an instant I wonder, "Is it my breath? Did I forget to put on some deodorant? Maybe I need to wipe my nose." But then the person explains, "I have a cold, and I don't want you to catch it."

Usually when that happens, I offer them the sign of the cross as a sort of blessing from a distance—call it a remnant of my days as a Catholic. I truly appreciate such consideration, because this profession is busy enough that I really don't have time to get sick. So I'd prefer not to catch a cold. Or the flu.

Yes, there are some things, like illnesses, you just don't want to catch, and you do everything you can to avoid, such as: keeping a safe distance from others. Using a gallon of Purell or some other brand of "germ buster" every few minutes. And going to your doctor or Walgreens or Hannaford's to get a vaccine.

On the other hand, there are some things you do want to catch. Things like the pesky fly or mosquito that's been buzzing around you for the past few minutes and driving you crazy. You want to catch that little varmint and send it back to God from whence it came.

Or, a fish. Catching fish is a popular pastime, especially here in our beautiful state with its many lakes and miles and miles of scenic Atlantic coastline. Some people spend hundreds, if not thousands of dollars on boats and equipment so they can go out and relax on the water, cast their line, and wait . . . and wait . . . and wait . . . for a fish to bite so they can reel it in and have a picture taken of them proudly holding it up and they can post it on Facebook or Instagram for all their friends to see.

Peter and Andrew and James and John were into fishing, big time. In fact,

as I'm sure you know, that's how they made their living. Of course, some days of fishing were better and more productive than others. There were times—and in fact, John's Gospel recorded such a time—when they had been out on the lake all day and didn't catch a single fish. And at other times they were fortunate enough to come across a large school of fish, and when they hauled in their nets they would be full to the brim.

We don't know how long Jesus had been observing the four fishermen at their work; but there was something about Peter, Andrew, James and John that caught (pun intended) Jesus' attention; something about how they went about their job on the Sea of Galilee caused Jesus to conclude that these were just the guys he wanted—even needed—to help him carry out his ministry.

Would good fishermen make good disciples and effective co-workers with Jesus? Was there some kind of similarity between catching fish and catching human beings?

I myself don't see any, but perhaps Jesus did.

Maybe Jesus thought that the patience, good eyes and observational skills it took to be a successful fisher would allow Peter and Andrew and James and John to be successful disciples. But whatever he thought, Jesus decided to give them a chance to join his ministry team. "Come, follow me," Jesus told them, "and I will send you out to fish for people." And their response wasn't just positive, it was immediate and very decisive.

When Peter and Andrew heard Jesus' call, "at once they left their nets and followed him." James and John were with their father, Zebedee; they were in a boat with their Dad, preparing their nets and getting ready to go out on the lake for the day when Jesus beckoned them. And there was no hesitation at all. Matthew records that, "immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."

"Bye, Pop. Gotta go."

It seems that Jesus' call was "catchy;" it was enticing enough that those four guys instantly gave up the careers they had invested so much time and sweat and toil into so they could respond to it. All Jesus said to them was, "There are other, more important things you could be catching. Like people." And Peter and Andrew and James and John agreed with him. So they decided to switch bait, change tactics, develop a brand new skill and join this wandering rabbi they didn't even know so they could help him lure people into the net of God's love and the blessing of God's Kingdom.

What can be said about catching people with Jesus?

Well, first of all, it's kind of scary and intimidating. That's because some people don't want to be caught. And they might get angry and resentful when you try to catch them. It's also challenging work. It's not always clear what kind of bait you need to draw someone into God's net. What works for one person might not work for someone else. And it might take multiple tries before you finally hook someone.

On a more positive note, for a Christian there's nothing more fulfilling and joyous than to be like Christ to another human being, and show them and help them experience firsthand what God's love and compassion are all about

I read a story recently about a young man who went fishing for people, and the fishing expedition he went on changed his life. Here's what happened to him, in his own words.

"I got converted in my senior year of high school. I was a fresh, eager Christian, so when evangelical activist Tony Campolo came to our town to speak, I went to hear him. He was great. After he spoke, he asked us to sign up for his program of inner-city ministry in Philadelphia. So I did.

"Well, in mid-June I met about a hundred other kids in a Baptist church in Philadelphia. We had an hour of singing before Dr. Campolo arrived. When he got to the church, we were really pumped up, all enthusiastic and ready to go. Dr. Campolo started us off by preaching for about an hour, and by the time he finished people were shouting and standing on the pews, clapping. It was amazing.

"Okay, gang, are you ready to go out there and tell them about Jesus?" he asked.

"Yeah, let's go!" we shouted back.

"Then let's get on the bus!" Tony shouted. So we spilled out of the church and onto the bus. We were singing and clapping. But then we began to drive deeper into the depths of the city. We weren't in a great neighborhood when we started riding, but it got a lot worse. Gradually we stopped singing and all of us college kids were just staring out the windows, not making a sound. We were scared.

"Then the bus pulled up in front of one of the worst looking housing projects in Philadelphia. Tony jumped on the bus, opened the door and said, 'Alright gang, get out there and tell 'em about Jesus. I'll be back at five o'clock.'

"We made our hesitant way off the bus. We stood there on the corner of the street and had a prayer, then we spread out. I walked down the sidewalk and stopped before a huge tenement house. I gulped, asked God for strength,

and ventured inside. There was a terrible odor. Windows were busted. There were no lights in the hall. I walked up one flight of stairs and toward the door where I heard a baby crying. I knocked on the door.

“‘Who is it?’ said a loud voice inside. Then the door was cracked open and a woman, a woman holding a naked baby, peered out at me.

“‘What do you want?’ she asked in a harsh, mean voice.

“I said that I wanted to tell her about Jesus.

“With that, she swung the door open and began cursing me. She cursed me all the way down the hall, down the flight of steps, and out onto the sidewalk. “I felt terrible. ‘Look at me,’ I said to myself. ‘Some Christian I am. How in the world could somebody like me ever think that I could tell someone else about Jesus?’

“I sat down at the curb and cried. Then I looked up and noticed a store on the corner, its windows all boarded up and bars over the door. I went to that store, walked in and looked around. Then I remembered. The baby had no diapers. The mother was smoking. I bought a box of disposable diapers and a pack of cigarettes.

“I walked back to the tenement house, asked God for strength, walked up the flight of stairs, gulped, stood before the door and knocked. ‘Who is it?’ said the voice inside. When she opened the door I slid that box of diapers and pack of cigarettes inside. She looked at them, looked at me and said, ‘Come in.’

“I stepped into the dingy apartment. ‘Sit down,’ she commanded.

“I sat on the old sofa and began to play with the baby. I put a diaper on the baby, even though I’d never put one on before. When the woman offered me a cigarette, even though I don’t smoke, I smoked it. I stayed there all afternoon, talking, playing with the baby, and listening to the woman.

“About four o’clock, the woman looked at me and said, ‘Let me ask you something. What’s a nice college boy like you doing in a place like this?’ “So I told her everything I knew about Jesus. It took me about five minutes. Then she said, ‘Pray for me and my baby that we make it out of here alive.’ “So I prayed.

“That evening, after we were all back on the bus, Tony asked, ‘Well, gang, did any of you get to tell ‘em about Jesus?’ And I said, ‘I not only got to tell ‘em about Jesus, I met Jesus. I went out to save somebody, and I ended up getting saved. I became a genuine disciple.’”

My friends, sometimes, Jesus’ call to discipleship comes at unexpected times, through unexpected people, in unexpected ways. But make no mistake about it, Jesus is calling us. All the time. Every day.

“Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.”

Maybe we’ll be afraid. Maybe we’ll think we’re not good enough to go fishing for people with Jesus. Maybe we’ll try to convince ourselves that we really don’t know how to fish for people. It’s out of our comfort zone. We’re too busy. We’re not smart enough. We don’t know enough about the Bible. We don’t know Jesus well enough ourselves to tell someone else about him.

I wonder if Peter, Andrew, James and John had similar thoughts? I wonder if they had the same kind of feelings of insecurity, of not being good enough, not knowing enough, not being smart enough to fish for people, when they heard Jesus’ call to follow?

If they did have such feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, it didn’t stop them. Instead, they chose to disregard their negative thoughts, their fear and doubt and pick up their fishing gear to go fish for human beings.

Maybe, my friends, just maybe, following Jesus and fishing for people has less to do with what we think and feel, and more to do with simply taking a step of faith in spite of our feelings and thoughts, opening ourselves up to God in prayer, making ourselves totally vulnerable, and allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us toward taking simple, Christ-inspired actions. Actions that are infused with the powerful bait of kindness, compassion, mercy, grace and love.

Hold on. Wait a second. Listen. Do you hear that? Do you hear Jesus calling?

There. There it is again. A voice, deep in our hearts, speaking to us. And it’s saying, “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.” That means Jesus must see something in us, something good and worthwhile and valuable that indicates to him we’re the right people for the job, or else he wouldn’t be calling us, would he? It seems that, to Jesus, you and I have all the potential in the world to go out and catch people.

And if we don’t really believe that and we have doubts, we should go out and do some fishing for them anyway. Because I think that, with a little practice and some experience casting our nets, we’ll catch on. Thanks be to God. Amen.