

“Been Fishing Lately?”
January 27, 2008

1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-23

I'd like to start this morning by asking you a question or two. I want to know how many of you talk about your church life with your family, friends, or acquaintances who don't go to church and who aren't part of another religious community. But before you answer, I want to be clear that I'm asking if you *really* talk about it. Do you talk about why you come to church, what place it has in your life, what it and the people in it mean to you? [Hands]

Would those of you who didn't raise your hands, would you willing to say a little about why you don't talk about your church life or why you at least hesitate to talk it? [Don't want to offend; consider faith something very private; don't like it when others try to convert me, so don't want to do that to someone else; don't know what to say or how to say it.]

As your answers suggest, there are many reasons one might want to stay relatively quiet about attending and being a member of a church, but there is one reason I've heard more often than all the rest. Many people don't want to talk about their faith or their church because they – or people they've known – have been on the receiving end of someone else talking about their faith in a heavy-handed, coercive, and even threatening way. Many people – and I'm one of them – have either experienced or heard of Christian evangelism that has no apparent humility but does seem to have an abundance of self-righteous certainty. Many people have experienced or witnessed a particular kind of evangelizing that they don't like, and they've promised never to do it themselves.

It's that kind of experience (or caricature) of evangelism or sharing one's faith that lies underneath a marvelous comic strip in last week's *Press-Democrat*. It was in one of the comics that the newspaper has just added to its funny page. In this particular strip, two characters are talking to one another about a third character. (I'll call the third character “Fred.”) One of the two asks the other, “So how's Fred doing with finding the missing pieces from the nativity scene?” The other one answers, in essence, “Not so good. He's having a bit of a communication problem.” The strip then shows us Fred, standing before someone's open front door. Fred asks the person in the doorway, “Have you found Jesus?” and, in an instant, he gets the door slammed in his face.

I think many of us have that just sort of scenario in our minds when we hesitate to share our faith, when we're reluctant to talk about our life and experiences in church, or when we shy far, far away from anything that might be considered evangelism.

Let's face it. Whether we call the activity “sharing our faith,” “doing evangelism,” or “fishing for people,” it's something that progressive Christian churches often have a hard time doing. Some of the very characteristics that make a Christian church “progressive” – an understanding of Christianity as *a* path into the sacred, not *the* path; an openness to the truths and insights of other religions; a respect for people of other faiths and for people of no particular faith – all these things can make progressive Christians hesitant to talk about our own faith and what it means to us. We don't want to “offend.” We *really* don't want to “proselytize.” We don't want repeat the mistakes

we're convinced that other people have made in the name of God and Christianity. And, perhaps more than anything else, we don't want people whose opinions matter to us to associate us with all the ways the Bible and the Christian religion have been used to promote intolerance and arrogance and the notion of a God who watches us closely in order to zap us, instead of a God who loves us and watches us closely in order to guide, heal, and bless us.

Progressive Christian churches and the people in them – and I'm talking about you and me, folks – tend to be mindful, sometimes to the point of obsession, of the damage that's been done and continues to be done in the name of God and in the name of Christ. The litany of damage is extensive, and it is breathtaking. It includes the Crusades, the Inquisition, the forced conversions of native peoples, the coerced subservience of women, the justification of slavery, the vilification of lesbians and gay men, and more.

It's a long and heavy list that represents a long and frequently troubling story, but I urge us all to remember that it's a *human* story, not an exclusively Christian story. To tell you the truth, sometimes, I wish that Christianity actually were the only religion or ideology that's been used to justify conquest, violence, patriarchy, greed, and even raw hate, but it's not. If Christianity had been the only one used and misused to support and defend our most destructive impulses, human history would be filled with far less ugliness than it is. But, in this, Christianity has a whole lot of company, and human history has the ugliness – *and* the beauty – that it has.

So progressive Christians can hesitate to talk about our faith, to invite friends or acquaintances to come to church with us, or, in this morning's metaphor, to go fishing for people simply because of all the baggage Christianity has from its past and its present. We can be reluctant to talk about the commitments we make here – the time, creativity, love, prayers, care, and financial support we *pour* into this community – because we don't want to be associated with that baggage and we don't want our family, friends, co-workers, or acquaintances to roll their eyes at us, to look at and think about us with suspicion or pity, or to attack us as superstitious, narrow-minded, or simply ridiculous.

But I believe there's another, deeper reason you (and I) can be so reluctant to go fishing for people, so unwilling to suggest to other people that they might receive what they need if they came here. If this church is a place where you encounter the healing, challenging gift of God's love ... if this church is a place where you find yourself loving people you'd never met before and even loving people you can't truthfully say that you like ... if this church is a place where you discover and learn to embrace your tenderest hopes and your deepest longings for yourself and for the world ... if this church is a place where you come to trust what author P.D. James has called "the magnificent irrationality of faith" ... if this church is where any of that happens for you – and I hope and pray *all* of it happens for you at one time or another – speaking about it, trying to share it, and inviting someone else to come share it, too, requires you to expose your most vulnerable self.

And there is a marvelous paradox in this source of our reluctance to share our faith or to go fishing. The very things that we may not want to expose in sharing our faith or our faith community – our vulnerability; our hopes for ourselves and the world; the tender, wounded parts within us that encounter kindness and grace through this church – are *exactly* what people in our lives and all around us need.

Our world is filled with messages that run parallel to what the Corinthians were fighting about when Paul wrote to them. Instead of dividing ourselves on the basis of being baptized by Paul or Apollos or Cephas, like the Corinthians did, we divide and judge one another on the basis of material wealth and possessions or looks or political affiliation or sexuality or race or even, God help us, on how we name and experience God.

This is a world in desperate need of what this church offers – what it offers consistently and beautifully, although, we need to remember, never perfectly. This is a world that needs to know that it's possible to gather with other people and be loved for who we are. This is a world that needs to know that it's possible to come into a community with people you've never met and to be welcomed and cared for both in your vulnerability and sorrow and in your joy, laughter, and celebration.

As we gather for our Annual Meeting this morning, I ask you to see this church for what it is – a place where we care for one another through hugs and food and rides and prayers. See this church for what it is – a place where people gather, as many did yesterday morning, and share their thoughts and experiences and ideas about something as inevitable and awkward as death and funerals. See this church for what it is – a community that knows a measure of God's love and grace and that seeks to share them beyond the walls of this sanctuary and beyond the boundaries of this town and this nation.

God's grace has brought all of us here, to a place where people love one another, where people care for one another in good times and hard times, where the healing power of laughter is welcomed and celebrated, and where we dare to believe that true *Shalom* can become a reality. God's grace has brought you here, and God's grace seeks to work through you, to tell the world that such a place as this is possible. God's grace is urging you to invite others to come and experience the healing embrace of love that is available here. God's grace is asking you to go fishing for people, to offer the hand of welcome and life to someone who may drown without it.

“I will make you fishers of people.” You don't have to claim that way out of the waters of alienation and fear that you have found is the only way out. You don't have to force anything on anyone. God simply asks you – asks us – to name the gifts of love and grace we receive here, to realize that someone else may need those same gifts, and to risk inviting someone else, maybe even many “someone elses,” to come and see for themselves.

So, my friends, let's go fishing.
Amen.

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