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Go Fish

Mark 1:14-20 (New Revised Standard version) 14Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." 16As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 17And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." 18And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Let me tell you a story. It's a parable, actually. It's called the "Parable of the Fisherless Fisherman."

Now it came to pass that there was a group who called themselves fishermen. And lo, there were many fish in the waters all around. In fact, the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes and an ocean filled with fish. And the fish were hungry. Year after year this group who called themselves fishermen met in meetings and talked about their call to fish, their desire to fish, the need to fish, the abundance of fish, and how they might go about fishing.

Continually they searched for new and better definitions of fishing. They sponsored seminars to discuss fishing. They enjoyed these seminars very much and spent time and effort and money attending them to discuss fishing. These fishermen built a beautiful building called "Fishing Headquarters." Their plea was that everyone should be a fisherman and every fisherman should fish. One thing they didn't do, however – they didn't fish.

But they did organize a committee to send out fishermen to where there were many fish. The committee was formed by those who had the great vision and courage to speak about fishing, to define fishing, and to promote the idea of fishing in far-away streams and lakes and oceans where many other fish of different colors and kinds lived.

This committee was so successful at discussing the idea of fishing that it soon hired a staff and appointed task forces and held many meetings, to define fishing, to defend fishing, and to decide what new streams and lakes and oceans should be thought about for the possibility of perhaps maybe thinking about the idea of possibly fishing. But the staff and committee members did not fish. Then, because the committee was so successful in discussing fishing, they then built expensive training centers to teach people how to fish. Those who taught had doctorates in fishology, but the teachers did not actually fish. They only taught fishing. Year after year, graduates were sent to do full-time fishing, some to distant waters filled with fish, but they were seldom heard from again.

Further, these folks interested in the idea of discussing fishing then started a slick magazine about fishing and set up a nice website and Facebook page. They sent Tweets about fishing. They were very tech savvy in providing all kinds of ways to discuss the idea of possibly perhaps fishing. Many indeed felt the call to be fishermen and responded, and they were sent to fish. But like the fishermen back home, they never seemed to actually fish.

*Along the way, there were others who said they wanted to be part of the fishing party, part of the excitement around the idea of discussing the idea of fishing, but they themselves felt called to manufacture fishing equipment. Others – probably from Boulder – felt their job was to relate to the feelings of the fish in good and life-affirming ways. After one stirring meeting on "The Need for Fishing," a young fellow left the meeting and – **he went fishing!** The next day he reported he had caught two outstanding fish. He was honored for his excellent catch and scheduled to visit all the big meetings possible to tell how he did it. So he quit his fishing in order to have time to tell about the experience to the other fishermen. He was also placed on the Fishing Board of Directors as a person having extensive experience. Now it's true that many of*

the fishermen sacrificed and put up with all kinds of difficulties. Some lived near the water and bore the smell of dead fish every day. They received the ridicule of some who made fun of their fishermen's clubs and the fact that they claimed to be fishermen yet never fished. After all, were they not following the Master who said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people"? Imagine how hurt some were when one day a person suggested that those who didn't catch fish were really not fishermen, no matter how much they claimed to be. Yet it did sound correct. Is a person a fisherman if year after year he never catches a fish or never actually goes fishing?

But hear now another story about fishing. It's the story of a fisherman named Jesus:

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Two stories about fishing. Two approaches to fishing. In the one, you think about, dream about, study about, prepare for, research, and plan your fishing. In the second one you hear the call of the one asking you, no, telling you, to fish and you say "Ok, let's go fish." And then you do it. Now, it doesn't take a literary genius to get the point of the parable of the Fisherless Fisherman, for it does describe all of us sometimes, doesn't it? You've heard me tell before about how every year for the last decade or so I have spent a few days with my friend the Rev. Bob Hill. Bob and I have

typically met up in Las Vegas or Phoenix and then have gone on a road trip during which time we see the sights of that amazing part of the country, eat lots of Mexican food and barbecue, and have our own continuing education seminar on wheels as we discuss church and preaching and all kinds of ministry concerns, the books we've been reading, the things we've been thinking about. The beauty of the landscape helps evoke the beauty of the conversation. But there have been times when I have been in danger of not, in fact, seeing that landscape, not letting it work its magic, because I had become so caught up in planning the trip rather than experiencing the trip. For weeks I pore over websites and maps, offering emailing options to Bob. But Bob is wiser than I because he pretty much ignores the planning suggestions I send in advance and his attitude when we finally get together is: *"Let's head that way and see what we see."*

My absolute favorite traveling companion is Barbara. It's been one of our best things. But I have sometimes done the same sort of thing with her, being obsessed with planning to the point of missing the joy of the journey. One time when we lived in the far west Texas desert, and when our youngest Katie was just a baby, we drove back from my parents home in Ft. Worth, just the three of us. I had planned to take the freeway; six quick boring hours. Barbara was smarter than I. She said, *"Let's take the back way"* and we did. And that journey is now a day, even though completely unplanned, that will live forever in a treasured spot in our memories. It's the same sort of thing I used to see in Hawaii when I would come across clumps of tourists, poring over their maps and guidebooks in one hand, and their typed up to-the-minute itineraries in the other. And I often wanted to say (and sometimes did say, if they asked me): *"throw the itinerary away! Part of what is magical about Hawai'i is the things that happen when you don't plan so meticulously, when you take the perfect side road, marked on no tourist map, that suddenly and unexpectedly causes you to catch your*

breath at the beauty of it.” The late singer and songwriter John Lennon once wrote, “*Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans.*”

Go fish, as the Jesus of Mark’s gospel has it? Or go **plan** to fish, as the parable of the Fisherless Fisherman would parody? Well, actually **both**. **Both** are necessary to the life of any Christian, and both are necessary to the life of any church if it wants to respond well and faithfully to what God is doing and calling it to be. For, on the one hand, it is indeed possible to do so much planning and research that what you’re going to do never actually gets done. You stare at the map, as it were, but never actually undertake the journey. For example, I stand in the line at King Soopers, and I have indeed planned that whenever the opportunity presents itself I will offer a witness to someone who seems to be in need of a good word, in need of the joy and hope the gospel can bring them. But sometimes I just didn’t do it. But I take comfort in the fact that I planned to; I read a lot about evangelism. Doesn’t that count? I plan never again to laugh at someone’s racist remark that is disguised as humor; I gird myself resolutely by thinking a great deal in advance about how I won’t laugh and will instead gently and respectfully chide the teller. But I stand mute. I plan about how next time that someone says something less than kind about someone else without evidence, I will not think the worst of the person being talked about, and I will instead assume the best and certainly won’t pass along any unfounded and unkind assessment. But instead I can’t wait to pass that gossip along. And yet – doesn’t all my planning count for *something* – even though I find myself doing what I said I wouldn’t?

Well, no, it doesn’t count for very much. If in our lives, whether as individual or as a church, we find ourselves thinking that **simply** because we have planned and planned and studied and studied that we have actually gone fishing then we are mistaken.

Well, then, let's take the other alternative. "Follow me." "Ok. Let's go fish." Let's just do it, as the Nike folks would have it. Is that all that the Christian life needs, all that a church's life needs? Is that the point of this story of Jesus and those first disciples: just do it, don't think about it?

No. That's not the point either. Acting with **no** larger plan or understanding to give you direction **assures** that you will *lurch* from this action to that, doing far less good than you could have. Without serious studying, planning if you will, of what the Gospel of Jesus Christ means for my life, I will be in danger of finding myself overcome and swayed by the most hateful voices who claim to speak in the name of God, rather than the quieter and gentler voices. And yet, at the same time, without a commitment and willingness to indeed finally step forward in faith even if we don't know every detail of the plan, every last thing about how it will turn out – as did Simon and Andrew and James there at that lakeside so long ago in Galilee – then we run the risk of never actually fishing, never actually doing what we are called by Jesus to do: which is to feed a hungry and hurting world with the assurance of the grace of a God who loves unconditionally and wants justice unreservedly. **Both** the plan **and** the doing are important if we are to be who God calls us to be, if we are indeed to both fish **and** fish well.

In the coming months and years we as a congregation will need to remember that dual truth. Last Sunday, the Special Congregational Meeting approved by a 94% vote "The Ministry Plan" that we have been studying and praying and discerning about for these last four months. It is a plan whereby we will use some of our monies from the Tejon Property mortgage to commit ourselves to new staff and other initiatives in the hopes that that will be enable us to successfully respond to our vision and mission statement of being a people of "radical hospitality, outrageous generosity, and joyful

service” as we seek to deepen our spirituality as a congregation and as we seek to add new people who need the love of God that we know. We have been planning and praying, and now is the time to move, to go fish. And work has indeed begun. And my commitment to you is that I and our leadership will regularly keep you posted about how that fishing is going. We will both fish and we will be guided by a good and worthy plan for that fishing - but we will also be attuned to God’s Spirit as there will no doubt be opportunities that we can’t even imagine to fish in ways we didn’t expect! Our plan has benchmarks built in. We will pay attention to those. We will not just fish blindly, as it were, but will constantly evaluate the catch to see if our methods need tweaking. We will listen to you. And most of all we will hold in front of us, every day, those in this community who so need to know that a church like us exists – one that values heart and head, one that understands God to be a good and wise and caring friend and not a scorekeeper waiting to foul you out of the game, one that zealously believes that each person has the right and responsibility to decide for him- or herself issues of faith and life. Now, there is no doubt we will continue to contend sometimes. And we should. Because that means we take seriously God’s call. After all, you don’t quibble over things that you don’t care about. But First Christian Church is a place, a people, a community that does care. We want to care well and wisely. We want to use our words and our actions to build up and never tear down. We want to embrace around the Lord’s Table even those whom we disagree with about this or that. We want to give witness to the commitment that Christ’s care for this world, expressed through that Table and calling us to follow, is and will be stronger than anything that would try to divide.

So, the tackle box is packed. The streams have been studied. The fish are plenty. The need is great. Let’s plan and let’s go fish, go fish. Shall we?