

“More Fish Than They Bargained For”

John 21:1-14

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

One of my earliest memories of church is from about age five when we were living in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts. In Sunday School we learned to weave our fingers together like this: and to say, “Here’s the church, here’s the steeple; open the door and see all the people!” But I recall that we couldn’t do it correctly the first few times. The church kept coming up empty! But once we got the hang of it, we showed off this miraculous demonstration of a full church to our parents hundred’s of times! We never tired of it! It was as if we had made a new discovery the world had never seen before! A full church every time we opened our fists! We even named our thumbs the names of the two ministers, Rev. Dawes and Rev. White. After awhile, just to be different, we’d weave our fingers the other way; say the same ditty, put up the steeple, open the door, and the church would be empty! I remember we preferred seeing the church full!

That early image of the church came to mind as I read John’s fishing story. The apostles, for lack of anything better to do, decided to go fishing. After all, several of them were fishermen by trade, so they were just doing what came naturally. No doubt, they were hungry, so they gathered their nets and pushed out into deep water. But after casting and recasting their nets throughout the night, they had caught nothing by the time the sun arose the next day.

A stranger calls to them from the shore. ‘Try casting your net on the other side of your boat and you’ll find some.’ Though these are seasoned fishermen who know that this is a preposterous suggestion, they think to themselves, ‘It can’t hurt!’

We have nothing to lose!’ So they cast the net on the other side, and this time they can’t even haul the net in because it is so full of fish! As they stand there admiring the halibut, a light bulb comes on in their minds, and they turn to have a second look at the stranger on the beach. Now they recognize him! It is the risen Christ. One of them jumps overboard and swims to shore. The others come along later, hauling in the catch. These adults are all as excited as we were when we were kids playing the ‘here’s the church, here’s the steeple game.’ There is something about having a full net that’s just like having a full church!

Hundreds of sermons have been preached on what makes the difference between the empty net and the full net. Theologians write books about this. Trout fishermen like to debate this over coffee and donuts. This is a question that matters because John intends this fishing expedition to serve as a metaphor for understanding the difference between a full, vibrant church and an empty, lifeless church.

For me, the secret lies in the disciples responding to the preposterous invitation. Cast your net on the other side of the boat. There is no logic to that. It is unreasonable. It defies common sense. Were these apostles guided solely by what’s rational, they would have laughed at the stranger’s suggestion and that would have been the end of it. But among the eleven, there was an openness to the preposterous. That is what John wants the church to hear and to trust.

There is something preposterous about Jesus saying, “Love your enemy.” There is something preposterous about Jesus teaching, “Forgive your brother or your sister not seven times but seventy times seven times.” There is something preposterous about following a teacher who claims ‘the first shall be last and the last shall be first.’

Is it not preposterous to turn the left cheek to the one who has already struck you on the right cheek? To live by faith is a preposterous notion!

Yet, it is the difference between a full net and an empty net. It is the difference between a full church and an empty church. It is the difference between a carried-away church and a church waiting for the physician to fill out the death certificate.

Last summer, we had a call from the Hartford Seminary asking if we'd like to participate as a host church in their international student program. Without blinking an eye, we said YES! Without consulting our insurance carrier, we said YES! Without asking a lot of questions about affording it, we said YES! We had a choice among Indonesia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. We said Indonesia. We had no clue about what we were really getting ourselves into! Then, she arrived! Meliani arrived! She befriended us; we befriended her. And she has been a light shining in our midst since last October. We will not be the same. Our nets are fuller now. She has revealed to us a fuller picture of God's diversity. In a way, saying YES was preposterous. It was like casting the net on the other side of the boat.

We had a call last week from FoodShare asking if we could send some volunteer gleaners to haul food from the Food Show at the new, downtown Convention Center and load it into waiting refrigerator trucks for delivery to soup kitchens around the city. Without asking a lot of questions, we said YES! Yes, we'll make an announcement from the pulpit, and we'll see if anyone responds to this rather preposterous invitation. A father and a son said, "We'll go." A grandmother volunteered her grandson. The four of us went. By the end of the evening, the raggle taggle crew of gleaners had loaded up 12,000 meals worth of food. It was everything from frozen hamburger patties and barbeque sauce to broccoli and buns.

As we wheeled our carts among the displays, we were like fishermen casting nets on the other side of the boat. We didn't understand all the details, but we believed we were doing God's work. We couldn't picture the families who would enjoy the food, but we could see there'd be a lot of people who wouldn't go to bed hungry the next night.

If those early apostles needed anything from the risen Christ, it was the invitation to live by faith, to cast a net when there is no perceivable gain in doing so, to love when there is no prospect of that love being returned, to believe when there is no hard evidence for doing so, to plant a seed even where the soil offers no promise of a good crop.

After church today and next Sunday, we are all invited to Listening Sessions in the social hall, opportunities to talk and listen and imagine a church without stairs. I've already heard some say it's preposterous. Of course it's preposterous! It's in the same category as casting nets on the other side of the boat!

As John sat down to write his Gospel toward the end of the first century, he had only one purpose in mind, that people of all ages would come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that through believing we might have life in his name. Thus, he gives us this marvelous fishing story, this simple invitation to live by faith. Many who have accepted this invitation have found it to be so, that there is life in his name. In the greatest of hope, Amen!