

SERMON: “Catching”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, February 6, 2022

PRAYER: “Let there be light. Let there be understanding. Open us to new revelation, O God, and fresh insight. Open our minds to ponder and wonder. Stir us in our imagination. Let your Spirit flow within us and move us and never fade.” Amen

Are you one of those suckers that P. T. Barnum said was born every minute?
Or are you a hard sell? What does grab you?
Commercial advertisers and businesses are well-schooled in the ways of enticement.
They are all out to attract us and catch us. So is God.
The good news is that God is not out to con us or to impoverish us.
God has been wearing that scintillating perfume “Allure” for centuries.
Hard to resist, but, if we choose, we still can. Even if we meet God in Jesus.
Is it only about the power of persuasion? Or, are there other dynamics?

I FIRST DISCIPLES

Maybe we can discern that by reviewing how the first disciples were recruited.
Especially Peter. Peter. Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter, Peter.
Who would have thought? Big, brawny fisherman; famous 'round the shores of Lake Galilee.
Had perhaps the equivalent of a grade six education? Most folks knew him as Simon.
One sunny Sabbath afternoon, Jesus, an itinerant rabbi, dropped by his house in Capernaum.
Simon's mother-in-law was there, deathly ill. Jesus visited her and healed her. Wow!
Word spread. Others brought their sick and demonized ones before him for a similar blessing.
They received it. And then, Jesus took off to a place apart.
People pursued him begging him to return and stick around.
“I have other places to go to,” said Jesus. “I have to keep moving on.”
Yet, a few days later, he's back in Capernaum, walking the shoreline of Lake Gennesaret
(which is one of three other names for the ‘Sea of Galilee’).
Crowds press in upon him again. He spies an empty boat pulled up on the shore.
Its owners are nearby washing their fishing nets.
“Uh, could I use your boat as a teaching platform?” Jesus asks.
“Sure, I guess so,” Simon answers; and, with his massive hands give it a little shove off-shore.
From the prow, Jesus set into a teaching session.
When he has finished, he says to Simon, “Now, you and your crew hop in!
Shove off, head out to the deep water with your boats, and let down your nets again.”
And Simon is thinking, “You must be kidding. Fishing again ... in broad daylight!
Even in the deep water the fish can still see the net.”
But, maybe just to humour the man who had recently healed his mother-in-law,
Simon gathers the Zebedee brothers and the rest of his crew and they all set out, Jesus included.

Flip! Whoosh! When the reach deep water, out go the nets.
 Oh my! Unbelievable! Within minutes they have a tremendous catch.
 It's so huge that the nets are straining at every joint.
 Simon Peter is now gobsmacked not only by the abundance, but by the power of this Jesus.
 Like old Isaiah, who ages before got God-smacked at the altar in the Temple,
 Peter melts: "Depart from me, Sir! I'm such a wayward one!"
 As his knees buckle and his lips tremble, the mouths of others like James and John gape.
 And Jesus says, "Oh, don't be so overwhelmed and afraid, after this, you'll be catching people."
 And the greatly compacted aftermath of that event, according to Luke is:
"And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him."
 Wow! Why would they do that?
 Their biggest haul of their fishing careers is left for others to cull and pick over.
 Their life on the water gets traded in for a rambling two- to three-year tramp on land.
 No turning back? Even leaving family behind? Farewell usual day job?
 Just as old Isaiah gave up his old priestly day job and became a prophet instead.
 There it is. Just as I said earlier, the allure of God can be amazingly captivating.
 And it is apparent that it is more than just persuasion; there is something about engagement.
 There is something about treating others, whoever they are, as valued persons.
 And there is something about the attractiveness and power of a Spirit-led, God-centred life.

II TODAY'S DISCIPLES

What draws us to God in and through Jesus?
 We don't all quit our day jobs and leave home and family behind, but we are drawn to him.
 Some of us do get drawn in such a way that we become ministry or mission personnel.
 One way or another we feel called to follow.
 How does that play out? How does that translate into life and action for us?
 In the language of theology, it has something to do with incarnation.
 We speak about Jesus as God incarnate: God-with-us in the flesh (*L. "carne"*),
 in and through whom the presence and power of God was channeled.
 And by the power and residency of the Spirit of God given to us,
 we too get to embody and channel God's presence and power.
 It's what Rose Ann referred to a couple of Sunday's ago that the Spirit of God is also upon us
 anointing us and gifting us for ministry and mission.
 We have it within us, so what are we doing with that?
 Last Sunday, we reflected on how we might repurpose our physical church space, our "temple",
 as we continue to upbuild one another and also serve the community and world around us.
 But guess what, church facilities and such are not the only locales of God's holiness and power.
 Listen to some encouraging words from that prominent first-century apostle, Saint Paul:
"Do you not know that your body is a temple (or sanctuary) of the Holy Spirit within you?"

That's lifted from I Corinthians 5:19. The metaphor is expanded upon in Ephesians 2:17-22. Discerning and claiming that in Jesus, the Christ, all dividing walls among human beings have been broken down, he writes:

"Jesus came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both have access to God in one Spirit.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus, the Christ, as the cornerstone.

In Christ, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple of God; in whom you are also built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God."

Oh, let's hear that again: "you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God".

As a relatively contemporary hymn most often sung in church school settings put it:

"I am the church, you are the church. We are the church together.

All who follow Jesus, all around the world, yes! we're the church together." 1

The calling and challenge is: how do we do that attractively, engagingly, fruitfully now?

That question has been rumbling inside the walls of our churches and our hearts for decades.

Loren Mead, while working for the Alban Institute and Center for Parish development, laid it out boldly as far back as 1991, declaring the ways and forms of being church that we have inherited are no longer working for us.

"Our task," he contended, "is no less than the reinvention of the church.

It may take several generations. We will not see the end of it, but we must begin now." 2

We are already at least one generation into that task, and because of a current global pandemic, every church and community of faith in the world is scrambling into reinvention.

So, companions in discipleship at First United, Waterloo, what are you and I doing now, what might we do now as "dwelling-places of God" that channel God's Spirit?

How might we be immersed in "fishing for people" and making God's world a better place?

The asset-mapping exercise being offered today after worship and again on Thursday evening is a means of assisting us in discerning our answers to such questions.

If you are able to be present with us, great. If not, make note of your own personal assets, and the assets within this congregation that you are aware of anyway.

There will be other opportunities to discern how we can focus them in ministry and mission in the weeks ahead.

Here are a few prompts and some other matters to ponder:

1. In considering your personal gifts, in addition to things like "I like to cook" or "carpentry", think about what gives you life? What energizes you?
2. Name some of the gifts and assets that groups of people in our congregation have to offer such as: "We have some groups that engage in Praying with Scripture".
3. Be as specific as possible. Rather than, "we have connections with a number of Social Service Agencies in Waterloo", try to name each of those agencies.

If we are channeling God's presence and transforming love to others as we "fish for people" how does that sound? How does that happen in ways that are comfortable for us?

If you were to invite a stranger to participate in some activity at First United, how would you do that? Would you share a bit about why it matters to you or energizes you?

If you could tell a stranger one or two stories about why you belong to First United, or how First United helps you live your life as a person of faith, what might you say?

Can you tell a story about why Jesus matters to you?

Yes, these are invitations to bearing witness, giving testimony, engaging in evangelism. What assistance and encouragement might any of us need to help us venture that comfortably?

These are ways we get to embody our purpose:

"building relationships, living God's transforming love".

These are ways through our Core Values find expression in Caring, Community, Celebration, and Stewardship.

These are ways of channeling God's Spirit already resident and active within us as we now are caught up in "fishing for people" and enabling social change.

It's about sharing in attractive, engaging, and maybe life-reorienting ways how we ourselves have been caught by God.

CONCLUSION:

David Ostendorf, Director of the Center for New Community in Ellsworth, Wisconsin has made this comment on today's gospel lesson:

"God's living Word draws people in. It calls and pulls and then pushes people out (It's) a call that compels us to turn away from accommodation to all the worldly ways that lure and enwrap us." 3

A fascinating discovery of recent science was unlocked by Floris Takens and David Ruelle. They used supercomputers to get a read on chaotic systems.

Every moment of the evolution of those systems showed up as a dot on a screen.

Then, as the dots accumulated, a vague image took shape in a seemingly unruly way.

After some more time, those random images became exquisitely beautiful patterns.

They do not give shape to the entirety of chaos, but emerge out of it.

They are called "the strange attractors" that pull wholeness out of randomness.

There is also a basin of attraction which limits how far a system can fluctuate and still remain itself.

That's a watered-down version of what has become known as "Chaos Theory".

It is the way of our universe. It is the structure of creation.

For people of Christian faith, God in Christ is our primary strange attractor.

People of other faiths find God catching as well in ways that magnetize them.

Many are the voices and lures that seek to entice all of us otherwise.

Sometimes, we wind up being seduced by them.

Or, maybe, we sometimes let the strange attraction of Jesus slip, suffer diminished power.

O, then may God catch us again!

Let us feel free to be drawn in, and then dare to shove off and test new experiences.
And let us be pushed out into the world to offer a daring and tender and liberating love
that others may just find compelling and engaging.
Love like that is still alluring and catching. Thanks be to God.

Notes

1 Chorus of "We Are the Church" Hope Publishing Company, 1972

2 Loren B. Mead, Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier, The Once and Future Church Series, (Alban Institute, Bethesda, MD: 1991), page 43. See also Donald E. Miller, Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millenium, (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA: 1997).

3 David Ostendorf in D. Bartlett and B. Taylor, Feasting on the Word, (Year C, Vol. 1), (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY: 2009), pages 334, 336.