

Gone fishin'

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With Jesus, the method is not to catch people but to know people

Maybe I could fish with nets like Peter did. But I can't fish like my parents-in-law by sticking my hands into a cage full of live crickets and pulling one out only to pierce it on a hook.

Jesus said to the fishermen one day, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And Jesus says to us, "Come, let's fish for people."

But too often we don't follow him. Why? What don't we like about fishing? The bait: evangelism. Or witnessing.

A lot of us have stereotypes of evangelism that are either very positive or very negative. We think the only ones who can do it are the few who are outgoing, articulate, equipped and effective. Or we see it as what pushy, manipulative, out-of-touch people cram down others' throats.

The result is the "average" Christian sees evangelism an activity for someone who is extraordinary enough to do it really well or obnoxious enough to do it anyway. Either way, we know we aren't the extraordinary or obnoxious ones to do it.

Talk about evangelism too much and you can see most mainline Christians start to cringe.

Visions of going down the street where we live with Martin Luther leaflets in our hands; calling strangers on the phone and saying, "I see you just moved into the neighborhood, do you have a church home?"; or being forced to talk about Jesus with our agnostic co-worker give us the same feeling as reaching into a container of live bait.

And so too few of us hang up our Gone fishin' signs on the way out the door each day. It doesn't have to be that way.

Listen to Jesus

Peter hauled in that big load of fish because he simply listened and did what Jesus said, even though all of his skills and experience as a fisherman told him it was useless. Jesus said to Peter, "Put out into the deep water now and let down your nets for a catch."

Peter, the professional fisherman, said to Jesus, the carpenter: "We have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

"If you say so," Peter said. "I wouldn't trust any other amateur, but if you say so, I'll do it." These fishermen were going about their routine lives, doing what they knew how to do, expecting the minimum, but willing to trust God for something more.

The first rule of fishing for people is to do what Jesus tells you—even if it goes against your instincts, your gut feeling, your sense of what's right and wrong. As Lutheran Christians perched on the edge of a new century, we need this lesson.

If we fish in the same waters, using the same methods at the same time of day and getting puny results, might we be open to dropping our nets in other waters? Are we willing to row out deeper, stay out longer, strain the nets a little further? This is the risk of fishing with Jesus and for Jesus.

Luke's fishing story also is a lesson in the power of a few to do great things. Ordinary fishermen became extraordinary disciples. They began a worldwide church by telling other ordinary people the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Although ordinary, the disciples were also uniquely empowered by Jesus, of course. But Jesus taught us the parable of the mustard seed, that smallest of all the seeds which grows into the greatest of scrubs. In God's kingdom, Jesus said, tiny things have wondrous power. Even if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you're ready to tell someone else about Jesus.

What's also true about evangelism, spreading the good news, is that the method isn't to catch people but to know people, Jesus caught people up in the blessings of the kingdom by building

bridges to them, eating with them, engaging them in conversation, listening to their problems and taking their hands when nobody else would touch them.

Making Christ known isn't done through marketing strategies or spending lots of money on leaflets to pass around the neighborhood. The gospel is contagious through human contact. It doesn't have to be a strong contact.

We're often encouraged to invite our family members and friends to church, but that won't cause an epidemic of the gospel. Our family and friends tend to occupy the same little worlds as we do, so the circle doesn't grow as much. The catch isn't record-breaking. We need to find ways, without being extraordinary or obnoxious, to share Christ and our congregations with acquaintances and strangers.

Many congregations are good at welcoming people who visit, but that's like saying a fisherman is really good at catching a fish that jumps into the boat. We've often neglected to do serious witnessing that reaches people who are seeking but not finding, lost, but not being sought.

This good news we have been given is meant to be shared. It's not a secret, personal information or private business.

"Cast your nets into deep water," Jesus suggested. The fishermen did it only because he told them to. They had heard Jesus' teaching, and now they trusted his word, even his word that seemed to go against their professional experience.