

“Gone Fishin’!”

Rev. Eric. S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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[Matthew 4:12-23](#)

My good friend, Katie Treadway, is a Presbyterian pastor in Northern Ohio now, but she pastored a church in Florida for several years. While she was there, she was told a wonderful story by a member of her church. This woman in the church said that after her mother died she would go down to the lake to sit and meditate. This wouldn't last long, as someone would come up and interrupt her, as if sitting alone were not acceptable. She felt that was nice of the person to make sure that she was OK, but there *were* times that she did need her quiet and solitude. So, she decided to buy a fishing pole and go *pretend to fish*, since people tend to respect silence when you are fishing. And it worked! She got her peace and quiet. People left her alone when she was pretending to fish. One day, though, a game warden came up to her and asked to see her fishing license. The woman explained that she didn't have a license, but she wasn't really fishing. She pulled up her line and showed the weights only – no hook and no bait. She explained to the warden that she wanted solitude and this was the only way she could be left alone. The warden laughed. After that, every time he saw her fishing, he just waved and kept going.

*Gone fishin'*. This woman knew how tranquil and peaceful fishing can be. It reminds me of the movie “A River Runs Through It.” I haven't seen the movie in years, but I do remember the beautiful scenery and the peacefulness of the characters tying their flies and casting. Quiet, serene, relaxing fishing. The narrator, who is one of the characters later in life, describes it like this: “in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and

memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise. Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.” Sounds so wonderfully soothing, doesn’t it?

However, I’m not much into fishing. Despite the wonderful imagery that I just mentioned, fishing just hasn’t been one of the big things in my life. Now, I *do* like to play a few rounds of “Go Fish” with my children, but actually *going* fishing is not high on my list of enjoyable activities.

I imagine some of you do like to go fishing. I’m not sure if that’s because you just love to eat fish, or if you do it in part to experience the peaceful calm of the experience. “Gone fishin’” – it’s a familiar expression in our culture, so common that it has come to be a metaphor for going out to do what you’d like to be doing, rather than working. Someone I used to work with had a sign outside his office door which read “Born to fish – forced to work.” “I’d rather be fishing” adorns bumper stickers, license plate frames, and signs in offices. “A bad day of fishing is better than a good day of work” reads another popular sign. Fishing is, for many people, a relaxing leisure activity, an escape from the everyday.

And so we might be tempted to think about fishing as described in the New Testament in the same way. We might think that when Jesus saw Peter and Andrew fishing, that the brothers were out for an enjoyable day on the lake. We might think that their bumper stickers read “I’d rather be fishing,” but that’s not the case. For them – and for so many like them – fishing was not an escape from work, it *was* work. Matthew says Jesus saw Peter and Andrew “casting a net into the sea *for they were fishermen.*” Fishing was not a hobby for them, it was their profession. More than that, it was their identity – “they *were* fishermen.” And the same was true for the other brothers Jesus called that day, James and John. They were fishing to make a living. And in those days, it wasn’t much of a living. Fishing was a major industry in Galilee, but these two pairs of brothers were very small players in the business. Fishing was highly regulated and highly taxed.

The ruling elites sold fishing rights to brokers who then contracted with fishers. The system set up kept them poor and dependent on the elites and brokers. What they caught made the richest in the society even richer, and barely benefited the fishermen themselves, who generally *weren't* standing on the shores casting a rod. The fishermen were out in boats casting large nets into the sea and then pulling these incredibly heavy nets back out of the sea.

So perhaps it is not a surprise that Peter and Andrew and James and John followed Jesus, even “immediately” as Matthew tells us. Maybe they weren’t too sad to leave that backbreaking work behind. It wasn’t a relaxing hobby; it was strenuous labor with few rewards. Maybe anything seemed preferable to what they were doing. Instead of “I’d rather be fishing,” maybe their bumper stickers said “I’d rather be doing *anything* else.” Maybe that’s all it was; a change of scenery.

Maybe, but I don’t think so. Jesus, the Messiah they had been waiting for, was asking them to be His disciples. These brothers saw Jesus for who He was. They saw the one who was not going to accumulate power and wealth for his own benefit, but was going to use power to *empower* others. They knew that they would be trading one hard job for another, but this was a job like the saying goes, “the toughest job you’ll ever love.” They didn’t leave everything to follow Jesus because Jesus promised to *give* them something; they followed because Jesus *called* them to a new life – to fish for people. Often people come to Jesus for the wrong reason. They come because someone has scared them about their eternal life. They come only because Jesus can give them forgiveness and grace. Too many church signs have messages like “Turn or burn,” making Christianity only about avoiding hell. And, don’t get me wrong – God *does* forgive us and grant us grace and salvation through Jesus, but we aren’t to follow only because of what we might get out of it. We are to follow because Jesus has *called us*. He has called us to fish for people. We are to cast a *different kind* of net than the fishermen did. We are to cast a net that frees and empowers, one

that draws people into *relationship* with one another and with God. We are to respond to the cries of the world and work with Jesus to seek out the lost. It's not easy work, but it's the most fulfilling work we can ever do because it's the work that we were *created* to do.

So how do we go about fishing for people, as Jesus has called us? Pastor Rick Warren, author of the bestsellers, *The Purpose-Driven Life* and *The Purpose-Driven Church*, gave five guidelines about how to fish for people.

First, "Know what you're fishing for." Those who fish know that there are different equipment, locations, bait, and strategies for catching different kinds of fish. There's no "one size fits all" approach to fishing and the same is true for fishing for people. People are diverse, and diverse approaches are needed. Second, "go where the fish are biting." If the fish aren't biting, move on to a new fishing spot. People are more responsive to the Word of God in certain seasons of their lives than in others. Don't focus your efforts on people who aren't ready to listen. Warren says "There are far more people in the world ready to receive Christ than there are believers ready to witness to them." Third, "learn to think like a fish." Good fishermen know the habits, preferences, and feeding patterns of fish. Jesus knew how people thought. He tore down the barriers that people had put up. Those of us who have been in the church our whole lives might forget the way that non-Christians think. Warren says "You must intentionally change mental gears when seeking to relate to non-Christians." We must be careful not to use Christian jargon with those who will just be turned off by it. We must seek to relate the Gospel to them where they are. Fourth, "catch fish on their terms." The Gospel of Christ is always communicated within some culture. We do not carry out our services in Latin as the church did for so long. We do not have the men sit on one side and the women on another in this day. The church must hold on to its core value while adapting to the times, bringing in different methods and styles. The methods of reaching people that were effective in the past are not as effective for many people and from time

to time, we must adapt to new realities. Finally, Warren says “use more than one hook.” The same techniques aren’t going to work with every person. If we want to have more college students here, we’ll have to use one method of reaching them. If we are seeking people in the community, we’ll use another method. Warren says that using multiple methods says “we will do whatever it takes to reach more people for Christ. The goal is...to make it as easy as possible for the unchurched to hear about Christ.” We should never put up barriers for people who need to hear God’s word.

I found another way of saying what Rick Warren was saying – in a children’s sermon. Children’s sermons, like children’s movies, often have much that is directed at the adults. The author of this particular children’s sermon said “*First*, we need to be properly equipped. We need to know what the Bible teaches and learn how to share it with others. *Next*, we need to remember that we can't just sit around reading the Bible and talking about fishing for people and expect to bring them to Jesus. We have to go out where the people are and tell them about Jesus. *Finally*, we must learn patience. Everybody we tell about Jesus isn't going to believe. Some people just won't be interested, but we can't give up. We just have to keep telling people about Jesus and let Jesus take care of the rest.”<sup>1</sup>

The bottom line is that Jesus called not just those four fishermen, but *all of us* to fish for people. The Great Commission tells us to “go...and make disciples of all nations.” I think the word that we most often miss there is “go.” Jesus didn’t tell us to sit in our comfortable pews and hope that people would show up. He told us to *go*. He told us to fish. You can’t catch many fish sitting on your couch and we can’t catch many people sitting in our pews. So, what are we waiting for? It’s time we hung a sign on the door – *Gone fishin’*. Amen

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sermons4kids.com/fishing4people.htm>