

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Think about commercial fishing for a moment. In many ways, it hasn't changed in centuries—even millennia. Commercial fishermen go out to sea, toss large nets into the water, drag them behind their boats, and then pull the filled nets onto their boats. Sometimes, they catch things they didn't intend to catch—turtles, tires, trash, and yes, even an occasional human body or body part. But they cast a wide net, seeking to catch as many good fish as they can. While it's OK for a sport fisherman to toss a line or two off the back of her boat as she hopes to catch that prize marlin or tuna, no commercial fisherman would even think of doing that to earn his living.

The first disciples called by Jesus were fishermen. And, contrary to what we often think, they were not poor subsistence fishermen, but rather successful ones. In later parts of the gospels, we hear accounts of one or more of them going to their homes—like Andrew and Peter—or have hired hands of their own—like James and John. These men were pretty successful at their chosen vocations, and weren't likely to be seeking out some way to get out of their lot in life. So, when Jesus came to them, he wasn't coming to the poorest in the community, but to some of the men who were part of the Chamber of Commerce!

When Jesus came to these first four disciples, he didn't ask them, "Are you saved? Are you a Lutheran?" or any other silly question like that. Nor did Jesus ask them if they *wanted* to come along with him. He simply and directly said, "Follow me," or, more literally, he told them to follow behind him. Jesus didn't give the four a chance to protest or stammer or make any excuses. He just said, "Follow me," and they did.

Sure, this *is* Jesus the Christ, after all. There *was* something special about him, but that's something that *we* know with the benefit of hindsight. To Peter and Andrew, James and John, and the rest of the people at the start of the ministry of Jesus, he was just a new rabbi in the community, proclaiming a different message than the people were used to hearing. But no one had any clue that Jesus was the Son of God, let alone did they have

any sort of theology about Christian evangelism. Jesus, and later the disciples, simply told their stories and invited people to follow—to come along after them. It was a pretty simple model.

And, that model was pretty effective, too. Today, there are about two billion—billion with a “b”—Christians in the world, out of a total world population of more than six billion. In the United States, some 240 million of the 300 million residents claim to be Christian, but at the same time, only 80 million of those folks are in church any given week. So, that means there are about four billion folks in the world who are not Christians, and in the US alone, some 60 million who are not Christian, and another 160 million who are claim to be Christian, but are not active in a Christian community.

For a long time, we at Abiding Presence, and I’ll be bold enough to say we in the so-called mainline churches, have been taking baby steps at the efforts to evangelize. Oh, we say the words folks expect us to say—live the Great Commission, teach the Great Commandments, love God and love God’s people—but we have done a lousy job at actually doing these things. Let me be brutally honest with you. Were it against the law to be a Christian, very few of us who claim to be Christians would be convicted because of a *lack of evidence* against us.

Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John—fishermen all—to become fishers of men and women. They knew a lot about fishing—casting large nets, bringing everything on board, sorting out and going to market. Jesus promised to teach them how to use their skills in different ways, but for an even greater reward for their labors. We, as successors to the call of Jesus to these first disciples, are called to be fishers of men and women, too.

But, we have to stop fishing like recreational fishermen, tossing a line in the water and tossing back a six pack, or like sport fishermen, going only for the “big one” that will make the year for us. We need to be like the commercial fishermen, casting a large net into the waters and dragging it on board, overflowing and nearly busting at the seams. Everything in the net won’t stay. Some of the catch won’t be fish at all. Other fish in the net will

not be ready to be caught. There might even be a terrapin<sup>1</sup> or two caught in the net. But, as good commercial fishermen and women, that's OK. We know that the bulk of the catch will be "keepers." But, if we only try to catch them one at a time, we'll catch more crabs, turtles, and tires on our lines than fish.

For this congregation to grow—for us to fulfill our calling as the people of God, gathered here in Beltsville to serve God and serve God's people by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, living out the Great Commission, and making disciples of others—we have to start casting a wider net. Today, one of the "nets" that we need to toss comes through the same tools as commercial business—advertising, direct mail, marketing, and promotions. We don't have the time to reach out to folks 20 or 50 at a time by hanging a door hanger or sending a personal note, or knocking on a door. These things are important, but they are like commercial fishermen using a bamboo pole and line to catch a day's worth of fish.

In order to cast our net into the waters, we need to cast a net that will reach 20,000 households in our community, and like the commercial fisherman, we need to cast that net into the water not once or twice, but regularly. We need to use all kinds of nets in order to catch the various kinds of fish out there. Post cards are a good start. Phone calls serve as a good supplement to help identify folks who are looking for us, but haven't found us yet. Personal visits, hand-written notes, and even visits to say "Follow me" help land the nets onto the boat.

I don't have the ability, or the time, to send out 20,000 postcards or make 8,000 phone calls per day. But, I know where there are "nets" that we can purchase that can do this. We don't have enough fishermen and women to do this ourselves right now, and I can't write a check on my own to buy the nets myself or I would do that.

God has called you by name and made you His child. Jesus has called out to you to follow him—get right behind him—and he will *make* you fish for people. The Holy Spirit is in our midst, encouraging and strengthening each of us in this holy calling.

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<sup>1</sup> A local joke—the University of Maryland mascot is the terrapin turtle.

Jesus didn't die on the cross so that you, and you alone, would be saved. No, God sent His Son into the world so that the *world* might be saved, and you have been called, just as I have been called and the disciples were called and generations to come will be called, to follow Jesus as he makes you, and I, fish for people. Forget the rod and reel. We need some new nets.