

## Fishers of People

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany, January 21, 2024

There's an old saying – some of you may have heard it – that you may reap what you sow, but you don't always catch what you fish for. Anyone who's ever hooked an old boot or shoe in the river knows this, and anyone who keeps catching river trout when they were really after river bass. (I don't even know if those two live in the same waters, and am a little bit ashamed of that.) No matter how good your range finder is, or how well you know the shoals and banks and shallows, you're never really sure what your line will bring up, or your nets haul in, until you reel them in. I read one time of an Englishman who cast his nets in the North Sea some decades ago, and brought up in them evidence of a long-forgotten civilization that used to live there, when that part of the sea was dry land, the Norfolk and Suffolk of its day. Imagine having that on your conscience. The evidence was in the form of a bog-preserved wooden statue of a god with a baleful gaze – a god that no doubt was at peace in its long sleep, and took not kindly to being awakened by hungry net and shifting tide. Who buries a god typically has good reason to do so; who unburies one almost never does. Yet are we not told that what is hidden will be disclosed, and what is concealed brought into the light? Yea, but let that be in God's time, not hours. Let the bones of those sacrificed and drowned in bogs, or the sigils and statues of darkling gods set down with them, rest where they lie.

Yet to fish is not always to catch. Every now and then, even in the gospels, a net cast in good faith comes up empty. Jesus sometimes uses an empty net as a teaching tool, or a faith formation tool – 'fish where I tell you to fish, and when, lads' – but not always. One wonders if that might've been what happened one too many times for Andrew, Simon, and the sons of Zebedee in today's gospel. I mean, they

“immediately” left their nets – ‘straightway’, in the King James – and followed Jesus. They did so without so much as a “Later, Gator” or a “Where are we going?” I bet Zebedee cursed them for days.

“Fishers of people,” or in the old style, “fishers of men.” That’s what he told them he’d make them if they followed him. One wonders if they had any idea what that meant, or if it was just young men seeking charisma who finally found what they seek. Maybe that, plus Jesus’s reputation, and a little bit of “anywhere but here.” Whatever the reason was, they followed, and never looked back.

It is interesting that the message they followed was, “I will make you fishers of people,” and not “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” That last probably came up soon enough, when it was given to them as the hook-and-eye they were to fish by, if nothing else. So, too, did “those who sat in darkness have seen a great light,” which if you’re a fish is not exactly great news. But if you’re one of those people in need of being fished, it is. It reminds us that repentance and enlightenment are two sides of the same coin, two peas in the same pod, two leaves from the same songbook: I Must Change. To repent, to turn around and do something differently and for good, is one such change. To seek to learn, to know, to be enlightened is another. Each says, “I do not want simply to be what I was. I want to be more than that.” It many even mean, “I want to be someone new.”

Yet if you rubbed a magic lamp and asked the genie that popped out to make you someone new, the genie would probably say, if *sotto voce*, “Be careful what you wish for.”

I wonder sometimes how many people really change, or how much. Oh, we age, go grey, and sometimes widen, but do many of us become other than who we once were? More often, I think, we come to recognize and become who we are, working out our identity as we learn what makes us thrive, what repels us, what we can do,

what we want to do, and what we have to do. We learn what we have to, and ideally all we can, along the way. We come to understand the world as it is, and feel more keenly the pull of how we wish it were. We become more fully who we are as we mature, and if we are fortunate, we may even become self-aware.

It is not easy to become self-aware, and it is even harder when one has self-awareness thrust upon one. A line I often quote from T.S. Eliot regarding one of the gifts reserved for age speaks to this as well as anything. The ‘gift’ is: “Shame at motives once revealed, and things ill-done and done to others’ harm, which once you took for exercise of virtue.”<sup>1</sup> Many of us, and me not least, can find ourselves faced with such shame, and it is not easy to work through it. What psychologists call primitive, or immature, defense mechanisms – denial, distortion, projection, and all the rest – don’t help for long. Clear-eyed honesty and a reach for forthright hope to change are essential. For me, these tend to come in a five-in-the-morning look in the pale dawn light on God un-flyblown truths. Some of these show up in the in the mirror and the lines wrought upon it; others show in the tears, rage, or disappointment in others’ faces. Only thus may we grow, in such matters – but the effort and will to do so is still a casting of nets, and sometimes even this net comes up empty. What’s said cannot be unsaid, what’s done cannot be undone, not every relationship that is broken can be mended. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men, after all, couldn’t put Humpty together again.

That’s a metaphor for someone, but I can’t remember who. And, no, I don’t mean that 18<sup>th</sup> century drink made of ale boiled with brandy, which is how English first met Humtie Dumtie (OED). Yet that, too, could serve to illustrate what Humpty Dumpty often does: the 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics as well as (see Joyce) the Fall of Man. Speaking of things best left to lie fallow and forgot; what’s done is done.

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, from “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets* 1943.

Yet we are not eggs, though we begin as them, or in them, whatever it is accurate to say. “Where there’s life, there’s hope” is a *cliché* not simply because it sounds good in hospice or the ICU. (It really doesn’t suit those settings, for all manner of medical and pastoral reasons, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics being what it is, but leave that aside for the moment.) “Hope is the thing with feathers,” in Emily Dickinson’s famous metaphor, from her poem of that title. It gets us through, and asks nothing of us as it does so. She writes:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -  
And sore must be the storm -  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -  
And on the strangest Sea -  
Yet - never - in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb - of me.<sup>2</sup>

Hope, as this songbird of the soul, never stops singing of free will. Storms strong enough to silence it are strong, indeed. I have known them. Yet even in that case, hope asks nothing of the person within whom and for whom it sings. It simply marks an occasion of grace, the gift of a God we know as loving, whose love we might be able ignore but can never avoid.

Ask Jonah, if you’d like to know more about what that means. He ran from God’s love, which he experienced as God’s judgment, wrath, and disappointment right up

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>.

until the moment he didn't. Once he stopped running, he knew God's love for true. Having no other choice, Jonah then spoke Love's words aloud in Nineveh, the Sin-City capital of the hideous Assyrian Empire, just as God wanted him to. It worked, though Jonah was none too happy about it. But it worked; God did what all the king's men and horses could not do: put a sinful and broken people back together again. How? By the simple trick of getting them to do it for themselves, once Jonah'd told them the error of their ways and what consequences would follow should they refuse to change.

Jonah then has occasion to learn the lesson we find in our reading from Dostoevsky this morning. The speaker is the monk Zossima, an avatar of Orthodoxy at its best, who advises the (and his) brothers: "Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it," which we heard, and also, "Love man also in his sin," which we did not hear. When one loves, one can "perceive the divine mystery in things," and then come to understand them. Understanding them, one can love them as God does, "with an all-embracing love," even when it is difficult to do so and the things themselves cannot give any of that love back.

As I've noted before, Jonah learns this lesson the hard way at least three times, which may be why Jesus at one point tells people that no sign will be given their generation but that of Jonah. God worked really hard on this one, Jesus might well have added. If you can't figure it out from his story, good luck to you. Jonah, like most of us, had to learn the hard way that repentance doesn't end until he loves everything the way God does – overwhelmingly and all-embracingly, not holding oneself back and not holding them back. That includes himself, his limitations, and his potential, and the work God has given him to do.

'Follow me', Jesus says, 'and I will make you fishers of men' (of people, we say). What did such work mean? Those who followed Jesus learned that their work, their

calling – fishing for people – did not mean catching them in order to exploit or consume them, but to save them. How? First, by showing them how and why to get over what wrongs they did, and whatever wrong ways they thought. But it doesn't stop there. It means helping people take the next step, as the monk Zossima says and the prophet Jonah shows, empowering and inspiring people to love as God loves. Such love we experience when we rejoice in all that lives, and rage at what seeks to destroy it. We find it when we remember how to hope, and feel its pull when we despair at not being able to. We feel it when we do as Jesus so often commanded: “Fear not.” We know it when we live into his saying, “Peace be with you.”

“Brothers,” Zossima says a bit later on, “Love is a teacher, but one must know how to acquire it, for it is difficult to acquire, it is dearly bought, by long work over a long time.” Love is, that is, a discipline, a practice, and if one is disciplined and practiced enough in it, a habit, a way of being in the world. Even Jesus had to learn how to love, and to use what else of the divine was within him, before he could teach others how to do so. As the good monk says “One ought to love not for a chance moment but for all time. Anyone, even a wicked [person], can love by chance.”<sup>3</sup> Mastering the discipline of divine love – fishing for people – requires much the same training, skill, and continued effort as does, say, fishing for actual fish. That may be why Jesus called people who knew how to do a necessary thing well, and feed themselves by means of it, to be his fishers of people. Hope may get us through, and ask nothing of us as it does so. Love, however, it what hope gets us through for – and love asks of us nothing short of everything. *Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> Online source for additional quotes from *The Brothers Karamazov*:  
<https://fited.wordpress.com/2020/07/27/love-all-of-gods-creation/>