



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Peter Thompson, *Associate Rector for Formation & Liturgy*

Go Fish

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 24, 2021

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Based on Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

*O God, before whose face
we are not made righteous
even by being right:
free us from the need
to justify ourselves
by our own anxious striving,
that we may be abandoned
to faith in you alone,
through Jesus Christ. Amen.¹*

Suppose, for a moment, that you're gathered with your family members or other quarantine buddies to play a favorite card game, and you have been designated to be the dealer. After shuffling well, you allocate to each player an equal number of cards from the deck and place the remainder of cards in the space between you and the others. The dealer goes first, so you assess your own hand and select a card from among the set before asking one of the others if they have a card of the same number. Scanning their hand, your fellow player sees none of that particular card in their collection. They stare back at you and say, "Go fish."

That's your cue. At their command, you plunge your hand into the ocean of cards, aware as ever that there are plenty of fish in the sea, but conscious, too, that you have no idea what you are going to get. If you're lucky, you might acquire the card you are seeking, and, with it, the opportunity to take another turn and a clear early advantage in the game. Or you might obtain a card that matches another one already in your collection—a help, for sure, even if it isn't exactly the outcome for which you hope. Or you might receive a different card altogether, one that doesn't match a card you already have but opens up new possibilities for the rest of your game. The moment after your competitor tells you to "Go fish" is one laden with promise and uncertainty. You yourself must make the next move, but you cannot predict with any confidence where that move will take you. Your leap into the sea of playing cards, however trivial, is a leap into the unknown.

What's true for the figurative fisherfolk who play card games is true for literal fisherfolk as well. To be sure, good fishing requires skill, technique, equipment, and knowledge. If fishers do everything right, they can have a reasonable expectation that they will enjoy some success in the water. But those who fish are fundamentally at the mercy of the sea. They search through a vast body of water for living beings that rarely stay still for long. They can never know with confidence where the fish they seek will be or how those fish will respond to their entreaties. One day, fishing nets may be teeming with all kinds of

¹ Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*.

creatures; the next, they may come up completely empty. To fish is to cast your line into the water knowing that there may be nothing on the other end or that whatever is there might eventually escape your grasp. To fish is to acknowledge that the world in which we find ourselves is beyond our full understanding; to fish is to admit that we ultimately lack control.

Ernest Hemingway's classic novel *The Old Man and the Sea* traces the journey of a perpetually unlucky fisherman as he endeavors to make a big catch towards the end of his life and career. After catching absolutely nothing for eighty-four straight days, the man goes out into the sea again on the eighty-fifth day, and a very large fish finally takes his bait. The fish, however, is so large that the man cannot reel it in, and the man lets the fish drag him through the sea for forty-eight more long hours. The man physically depletes himself in a strenuous effort to capture the giant animal once and for all. And he comes close, killing the fish with a harpoon. But before the man is able to bring the fish to shore, it is eaten by sharks. The victory for which the old man has toiled so hard eludes him. He is forced to reckon with the fact that he is ultimately subject to powers he does not have the capacity to overcome, no matter how hard he tries. For the old man, fishing is a humbling experience; it reminds him of how big the universe is and how little of it he can control.

Follow me and I will make you fish for people: Jesus' famous charge and others like it have been used over the centuries to justify all kinds of aggressive evangelism. In its most innocent forms, practitioners stop passersby on street corners and in subways and knock on the doors of apartments and houses. In its more problematic manifestations, armed militias have forcibly converted and even killed. Jesus gave us a charge, the reasoning goes, to bring as many people as possible into the fold; therefore, we must use whatever means necessary. If you're not doing all you can to spread the Good News, the argument maintains, you're neglecting your duty.

But to my ears, the call Jesus extends is a far gentler and more generous one. Remember: fishing is difficult and unpredictable work; it reminds us of how little we can actually know and control. In selecting fishing as a metaphor for evangelism, Jesus is not only speaking to the earliest disciples in a language they are able to recognize but also advising them to be modest—to embrace their own uncertainties and limitations. "Fishing for people" hardly sounds like a strategy for conquest and domination; it comes across more like an invitation to explore the vast and wild seas of our world. Jesus is asking the disciples (and us) to search and to probe, to investigate and to discover. He is encouraging his followers to experiment: to cast out a line and see who bites, to throw down a net and see who swims in. In Hemingway's work, the old man is actually affected and inspired by the fish at the end of his line; it seems to me that, in sharing our faith, we should likewise be changed by others as much as we seek to change them.

When we choose to be less modest, when we fail to acknowledge our own uncertainties and limitations, when we stop fishing for people and start trying to conquer them instead, we get the Crusades, we get slavery and the erasure of Native peoples, we get anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and we get days like January 6, 2021. Like it or not, evangelical Christianity was at the center of the Capitol insurrection that occurred two and half weeks ago. Rioters prayed on their way to the Capitol, on their way in, and in the Senate chamber; they held up signs that said "Jesus Saves" and "Proud American Christian"; they bragged in social media posts about standing up for their faith.² There are plenty of people and forces to blame for what happened in Washington earlier this month, but it is hard to deny that the invasion of the Capitol was a natural consequence of an evangelical Christian movement that, for decades, has insisted on getting its own way, whatever the cost.

² <https://www.newyorker.com/news/video-dept/a-reporters-footage-from-inside-the-capitol-siege>;
<https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/nation/christian-nationalism-clearly-evident-in-capitol-riot>

Contrary to popular belief, stubbornness is not a Christian virtue. Throughout our Scriptures, we are continually prodded to change—to leave behind our old ways of life and be transformed. “Repent!” Jesus instructs us. Turn away from the old and turn towards the new! Sadly, I have difficulty believing that most Americans are capable of such transformation at the moment, entrenched as we are in our own worldviews, certain as we are that we alone are right. In today’s Hebrew Bible reading, the Ninevites were willing to listen to Jonah’s message and change their behavior in response. Even more astoundingly, God changed God’s own mind, reversing course from previously announced plans. I wish we could be like the Ninevites and carefully consider what others say to us, however alien their perspectives might at first appear; I wish we could be like God and change our minds when a situation warrants. But I fear that we are more like Jonah, who, in the fourth chapter of the book named after him, lashes out at God for noticing the Ninevites’ change and saving them from destruction. I worry that we have become so consumed by our battles with one another on cable television and on social media that we desire the fall of our opponents more than we yearn for positive change. I find myself wondering how we can become a more gentle and less vindictive people, how we can foster flexibility and generosity in ourselves and in society as a whole.

I do not intend to suggest that we should not hold wrongdoers accountable, nor do I mean to imply that we should not pursue justice of every kind or that we should let lies and misinformation continue to go unchecked. Rather, my hope is that, as we pursue justice and ensure accountability, we might choose to fish for others more often than we decide to obliterate them—that, as we seek truth, we might endeavor to invite others in more often than we work to push them out. Conflict typically occurs when one group or individual attempts to seize full control and play God. When we admit our own ignorance, when we recognize our own limits, when we acknowledge the possibility that even we might be wrong, we create an opening for peace and level-headedness to flourish. When we stubbornly demand our own way, the consequences be damned, we light the spark of extremism and put our communal safety and wellbeing at risk.

“From the place where we are right,” Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai warns,
“Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.”³

Amen.

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For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

³ <http://www.princeton57.org/dynamic.asp?id=Amichai>. See also: <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-place-where-we-are-right/>.