

## **"I'm Connected - EVANGELISM – Connected to the Lost"**

**Pastor Jonathan Swenson, St. Mark Lutheran Church, 16 November 2008**

Well for the past several weeks now, we've been working our way through our church's six core values. And each week we've chosen a symbol of some sort to represent the purpose and meaning of the Core Value we are preaching on that day. This morning we're focusing on the core value of **Evangelism**, and our symbol is a simple one. It comes from the teaching of Jesus himself, 2,000 years ago, when He taught on this topic, and when he called the original disciples into a *lifestyle* of Evangelism.

So to get started, if you brought your Bibles with you, open up to Luke, chapter 5. We are going to dive right into scripture this morning. This is the famous passage where Jesus calls the disciples to be FISHERS of MEN. (*Or today, I suppose we would call them "Fishers of PEOPLE!"*)

We start with verses one and two... **"One day, as Jesus was preaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, great crowds pressed in on him to hear the word of God. He noticed two empty boats at the water's edge, for the fisherman had left them and were washing their nets."** Now stop right there for a second, and notice two things right off the bat: The boats are empty, and... the fisherman are washing their nets. And this is significant because it tells us that even though these men *had an occupation*, namely, FISHING, even though they had this *calling* in life, they weren't going about it. The boats were sitting unused while the men were taking a break, just sort of hanging out and washing their nets.

*So, what does Jesus do?* Well, in verses 3 he steps into one of these boats, has Simon Peter push him out a little ways, he does some teaching to the crowd, and then he turns back to the men in the boat with him, and to Peter in particular, and says in verse four, **"Now go back out where the water is deeper, and let down your nets to catch some fish."** Modern day translation? *"Yo, Peter! Yeah, you, Peter! You and your buddy there. Quit wasting time washing your nets! They're just going to get wet again! You're fisherman, right? So, get back out in the water and START FISHING!"*

And what's the message for us? Well, remember that this *whole* story is about Evangelism – not just the ending when Jesus calls Peter and the others to become Fishers of Men... but the *WHOLE* story is a teaching on evangelism. And so, when Jesus tells the disciples to get out there and start fishing, he's saying the same thing to us. He's saying, *"Look, it's great that you come here on Sunday morning, and you hear my teaching and take it all in. But now, it's time to get back out there. Get back out there, folks, and get back to your fishing!"*... And that might lead each one of us to ask ourselves, *"How often does God see me, in my spiritual life, just sitting here sort of washing my nets – coming to church to be fed... maybe even participating in a small group. But never heading out into the deeper water to cast my net, and to do the thing we Christians are supposed to be all about – namely, FISHING!"*

How often does God see us actively building relationships with our friends and colleagues who don't have a saving relationship with Jesus, and looking for

opportunities to invite them to church or to share our faith story with them? *You see the point?* And it's an important question to ask because it *gets to the very heart of our mission*, and it strikes at the very core of who we are as followers of Christ.

Whenever I think of this passage, I think of Jana and my seminary internship pastor, Bill Bartlett. Bill had a very poignant way of making this point of getting us all to ask this question. And to understand the spirit of how he went about this, you first have to understand Pastor Bill. Pastor Bill is the most outgoing, Jesus-loving, Jesus-sharing person I know. He's also one of the most energetic and athletic pastors I've ever known. His passion is wrestling and he has the wrestler's puffed-up cauliflower ear from his high school and college wrestling days to prove it. Bill was (and is) an excellent wrestler, and he once told me that when he was a member of the St. Olaf wrestling team, back in the 70's, he set a record at Luther College for the fastest pin of an opponent.

Well, during our year of internship, Jana and I watched Bill pour that same passion and energy into his efforts at sharing Jesus with everyone he met. The congregation where we served under his leadership was the fastest growing Lutheran church in Southern California at that time, largely because Bill set the tone and example for his congregation. It didn't matter who Bill met -- store owners, his kid's teachers or their soccer coaches -- *so many* of them ended up joining the church where Bill served. Now, granted, Bill is a winsome guy, and people couldn't help but be attracted to him as a leader, but Bill didn't want to have anything to do with that kind of adoration. "Forget Bill," he clearly only wanted one thing... for people to know **Jesus** and to know the life-saving message of the **Gospel**.

Bill was also the chairman of the evangelism task force for the entire Southern California Synod (or group) of Lutheran churches, and he was relentless in encouraging other pastors and churches to capture the same zeal for Evangelism that he had. But truth be told, not all the other pastors in our Synod appreciated Bill's approach... and here's why I think that was: The church that Pastor Bill was leading **did** what the other pastors and their churches often only **talked** about doing.

And so, when Bill would teach on this topic at large conferences and pastors' gatherings, he would often use a poignant illustration... one that revealed a truth, but a sobering one for many church leaders. He called it the **Parable of the Fishers...** and *it went like this:*

"Now it came to pass that a group existed who called themselves fishers. And lo, there were many fish in the waters all around. In fact, the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes filled with fish. And the fish were hungry.

Week after week, month after month, and year after year, those who called themselves "fishers" met in meetings and talked about their call to go fishing. Continually they searched for new and better methods of fishing and for new and better definitions of fishing. They sponsored costly nationwide conferences to discuss fishing and hear about all the ways of fishing, such as the new fishing equipment, fish calls, and

whether any new bait had been discovered. These fishers built large and beautiful buildings called "fishing headquarters" and the plea was that everyone should be a fisher and every fisher should fish.

One thing they didn't do however – **they didn't fish**. Now it is true that many of those who believed in fishing sacrificed and put up with all kinds of difficulties. Some lived near the water and bore the smell of dead fish every day. They received the ridicule of some who made fun of their fishing clubs. They anguished over those who were not committed enough to attend the weekly meetings to talk about fishing. **But one thing they did not do -- they never fished.**

Imagine, then, how hurt some were when one day a person suggested that those who don't catch fish were really not fishers, no matter how much they claimed to be. Yet, it did sound correct. Is a person a fisher, if year after year, they never catch a fish? And is an organization really a center for fishing, if year after year, their nets remain empty?"

And with that, Bill would launch into his teachings on the importance of keeping EVANGELISM at the center of every church's vision. And, well, you can imagine the response of the other pastors at times. Because, here was the hard truth... other churches in the area were NOT catching many fish... and very few of them were growing. And, truth be told, I would guess, a lot of us pastors hearing Bill tell that story had to confess silently to ourselves, that we hadn't exactly been out there casting many nets lately. We were telling others to go fish, and agreeing that we *should* all fish, but we weren't necessarily getting out in the boat ourselves.

Now, why do I tell you that story? I tell you that story because I believe Pastor Bill's question is an absolutely critical one for us to ask. "**How's our fishing? How are we doing? Have we caught any fish lately?**" And when we count that number, we need to make sure that we aren't just counting fish that have jumped from one fisherman's net to ours! :o) In other words, we need to ask ourselves *not only* how many new members are coming in who have transferred from other churches, but even MORE important -- how many people are being introduced to Jesus for the very first time? How many adult baptisms are we seeing here at St. Mark's? And how many new believers are going through the Alpha class and joining a small group. And you know, as we see *that* number go up, we *KNOW* that the nets are being cast out wide, and that there is some *great* fishing going on here.

That's part of the reason why we are ramping up our efforts in this area of Evangelism here at St. Mark's. In the past year, Pastor Perry and the Executive Council have been working hard to bolster the amount of staff and staff *time* dedicated to this area. The staff and many volunteers have been spending some long hours in re-examining and sharpening our Evangelical Mission and Vision.

And next spring, after we as a congregation complete the Capital Campaign for our building expansion, we'll immediately launch right into a several-week sermon series on *Evangelism* that will remind us of the **REASON** we are expanding our facilities in the first place – namely – to do an increasingly-more-effective job of FISHING – at

bringing more and more people, young and old, into a saving faith and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

We're excited about that upcoming sermon series. I've been spending some time the last few weeks previewing the materials and I can tell you that it is going to be incredibly practical -- incredibly user-friendly for helping each one of us develop and put our "fishing skills" into practice. During that series, you'll learn some extremely simple skills and perspectives to help you share your faith in a very natural way... that is both inviting to the other person, and is very much based on who you naturally are and who God made you to be. I think you are really going to enjoy that series.

And it is critical that we grow these skills, because the truth of the matter is this: **The moment a church and it's individual members start just "washing our nets" -- the moment we stop reaching out in love to the world around us -- the moment we stop listening, and encouraging, and serving, and inviting, and casting our nets -- and yes, the moment we stop *speaking the name of Jesus* -- that is the moment we cease to be the church.**

Now that being said, it is important for you to know that we as pastors know that this is not always an easy thing to do on an individual basis. I remember talking to a guy from church just a while back about how difficult it can be to go about being an effective Christian in the world. He shared with me how tough it is in the business world to know how and when to go about talking about matters of faith -- and how to do so in a way that is socially acceptable and that won't get you fired from your job!

Another guy described to me the awkward feeling of having worked with a man for years before accidentally stumbling upon the fact that they were both Christians. "*Why does that happen?*" he asked. "*Why hadn't either one of us been brave enough to tell the person earlier on?*" And many of us can relate to his experience. We want so badly to say SOMETHING that will influence the other person to be open to Christ... but we struggle with knowing just what to say and how to say it when a moment for sharing our faith finally does presents itself.

And please understand -- we pastors are not immune from this. Just because we have a REVEREND in front of our name doesn't mean we don't go through the same fears and hesitations and frustrations when it comes to sharing our faith, or to inviting others to come check out our church. We know those fears and concerns as well as you do. And we know, first hand, how depressing it can be to work very hard at building an authentic and trusting friendship with someone outside the faith, with the hopes that they will join us here some day -- only to have that person consistently and sometimes aggressively resist and reject those invitations. I, right now, can tell you about a *number* of friends of mine whom I dearly love, but who I also know are far from Jesus. These are friends who I have *not* succeeded in encouraging to take a leap of faith in Christ.

I know, first hand, the pressures we can place on ourselves, to try to winsomely invite these friends to church, only to have that offer consistently rejected. But it is precisely because we recognize and know those experiences and pressures that we will be offering the Evangelism sermon series and classes next spring -- to help lower the

anxiety and the mystery surrounding the practice of evangelism, and to debunk the idea that this is only for super-Christians who have some superior level of faith, and to remind ourselves that ultimately, it is up to God, not to us, to win someone over to saving faith. We think you will find that series VERY helpful.

*But in the meantime*, let me encourage you (even as I remind myself) that we are **NOT** all called to be Billy Graham, converting thousands of people (or even *one* person) to Christ in one evening. Nor are we called to be street-corner evangelists, confronting strangers with “in your face” fire & brimstone, turn or burn techniques. **BUT** we **ARE ALL CALLED** to intentionally build authentic relationships with those we live and play and work with. And we **ARE CALLED** to consistently *love* people, and to **LISTEN** to them, and to sincerely seek to understand who they are as a person in order to recognize legitimate moments where we have an opportunity to speak the Gospel into their life situation.

In fact, statistics show that the greatest number of people who converted to Christianity as adults did *not* become Christians because they heard an evangelical preacher in the pulpit, or on TV or on the street... but rather, *because someone with whom they already had a significant relationship FIRST took the time to understand their struggles and their hopes and their sorrows in life, and who THEN pointed them to how Jesus could be a part of addressing those realities.*

And when it comes right down to it that is exactly what we are trying to do at St. Mark’s, right? We are striving and praying for St. Mark’s to be a place where **FAITH and LIFE are CONNECTED in real, and relevant and meaningful ways.** And for some people this is, or will be, the first time these two things... FAITH AND LIFE... have truly been connected.

And yet, you know, even with all that having been said, I know all too well how easy it is to identify with Simon Peter in this story from Luke that we have been looking at today. We can all probably recognize a little of ourselves in Peter when, after Jesus tells him to get back out there and start fishing again, Peter starts whining a little bit and says to Jesus in verse 5, **“Ah, man. Really? You want me to go back out there? But master, we worked all night and took in nothing!”** We can all probably recognize moments in ourselves when we just want to say to Jesus, *“Come on Lord, my friend is never going to come to church with me, and you know it... And you know, too, God... that I have been very faithful in all our other core values! I’m coming to worship consistently, and I’m giving financially, and I’ve been serving down in the Flood Zone... but come on Jesus, do you REALLY want me to TALK to people about you? You know I wouldn’t even know what to say! It is all so unnatural... where would I even begin?”*

But just when we are tempted to offer those excuses, we need to read the rest of what Peter says in verse 5 of this passage. When he gets done with his whining, he turns and looks at Jesus and says these words, **“but at your word, I will let down the nets.”** See, that’s the key phrase that Jesus is waiting to hear. **“BUT AT YOUR WORD... I WILL.”** That’s a defining moment in Peter’s life, and it is for us as well.

Peter makes a decision to follow Christ's command, even though he may not feel like it, even though he doesn't think anything is going to come about by his efforts... he makes a decision to FOLLOW CHRIST'S COMMAND. It's not an issue of how he feels about it – it's an issue of obedience. And so, *Peter does it... he goes back out to his fishing.* And look what happens next..

We read in verses six and seven that the catch of fish is so great that Peter has to call his partners in the other boats to come and help him out. And Peter is so overwhelmed at what this man, Jesus did, that he feels guilty for not having trusted and tried earlier, and out of guilt, he asks Jesus to leave him. But *instead of abandoning him, Jesus **calls** him.* Instead of beating him up for not casting the net further or deeper or more often... instead of beating him up, Jesus says in verse 11, **"Okay, now that you've seen what I can do with fish, why don't you go now, and fish for PEOPLE."**

**And friends, that is what Jesus is saying to us today as well. This is our Great Commission.** So, today, as you fill out your white commitment cards, we think about who the person or people might be with whom you are called to be building authentic relationships that point to Christ. As you fill that card out, realize that in doing so, you are picking up the net and committing to heading back out again... to start fishing. And realize this too, that even though you might be writing down a specific number on that card, realize that it really isn't so much about numbers, although setting goal for this area of your faith life is good... but the important thing is that you ARE fishing... and not just talking about it. That you are intentional in noticing and building into anyone whom God may prompt you to build a relationship with, in order to one day lead them to the one whom they were created to know from the start.

And one last thing, as you fill out these white cards and as you prepare for communion this morning, we want to also encourage you to begin working on the green sheets as well. Perhaps as you return to your seat after communion, you can spend that time this morning beginning to fill out the green form and sharpening your story of how God has been working in your life through the ministries of St. Mark's.

Some of those stories will be used to build our excitement and spiritual emphasis for the upcoming capital campaign... but even more important than that... as you fill out the form you will be sharpening your understanding of how God has been working in your life in such a way that you will be able to share that part of who you are with the right person, at the right time, whom God will bring into your life at just the right time, so that it's your story... YOUR story and no one else's...

YOUR story is the key to that person taking the next step in trusting in God and committing their life to getting to know him better... and eventually, to commit their life to following him as well.

So, we encourage you to fill out both of these forms today, or to take them home and finish them there, and bring them back with you next week. We believe God is going to do great things through the stories on those forms.

This much I know, my friends: The kingdom of God will not be built overnight, but the kingdom of God **IS** being built every day, through the faithful witness of Christian disciples answering the call to cast their nets, and to share their faith... one person, and one relationship at a time.

There is an old story that I know many of you have heard before, but it is worth repeating: An old man, walking the beach at dawn, noticed a young man ahead of him picking up starfish and tossing them back in the ocean. Catching up with the young man, he asked what he was doing. The young man's answer was that the starfish would die if left until the morning sun.

*"But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish,"* countered the old man. **"How can your effort make a difference? How can it possibly matter?!!"**

The young man looked at the starfish in his hand, then threw it to safety in the waves, and then he turned and looked into the eyes of the older man and said, **"It makes a difference to that one,"** he said. **"It makes a difference to each one."**

So, pick up your nets and head on out for some fishing, my friends. Take your nets and cast them far and wide. Your efforts may make an ETERNAL difference in someone's life.

Let's pray...