

Grace... Amen.

This sermon is about fishing, although not the kind with hooks and worms. Of that sort, I know very little. Few people are aware that fish can laugh. They can. They laugh every time they see me coming. They laugh for joy, because they know it's time to feast at my expense. So, I have little to say about fishing for fish, but fishing for people- that I can give you some tips on, not because I'm a pastor, but because I have been caught; caught in a net of love and grace cast by Jesus Christ. It's a good net to be caught in, I hope you know that. It's a good thing to know that no matter how you wiggle and squirm, no matter how you turn, you're still surrounded by a love that just won't let you go. That's the kind of net Jesus Christ casts; he pulls us into a relationship with him that no one word can describe, but the Bible calls joy and peace and life and hope, and it's all those things and more, all rolled together. That's the net I hope you're caught in with me. That's the same net Simon Peter got caught in one day, when Jesus first started fishing, and I'm convinced that what happened to Simon Peter has a lot to do with what happens when Jesus starts fishing in the ponds of our lives.

It all started one day when Jesus was teaching alongside the lake of Genessaret, otherwise known as the Sea of Galilee. There was quite the crowd gathered around, and as Jesus was not blessed with the benefit of a microphone and p.a. system, the people were pressing in on him. They wanted to hear what he had to say, but Jesus wanted a little breathing room, and in the absence of a 200 pound pulpit, he settled for a boat, Simon Peter's boat, which sat empty after a long night with nets full of nothing. He had Simon put the boat out a few feet from shore, and there he taught the crowds. This seems simple enough, but something else is happening here. Jesus is going to make Simon Peter his disciple, we know that- so how does he do it? He gets in the boat with Simon Peter. This is how Jesus begins to catch his followers; he meets them where they are, wherever life has taken them. Now Simon was in a boat, but more to the point, he was in trouble. He didn't fish for recreation. He fished to live, it was his way of life. And his way of life had failed him. Empty nets after pulling an all nighter. He was exhausted, he had failed; doesn't that sound familiar? In so many different ways I have heard and I have said the same thing. We say we're stuck in a rut, that our lives seem pointless and hopeless, that we're just sick



and tired of it all. But that is exactly where Jesus meets us. Remember who else Jesus caught in his net of love? It wasn't just frustrated fishermen; it was tax collectors and prostitutes and the sick and the dying and the beggars, people who by their actions or by accident had failed; their nets were empty, their souls were empty, until they were filled with the love of Jesus Christ. So it is with us. Jesus comes to meet us exactly where we are, be that in the pit of despair, the valley of the shadow of death, a desert of hopelessness, an ocean of guilt or a gulf of shame, there Jesus meets us. You've probably seen that footprints in the sand story, where a fellow looks back on his life and sees only one set of tracks in the sand when things were toughest. "Lord," he says, "you promised you'd always walk beside me, but when I needed you most, it looks as if you were gone." "No," says the Lord, "those times you only see one set of footprints is when I was carrying you." Now that little story has been done to death and printed on everything but a box of Wheaties, but the point is no less true. The point is that when your way of life has failed you, when you are exhausted and empty, you're not alone- Jesus is there to catch you in his love again.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Jesus is just teaching from Simon's boat up to now, and Simon's no more aware that his life's about to change forever than a rock knows that it's hard. Jesus finishes teaching, and then he tells Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon objects, of course. He figures he's done everything humanly possible, and he knows the fishing business, so he knows there's no point in trying again. Besides, it sounds too easy, and nothing worthwhile comes easily. But maybe Simon Peter heard something when Jesus was teaching the crowd, just enough of something to get him to take the risk, to take a step of faith. And this is Jesus' second step in catching his followers; he gives them an invitation to try something new. When our own efforts fail us, when we look around and see that things have not gone the way we hoped, when no other path is open, Jesus offers us a different path, the path of faith. It's usually over our own objections, it usually doesn't make sense to do so, it may even seem foolish, but the path that Jesus offers is the one and only path that leads us out of the dangerous places we find ourselves, in that proverbial pit, in the valley of the shadow of death, in the desert; Jesus offers us the way out of our wildernesses, the way



called faith. "Because you say so," Peter said, "I will let down the nets." Because you say so, we pray, "we will try your way." And look what happened to Simon Peter. The nets were filled to the point of breaking, to the point of sinking both boats. This is not just a day's catch. This is not just Jesus' way of brightening Peter's day. There are so many fish, Jesus' word has done so much, that everything Peter ever thought he knew about fishing is forgotten. The fish aren't even important anymore. You notice that Simon Peter and company don't run off to the nearest market to sell all these fish. They drop everything and leave it, because their old way of life has been shattered. And what happens to us when we take the path of faith, when we answer Jesus' "follow me"? The very same thing. Our old way of life is shattered. Things that were once so danged important don't matter much at all anymore. We realize that the stuff we chase after, the treasure we long for, the priorities we hold, are all backwards, and that there is more to life than just have, that the greatest things of all is being, being right with God, being right with each other, being at peace with ourselves. When we follow the path of faith, when we say, "At your word, Lord, I will," we are caught up in a net of love and pulled out of our old reality into an entirely new one, so different from the old that we're like fish gasping for water, gasping to be put back where we think we belong. Simon Peter said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." In other words, "I'm not worthy of this. If you really knew me, you'd know I'm not the kind of person you want in this new world you've opened up to me." And he's exactly right. None of us are worthy of that new life, no of us deserve that free gift of love, but it is Jesus' pleasure to give us what we can't deserve, it is Jesus' pleasure to love what we think is unlovable. And so he says to Simon and he says to us, "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. From now on, you will be catching people."

So this is how Jesus fishes; he meets us where we are, even in our brokenness, even in our failure. There he invites us to take a new path, the path of faith, and taking that path, we are caught by his love and given new life, and in our new life given a new purpose; to help catch others in the same net.

Friends in Christ, we can learn a lot from our gospel reading today, but we fall short if we do not learn one more thing. We fall short if we do not learn what you and I, what this



congregation, what the entire Christian church should be about. What we are about is announcing to a world in very deep water that the net of God's love is cast for them too, that it is the Father's desire that not even one of his own children should be lost. And here in this gospel lesson we learn how to catch those lost ones; here we have all the tips we need for becoming fishers of people. Tip #1- Do like Jesus. Be with the fish. In other words, meet people where they are, accept them as they are. Remember that Jesus welcomed sinners and scorned the self-righteous, not the other way around, and do so likewise. Tip #2. Bait your hook. In other words, offer a new possibility, a new path; offer them the path that's been offered you, faith in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's the path that turns lives not just around, but inside out and upside down, just as it did to a fisherman named Simon. Tip #3- Be prepared for a big catch. In other words, don't be surprised if in living in word and deed the new life that is yours in Jesus Christ, others follow. They will. Aren't you here today because of what someone said to you or did for you? Tip #4- Don't be afraid to go fishing. In other words, don't be afraid to fish for people, don't be afraid of speaking about your faith. Remember how Jesus said it in Matthew's gospel; "I will make you fish for people." We are made, we're not dependent on our own making. God will make us into fishers, so don't be afraid. "Lo, I am with you always," Jesus promises, and it's true.

Well, those are my fishing tips. Pretty simple, aren't they? Yes, and pretty simple to use. But don't forget to use them. There are thousands of people who call this town/county/university their home. But not a lot of them know what it's like to be caught in the net of God's love. In truth, far too many people that you and I know are like Peter that morning. They're feeling alone, and tired, and lost, and empty, and there are far too many to count on a pastor or evangelism committee to reach. You have to grab that net and throw it. Start by praying for someone you know who is hurting, who needs a word of love, and then invite them to worship. And invite them to this table, where we can taste again that the love of God is real, and that it is for you and for me and for all the lost and lonely people of this world. Just don't be afraid to go fishing. Oh, I have to end this sermon now. The fish are biting. Let's go catch them. Amen.