

**“Fishing on the Other Side of the Boat” based on John 21: 1-12a, NRSV**

These ideas were presented in somewhat different ways at the All Saints’ Anglican (8 am and 9:30 am) and First United Church (11:15 am) services, Easter 3 2009.

**Fishing?**

“Fishing” has a long history as a metaphor for the mission of the Church; but we have to use the term carefully today:

- \* For people born in the 1980s, “phishing” is spelled “ph-” and it is negative, a reference to an aggressive, insidious, malevolent force that might attack our computers, our privacy and our identities; we need security against such phishing.
- \* And the fishing metaphor as it was used in the imperial church was a little like that. Such scholars as Douglas John Hall, of McGill, have helped us to understand that we live now in a post-Constantinian Church. Some of the language and traditions of the imperial age from Constantine’s conversion to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century are clearly historically specific and culture bound... and not helpful now. Neither are they biblical, by the way, but rather part of a cultural overlay that no longer serves. They connote power and patriarchy, sexism, racism, homophobia, anti-intellectualism, prejudice and the abuse of privilege.

As Church, and as church leaders, we reject the Constantinian, imperial church and seek a new way of being the Body of Christ, a post-Constantinian church. But I work with people born in the 1980s, our “Missing Generation”. For the most part, they are very good at the first part of our process: they reject the imperial Church. The problem is that, for them, that often means rejecting the Church entirely... and all its possibilities.

But if we are biblical (rather than traditional) we may still see some value in the fishing imagery. Early Christians used the FISH symbol to identify themselves: in Greek (the common language spoken all around the Mediterranean world, the street language), the first letter of words that say, “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” form an acronym: ιχθος – the Greek word for fish. Let us allow fishing to stand as a metaphor for following Jesus, and let us hear the original invitation issued to some of the first disciples (who were fishing for fish) into a new activity of following Jesus.

Notice something else: in Scripture and Tradition, fishing has long been an important image for the ministry of the Church, but NOT “fishing on the other side of the boat” for some reason. And yet there is so much in this story...

especially for us in an age of change  
and a time of change for this congregation.

**Change**

The dominant characteristic of our society is change,  
the rapid pace of social change,  
a pace that is accelerating.

The most difficult thing for an organization or institution to deal with is change... And the older the organization, and the more that inst’n entrenches its practices with sacred reference, the more difficult it is to change

That describes The Church.

Jesus came into a world of change and tension and pluralism. But much of our religious tradition developed in a fairly stable, unchanging, fairly homogeneous society in Western Europe. The church developed a kind of institutional inertia resistant to change. The Christian Church finds change difficult. This is both ironic and understandable.

Understandable because change is so difficult for any formal organization. The irony is that change is the normative Christian experience. It may be called “conversion” or spiritual growth” or “Christian development”. It may be referred to as “a journey of faith”. It may be expressed as a pilgrimage across real, physical terrain or metaphorically across the psychological landscape of a lifetime; but the expectations of Scripture and Christian thought are that God is still creating the world, that salvation is active and dynamic, and that individuals will not be the same this week as last.

The biblical narrative itself is a travelogue: God’s people are always on the move.

“In the beginning” Adam and Eve go out from the Garden.

Their son Cain becomes “a homeless wanderer”.

Noah builds a boat.

Abram and Sarai leave the comfortable and the familiar in response to God’s call, going not knowing where.

Jacob journeys. His pilgrimage changes him so much his name is changed to Israel.

The children of Israel go to Egypt.

Moses leads them out of Egypt in the Exodus.

Moses commutes, regularly checking in for messages at the Mount Sinai office.

In one dramatic moment there, at the Burning Bush, Moses says to God, “What is your name?” And the answer is itself a verb, not a noun: “I am who I am”

(Exodus 3:14). In fact, God’s identity is probably a verb in the future tense: “I will be who I will be”.

As we continue to read through Hebrew Scripture, we follow the travels of Ruth and Naomi and others. The various prophets go here, there and everywhere in obedience to God – or, as in the case of Jonah, sometimes in defiance of God.

Jesus journeys.

Saul sets out for Damascus; but on the way, his life is changed and his name, too.

As the Apostle Paul, he went on three missionary journeys and then to Rome; and other apostles would go even further.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is usually printed with maps to clarify the narrative. Led by the Spirit, the New Testament Church changes, grows and goes. Every day was different (according to Acts 2:47). Only later, in European history, did the Church sometimes get stuck. In some ways, in some places, it has stayed stuck. This ossification of the Spirit (I call it “pneumatoid arthritis”) would seem to be more an expression of human nature or human inertia than of God’s dynamic personality as revealed in Scripture.

The Bible is, in fact, a blueprint for a rich, diverse theology of change. It is a thesaurus of references to change in many forms: creation, destruction, growth, development,

aging, progress, backsliding, reform, revolution, Exodus, Exile, journey, conquest, addition, subtraction, conversion, transfiguration, death, resurrection, ascension and more.

If theology is our attempt to express what we discern as the “theo-logic” or God logic or divine thinking, then a theology of change is an attempt to express what might be God’s mind on the subject. A biblical theology of change relies on the scriptural revelation in order to do this. And it is obvious that the biblical attitude is far more dynamic and enthusiastic about change than has been the traditional Church.

That implies that while an articulate theology of change may be biblical; it may not be traditional. In fact, a major theme in the history of the Church has been its resistance to social change, sometimes defining itself as Chaplain to the Status Quo.

The biblical narrative, in contrast, seems to be energetically all about change.

The implication of the biblical attitude is that Christian spirituality would be:  
not a destination but a journey,  
not a still photograph but a movie,  
not a statue but a dance,  
not a single note but a song, a marching song.

In the Bible, as in life, change is constant. Change is life.

### **Implications for congregations in transition – A church “in recovery”**

All this reminds me of a very special part of our ministry at Carleton University: 12-step or recovery programs. Most academic terms, a few of the students organize themselves into one or two AA groups or Serenity Groups. They gather in The Quiet Room, a few steps from my office. On the wall of The Quiet Room, they have put a large poster of The Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can, and  
wisdom to know the difference.

I commend this prayer to the Church today and church leaders.

A Recovery Prayer for the Church and church leaders? Yes. (One of the significant 12-Step programs is ACOA, Adult Children of Alcoholics.) We need an ACCC Group! – We are all the Adult Children of the Constantinian Church. We are all struggling with the woundedness of our spiritual formations. We are all the Adult Children of church models that no longer serve. We are all the Adult Children of a pre-modern past, taught by people we loved and trusted (good people) how to live and be in a world that no longer exists. Our congregations are struggling as dysfunctional Adult Children of a kind of Parent Church that needs to be identified as historical and confined to history. We seek the courage to change.

**FOTOSOTB (“Fishing on the Other Side of the Boat”)**

This biblical picture of FOTOSOTB may help. What would FOTOSOTB mean for you as an individual today – to try to be faithful, but in a new way?... for you as a marriage, as a family, as a congregation... What might it mean?

I don't proclaim wisdom this morning, I frame questions...

And I tell stories:

1. hooking a muskie when I was poorly prepared, poorly positioned
2. my brother trolling a surface lure behind the canoe, and hooking... a seagull!
3. In my personal version of “disabling parenting” I used to take Robert fishing, but his lure had no hooks on it. One day, to my surprise and his unforgettable delight, he caught and landed a 3 lb bass using the lure with no hooks!

And for each of the stories the punch line is the same:

If you do try, FOTOSOTB, if you do go “fishing” today, be careful, because:

- You might actually catch something.
- And you may be surprised by what you catch.

May God bless you as you go.

Note: In the preparation of this sermon, no fish, seagulls or other animals were actually injured. It was all catch-photo-and-release. The jury is still out on how much psychological damage I have done to Robert, but he seems to be a fine young man.

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