

# A Potentially Gruesome Metaphor

*February 4, 2001: Fifth Sunday of Epiphany*



*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus's knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.—Luke 5:1-11*



Many of the unforgettable childhood songs involve hand motions. For instance, the “Itsy Bitsy Spider,” “I’m a Little Tea Pot,” “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” For the evangelical subculture of my generation there was “I Will Make You Fishers of Men,..fishers of men fishers of men. I will make you fishers of men if you follow me” and as you sang this, you cast out your imaginary line and reeled it in. Cast it out, reeled it in. I’ve been disturbed now for nearly twenty-four straight hours by this song, which came from the text for tonight, which is running through the back of my mind even now, which began to seem like the oddest thing in the world to put in the mouths of babes.

I’m really not a believer in the need to purge our children’s world of every little symbolic suggestion that darkness exists. I think there’s a legitimate place in their mythical world for Zurg, Mo Jo Jo Jo, Overcat, bad guys. But I think it might be a good idea not to unconsciously promote a potentially gruesome metaphor without acknowledging a little of its darker qualities. Like, fishing for men. Think of the graphic details. Often the power of a metaphor is precisely in its graphic details. You cast and you hook a fish. It desperately writhes and flips, madly fighting for its life. A fish is never caught without a struggle, not even if you’re fly fishing artfully in some remote and serene mountain stream. And for the large majority of sportspeople? Its about piercing the little fishies’ flesh with a sharp barb and dragging it to its death.

Imagine that you are fishing for humans. Or, worse, catching humans. Imagine your five year old imagining that he is fishing for humans: casting then hooking a kindergarten classmate, dragging him across the shore by the hook implanted in his lips. That’s gruesome. The kids probably love it. The boys especially always seem to love anything that suggests fighting or blood or, of course, guts. Maybe little boys everywhere have always been into the fishing for men song in ways their Sunday School teachers would be horrified to learn.

I’m not saying it’s a bad song. Maybe it’s a great song, with all the thorny potential of a dark folk tale. However, I think it would be good to acknowledge that there’s darkness instead of, say, expecting the kids to smile sweetly as they cast and reel and pretend to fish for humans.

It seems like so often, maybe out of familiarity or domestication, these sorts of biblical images slip by us without us even being startled by their

force. And I think there's something to be said for being startled. Maybe we are more likely to be jarred from our sleep when we hear in our Bible songs, or in the Bible, some of its unfamiliar harmonies, shifting textures, its profuse teeming plurality of notes, its generative cacophony, its stresses and contradictions and ambiguities instead of just one melody we've come to know and love.

Almost everything you find in the New Testament has some sort of background in the Old Testament, which was of course the Scriptures of the day. And it's often a good place to go to hear a jarring or less familiar note. You'll find fishers of men here. In Jeremiah they are sent out to search every crevice and crack and little pool where the unrepentant little fishies might try to hide. The fishers are to catch and expose them and all their polluted, idolatrous, abominable ways. Amos says God will fish out every last one of those who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, and drag those oppressors away with hooks.

I think it was somewhere around midnight last night that I began to hear that old fishers of men tune but with these new words: "God will drag the oppressors away, the oppressors away, the oppressors away. God will drag the oppressors away, and find them wherever they hide." It's dark, but I thought it was catchy.

Often what people have taken from the text we read tonight in Luke is this simple formula: to be a disciple of Jesus is to be a fisher of men. As if "fishing for humans" was a good *model* for discipleship, some directions we should follow. I think this is pretty clearly not a very good reading of the story. It is extracting a model for discipleship from a very strange metaphor that I doubt was meant to be extracted as a model for discipleship.

There is a certain strain of evangelism that has over enthusiastically seized upon this metaphor without the irony or ambiguity or complexity (or humor even) which might be appropriate to it. There's a whole history of American revivalism that has a sportsmen feel to it, a macho sort of hunting fishing competitive tone. Billy Sunday takes off his jacket, rolls up his sleeves and prowls the stage, like a hunter, or a fishermen who has honed his skills, his techniques, his expertise and is determined to land an impressive, a big, a huge fish. Maybe that's not some unconditionally horrible song that should never be sung, but I don't hear the Billy Sunday

Song in this story from Luke.

If there's anything clear in Luke, it's that the mission Jesus embarks upon is one of *release*. Release from the forces that alienate humanity from each other and God and creation, the cages that oppress and separate and blind. So the mission of the followers of Jesus, the disciples, the church will surely have that character of releasing.

Well, fishing is *catching* which seems to be nearly as opposite of *releasing* as you can get.

Where is the release, what is released, is there any release in this passage? Jesus doesn't actually set out to go fishing in the story. What happens is that the people, urgently desiring to hear the word of God (maybe, seeking release) press upon him so, that he is backed up against the sea. He sees a boat and thinks he'll speak from there. It happens to be Simon's boat. It seems like there's nothing to particularly recommend either Simon or his boat. It and he just happen to be there.

But when Jesus has ceased speaking the Word of God (the word of release, of freedom) to the crowd, Jesus says to Simon: "put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.

Now that sounds a provocative note. Remember that in the Bible (and all sorts of ancient literature) the deep is everything that threatens us: *darkness*, death, chaos, uncertainty, and even in completely contemporary use the deep almost always refers to the mysterious, the unknown, what we can't readily see, or don't usually see.

Or how about this interesting variation on the theme: post modern psycho-analysis refers to our unconscious as a net at the bottom of which a catch of fish will be found. Or this: some contemporary scholars talk about revelation as actually a fishing net which drags the depths of our being, of being itself. At the bottom of the net, they say, a catch of fish will be found.

Simon is fairly certain that there is nothing, no fish, to be caught. As far as he's concerned, he's been fishing a long time and the nets keep coming up empty. But when Jesus speaks, Simon is compelled in spite of what would normally make sense to him, in spite of what would seem to him to be professionally prudent, to let down his nets into the deep.

The result is really quite traumatic for him, dreamlike, miraculous, or

nightmarish. It's hard to distinguish. *There are so many fish.* A lovely delightful lavish abundance? A slithering writhing morass? Beautiful or frightening or both? The text certainly suggests an element of danger. This absurdly fecund, enormous catch of fish threatens to sink the boat. Simon is obviously enormously disturbed by what came up from the depths.

Some commentators on this biblical text read the story very literally and rationally as Luke's attempt to explain plausibly why Simon and the disciples would follow Jesus. It's all very simple to explain. Jesus impressed them by catching a lot of fish. So they left their families and homes, their lives, their careers, everything they ever had, to follow him. Somehow I think it's possible that there was a little more of a crisis involved.

"When Simon Peter *saw* it, he fell down at Jesus' knees saying depart from me for I am a sinful man." Saw what? A lot of fish? Or maybe, everything he ever feared writhing around in the bottom of the boat? The darkest corners of being brought to light? Mysteries revealed? death? chaos? uncertainty? The depths of who he was, who we are, the depths of humanity, or of being itself? Splayed out all over the boat. This slithering morass up from the depths, and Jesus (God incarnate) sits there on it.

I think it's legitimate to imagine yourself in Simon's place for a moment. Jesus in the same boat as you, next to you, sitting on your fish: what's been hauled up from the absolute darkest scariest place anyone ever imagined, knee deep in sardines, catfish on his lap, traces of the depths (your depths), the smell of fish on his hands. You're both on the verge of being buried by this unbelievably large catch.

Simon seems to have an absolute crisis. I don't know if you can blame him. Jesus has brought all these "fish" up, into the nice little comfortable place they were sitting, into Peter's boat. "Depart from me." That's Peter's response. I think this might be my response: "Please. Leave. This is madness."

But Jesus says, "Don't be afraid." That's his response. He's not afraid. He's not appalled. He's not angry. He anticipates it. He's seen it all before (and before and before), all those "fish:" trout and jellyfish and eels and big crabs and sharks and serpents and anything anyone could ever haul up from the deep.

It's a pervasive theme throughout the Bible that everything hidden will be made known. The darkness will all come to light. What is concealed

will be revealed. What a startling assertion. It seems like a frightening prospect. *Maybe* unspeakable beauty, but there's all the darkness, the vulnerability, everyone's deepest needs, what we can't face or even name, made known. Who doesn't balk at that, hide from it, deny it?

But maybe the story of Jesus (God incarnate) is that God puts God's self in our boat. God looks at all that and loves us, it, the depths of our being, the depths of being itself. God looks at everything we're afraid of and says "don't be afraid." Perhaps that's why Simon left everything to follow Jesus. Perhaps that's the note that releases us from the forces of alienation and separation, excommunication, estrangement, hate, division, exclusion. Don't be afraid. All manner of darkness may be made known but it doesn't overcome the light.