

Dear Fellow Fishermen and Fisherwomen:

A delicacy in Japan's sushi restaurants, a single bluefin tuna can be sold by a fisherman for \$30,000; be auctioned at market for \$60,000, and cost people having dinner \$350 per pound. In fact, in 2013 the owner of a Japanese sushi restaurant paid \$1.76 million dollars for a tuna that weighed 489 lbs! Talk about a precious fish! Most of us are used to catching bluegills or perch that cost us a buck worth of redworms or crawlers, or walleye for the price of a lure or a few minnows from the bait shop.

Just think what price Jesus was willing to pay to catch you and me for his live-well trophy collection. He was willing to give his life! You are precious to him -- and so are the rest of the fish in this big pond we call Earth. Now he wants you and me to go out and catch fish as well. He tells his disciples to **"Fish for a Precious Catch"** (1) *Use the Lord's net*, and (2) *Go now, but be patient*.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake because they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ **At once they left their nets and followed him.** ²¹ **Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them,** ²² **and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.** (Matthew 4:18-22)

I

Imagine early morning as the sun rises over a lazy fishing village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It's a busy scene with fishermen cleaning and mending their nets. Some had just come in from a night of fishing, and others were about to go out and see what the day's catch would bring.

Matthew tells us that Jesus saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew. They were hard at it, ***"casting a net into the lake,"*** we are told. The nets were usually round with lead or stone weights on the edges to sink it to the bottom. Then they would pull the rope to draw the edges together trapping whatever unsuspecting fish might be swimming past.

Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, ***"Come, follow me."*** Amazingly, they did! ***"At once they left their nets and followed him."*** Now, we have to realize this wasn't their first meeting. Peter and Andrew had been followers of John the Baptist. John told his disciples that it was now time for them to follow Jesus, the Lamb of God, the Messiah, instead. So these men did. Before this point in time, however, they were only part-time learners. They had continued their occupation as fishermen. But on *this* day Jesus is calling them to full-time apostleship. He's not saying, ***"Come, follow me"*** for an hour or two of classes -- but ***"follow me" permanently***. What a huge change of life this required! Oh, they would still fish -- but the catch would be entirely different...and the net they would cast would be far different too.

After calling Peter and Andrew, Jesus also called James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They did the same thing as well: ***"Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him."*** I always wonder if Zebedee said, *"Hey, boys, where are you going?"* But Mark tells us in his gospel that he had hired hands who could help with the chores. Zebedee must have recognized that a greater calling had come to his sons.

These four were simple men with little formal education. From the gospel accounts we see that they often found it difficult to grasp the deeper meaning of Jesus' teachings. Sometimes they said foolish things. Sometimes they even argued with each other and jockeyed for position to determine who was the greatest. Think of it: on Good Friday we find Peter cursing and crying in the dark because a little girl challenged his faith and connection with Christ. And this from the disciple Jesus nicknamed "The Rock!"

Jesus called these men to follow him, however, not because they were so special, but because he was so gracious. He was going to use them in spite of their weaknesses and sins. He was going to use them to cast God's net into the sea of humanity.

What is the net? Those who can remember details from confirmation instructions will know the answer to this. The net is the Means of Grace. Simply put, that's the means or the way by which God brings his forgiving love to people's hearts. It's the **Gospel**, the Good News, the Evangel. There is no other power in the world that can bring fish into God's aquarium/sinners into God's kingdom. It's not like when we go fishing and have to figure out whether we should use a Shimano or Zebco reel or live or artificial bait to make the catch. Only one thing, only the gospel catches souls for Christ's eternal Church.

Oh, there are plenty of others things some churches to use try to lure people. Some churches push the gospel to the back or abandon it all together and try to entice fish with cool entertainment, popular political stances, environmental activism, social programs, or even the kind of music they play. They treat people like noseey sturgeon thinking they will be attracted to anything new or shiny in the water. But we aren't trying to catch fish so we can superficially add their names to our church roster; we're trying to catch them permanently for Christ's kingdom of heaven! Only the Holy Spirit catches fish -- and the Holy Spirit works only through the gospel, the means of grace.

II

So we have our net. We want to keep our gospel net clean and mended. No foreign substances. Jesus netted us with the message of his forgiving love. He wants us to cast that net to others.

This takes a couple of things:

(1) It takes a concerted effort. ("Concerted" means "in concert with"; we all have a part to play, like instruments in a concert.) When fishermen cast their nets into the Sea of Galilee, it took more than one man to draw the rope tight and bring the net into the boat. The fishermen had to work together. The lake we're fishing in is not just community-wide, it's world-wide. We work together as a congregation to get things done locally; and we work together in the WELS, our church body, to get things done globally. (We'll see more about that in a few minutes with the *WELS Connection*. And thanks to the Lord for leading us to exceed our mission budget goals in 2016.)

(2) It takes patience. That's probably the hardest part of fishing -- being patient. Although the gospel is a beautiful message of Christ's forgiving love, the devil, the sinful world, and the sinful flesh are working to stop up the ears and harden the hearts of people we reach out to. It takes patience -- reaching out in love (casting our nets) time and time again, persevering and not easily giving up.

An example: This is the 44th anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling (Jan. 22, 1973) *Roe v. Wade* that legalized the sin and shame of abortion in our nation. The Jane Roe in the case is really Norma McCorvey. Although she never did abort the child in question in the legal case, instead giving it up for adoption, she did work in an abortion clinic and advanced their cause. But through Christian friends, eventually Ms. McCorvey became convinced that abortion, the taking of a child's life in the womb, was sinful. Through the Word, she also realized that Christ forgives all sins, including sinful attitudes and beliefs concerning the sanctity of human life. It took patience, almost 20 years, but the fish was netted. God changed a heart.

God said, "***My Word will not return to me empty...***" When you share the Word, when you cast the net, there *will* be fish. We cast, God catches, and God cleans his fish to perfection.

What a privilege it is for us to be modern day Andrew, Peter, James and Johns fishing for a precious catch. And although it's in the middle of January, we can all say to each other today, "Happy fishing!"

Amen.