

12.27.2020 St. John, Apostle and Evangelist (Matthew 4:18-22)

If I were to say to you, “Let’s go fishing,” what image would the thought of fishing bring to your mind? Would you think of a sunny afternoon trolling around Applegate Lake, or maybe blazing a trail through the brush to get to your secret spot on the river, or perhaps you’d think of traveling to the coast for a deep sea charter. Whatever image comes to your mind, I imagine most of us, when we think of fishing, picture good times with family and friends. We see ourselves eating, drinking, laughing, and enjoying life, but let me ask you this...

If I was the captain of a crab fishing boat in Alaska, and you had just signed on to be my new deckhand, if I were to say to you, “Let’s go fishing,” what image would come to mind? You’d probably picture long days and longer nights, rough seas and grueling physical labor, huge risks and the thought that you might not make it back alive. We may think of fishing as a fun and relaxing weekend activity, but many professional fishermen have a completely different understanding of what it means to go fishing.

Today is the feast day of St. John, a man the Church describes as an Apostle and Evangelist, and a man our Second Lesson describes as a deckhand on his father’s fishing boat. The passage we read this morning paints a picture of Jesus walking by the Sea of Galilee. There He sees Peter and Andrew, *casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men”* (Matthew 4:18-19). *“Going on from there He saw two brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and He called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him”* (Matthew 4:21-22).

Long before St. John was an Apostle and an Evangelist, he was a professional fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, and therefore we can be certain that his idea of what it means to go fishing is radically different than our own. Fishing on the Sea of Galilee in the first century wasn’t a leisure activity. The long nights John spent fishing would’ve been followed by long days spent cleaning and mending nets, and like an Alaskan crab fishermen, John would’ve identified fishing with rough seas and grueling physical labor, huge risks and the thought that you might not make it back alive.

Now with that in mind, imagine how John would've interpreted Jesus' statement, "*Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" His understanding of what Jesus is saying to His disciples when He calls us to be *fishers of men* very likely stands in sharp contrast to how we might interpret Jesus' words. We view fishing as a fun and relaxing weekend activity, a time to eat, drink, relax, and enjoy life, but on that day Jesus wasn't talking to people who, on a sunny afternoon, start their trolling motor, unwrap their sandwich, and wait for a bite. He was talking to professional fishermen, men who worked night and day, who endured the most difficult circumstances, who literally put their lives on the line to accomplish the task set before them.

Clearly, John would've interpreted Jesus' words, "*Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men,*" as a call to a life of hard work, filled with difficulty and great personal risk, and I wonder if part of the reason we are often unsuccessful in our own efforts to evangelize is because we've failed to see our Lord's words from the proper perspective. We hear the call to be *fishers of men*, and we show up in shorts and a tank top expecting a relaxing day at the lake, when in fact we should be wearing work boots and coveralls, fully prepared to confront any obstacle.

St. John, the Apostle and Evangelist, worked as a deckhand on his father's fishing boat, and I'm led to believe that life experience defined his role as a *fisher of men*. St. John knew that the role of a deckhand is to help the captain accomplish his work, to be the captain's hands and feet, to simply go where he tells you to go and to do what he tells you to do. You can be sure that on their father's boat, John and his brother James were called to perform difficult tasks without any explanation, and were trusted with great responsibilities that they accepted without complaining.

To be an evangelist in the Kingdom of God is to follow the example of St. John, to be a deckhand. To be a *fisher of men*, in the proper sense, is not to sit back and casually cast a line. Instead, to be a *fisher of men* is to diligently work night and day, to faithfully endure through the most difficult circumstances, to willingly give all that you are and all that you have in loving service to the Captain of your Soul, our Savior Christ. May our Lord, when He comes, find us, His hands and feet, obediently working and praying and giving to draw the world out of the darkest depths and into the glorious light of His heavenly kingdom.