

The Lowest Freshwater Lake On Earth

The 3rd Sunday after Epiphany sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, January 21st, 2018 at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Jonah 3: 1-5,10 and Mark 1:14-20

The Sea of Galilee is the ecological and social setting of the first half of the Gospel of Mark. A large freshwater lake about eleven kilometers wide and eighteen kilometers long, its shore is dotted with villages connected with the local fishing industry. The lake (also called Sea of Genneseret, Lake Kinneret or Lake Tiberius) is fed by the Jordan River, which flows in from the north and out to the south. Some 209 metres below sea level, it is the lowest freshwater lake on Earth. Due to this low-lying position in a rift valley, the sea is prone to sudden violent storms, as attested in the gospel stories. Fishermen, beware!

Thus fishermen fell to the bottom of the lake and co-incidentally to the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. The “*Er’do’wells*” looked down on them, even as many of them depended upon their labour: “*The most shameful occupations are those which cater to our sensual pleasures,*” wrote the Roman poet Cicero pejoratively, “*fish-sellers, butchers, cooks, poultry-raisers and fishermen*”. “*The fisher,*” attests an ancient Egyptian papyrus, “*is more miserable than any other profession.*” Uneducated, lacking any social sophistication, fishermen learned to fish by fishing, usually the same as their fathers.

From the time of Jesus, it is clear of the marginal existence of the fishermen. Restless peasant fishermen had little to lose and everything to gain, by overturning the status quo. When you are at the bottom, your every step you take is up. Thus Jesus’ strategic decision was not unlike Gandhi’s attempts to mobilize the “*untouchable*” classes in India in campaigns such as his famous Salt March, or M.L. King Jr’s fateful choice to stand with the sanitation workers of Memphis in 1968.

“*And Jesus said to these men, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people’*” (Mark 1:17b). This famous phrase is beloved to evangelicals, who have traditionally interpreted it to connote the vocation of “*saving souls*” and changing lives. But we miss the point if we remove this text from its social matrix, and if we ignore the roots of this metaphor in the Hebrew Bible.

Now, I haven’t picked up a pole since our cottage days at Pike Bay on Lake Huron...that ended when we sold that property in 1990...and I’m not certain that I did very well – but I loved doing it and I have a few fish stories of my own to tell. Of course, I have picked up some things *about* fishing, which if used carefully, might just make this metaphor somewhat useful.

It helps to know what you’re fishing for. Some kinds of *bait* attract one kind of fish — and others attract another; and there are certain times of the day which are apparently better for fishing than others. Of course, there will be no fish *caught*, no fish stories told, if the water is polluted or has run dry.

Certainly the story of Jonah is a whale of a fish story. You may remember what happens: a storm arises on the sea. Jonah is thrown overboard to appease the storm. God sends a great big fish to grab Jonah and bring him back to the shore where he started.

It is the story of a man who was called upon to do something for God, and he doesn’t want to do it. Jonah is called upon to speak out against the city (Nineveh) because the wickedness of the city has literally been thrown into God’s face. Loosely translated it goes, “*Hey Nineveh! In forty days you’re going to be blasted to bits*” even though the people of Nineveh don’t speak Hebrew, they begin to take notice. I mean, how could Jonah lose? Three days in the belly of a fish, and the digestive gases

have bleached him white. His clothes are ragged, he's missing a couple of teeth, and he still has a little seaweed hanging from his left ear. He strolls into the center of town, belts out his message and then begins the countdown: *"In 40 days I said and the clock is ticking!"*

The good news is that the people now believed in God. The bad news is that when Jonah sees all this, he gets furious. He says, *"Darn it, God, that's why I ran away from your face in the first place. When I preach doom and destruction, I want doom and destruction. But here you are, merciful, kind, and forgiving, it just makes me sick."*

I hope the story disturbs us too. Why is Jonah so angry? The short answer is because God loves too many people. The longer answer, according to Jonah, is that God is *"gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing."* Like Jonah, that's how we expect God to be toward us. That's not always how we always want God to be toward others.

The flight would be long and tedious – six hours between Pearson International and Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. A well-dressed Johannesburg, South African woman with a thick European accent got on the plane. She came down the aisle to the tourist section and discovered her seat assignment put her right next to a man with, shall we say, an African accent. She looked at her seat assignment; she saw it was correct. She asked her seatmate, *"I'm sorry, are you sure you are in the right seat?"* He smiled and nodded yes. She turned around to see if there were any other empty seats in the section but she didn't see any so she tugged on the sleeve of the flight attendant. *"Excuse me,"* she said, *"as you can see, I'm sitting next to a person whose skin color is different from mine."* *"Yes, ma'am, I can see that."* *"Well,"* she said, *"is there another available seat?"* The flight attendant looked at her strangely and said, *"I'm sorry, ma'am, it's against our policy to move people unnecessarily."* *"You don't understand,"* said the classy woman, *"this arrangement will not do. I have funds in my purse to arrange an alternative."* The flight attendant said, *"You do?"* *"Yes, I do. Would you please go up to first class and see if there is an available seat? I simply cannot sit here."* The flight attendant shrugged her shoulders, walked up the aisle. A few minutes later she returned. She leaned over the woman, tapped the man with the African accent, and said, *"I'm sorry, sir, I hate to do this. I must make a seating change. If you follow me, we have a place for you in first class."* The love of God makes it possible to give every person first-class treatment. Sometimes, however, we get stuck in our same old seats.

Surely, it's a call to people of faith to care for people as they seek to meet basic needs of their lives, and for Jonah to do like wise.

One more thing...Jesus turned fishing into a team sport; we are called to do this together and here I find myself returning again to where I started. In Mark's fish story, Jesus calls simple fishermen from lives they knew by heart, into lives they could not have imagined --- although at least part of them must have been wondering, or they would not have left their nets so quickly to take up after Jesus. I wonder now what it is that Jesus is calling us away from and what Jesus is calling us to, don't you? I wonder how our worlds would change if we just *left our nets behind* and stepped into the new life before us. I wonder how the world itself would change if we just did and do what Jesus asks: ***"COME – FOLLOW ME!"***