

Sermon for Sunday, April 17, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
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"FISHING IN SOME NEW PONDS"

St. John 21:1-17

Text: "Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat; but that night they caught nothing."  
--St. John 21:3

When Jesus first called the disciples, he said to them, "Come after me and I will make you fishers of men." So they followed him. For three years they served their apprenticeship. Then disaster struck! They couldn't believe it when Jesus was taken prisoner in the Garden of Gethsemane; the trial that followed was even more incredible and fearful--so much so that even Peter denied him when the heat was on. The crucifixion was the nightmare climax to the worst of dreams. They simply could not believe that all of this was happening to them, yet the fear for their own lives was so real that the Bible tells us that they hid out in an upper room for fear of the Jews.

As the death of Jesus had been incredible, so was his resurrection. On a number of occasions he had appeared to the disciples. However, somewhere in that interval, Peter became restless--perhaps he simply wanted to get out of Jerusalem because of the threat from the Jewish leaders. It was then that he declared to his fellow disciples, "I am going fishing." "Well," said the rest of the disciples, "wait a minute and we will go with you." And here were the disciples of the Lord who had been called to fish in some new ponds going right back to the same old place.

If Jesus came today and called you to be a disciple, would you follow him? And suppose you did--would you ever go back to your old way of life? Well, let's put that same question in a little bit different context. Does Jesus still call men today to be his disciples? Does Jesus still ask men to leave an old way of life and come fish in some new ponds? We all know the answer to that--at least intellectually. We would respond, "Well, of course Jesus still calls men to be his disciples today." If that is the case, let me ask, "Has he called you to follow him?" That does put it a little differently, doesn't it? So let me put another question: since Jesus has called you to fish in some new ponds, do you ever find yourself fishing in the same old places you used to fish?

For example, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." But do you find that you still lose your temper and start an argument with your spouse, or your children, or your parents? Are you fishing in the same old pond? Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart." But do you find yourself caught up in some book or movie and discover that your heart isn't so pure, that your mind is filled with sinful or lustful things? Do you fish in that same old pond? Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also..." And when you started following Jesus, you tried to do that; but now do you find yourself striking back, retaliating, getting in your licks, when someone has hurt you or offended you. Are you throwing a hook in the same old waters? Jesus says to love our enemies. Have you been doing that lately or do you find yourself loving those who love you? Is that an old pond you keep throwing your net in?

Why do you suppose it is that we find it so hard to fish in new waters? Why do you suppose it is that we find it so difficult to change? We can look at Peter going back to his fishing boat, back to his old business, and it is easy to criticize him--easy, that is, until we discover that we are doing exactly the same thing.

be so drilled and hammered and beaten into us that when temptation comes, when our reason fails us, when our hearts are overcome, a divine habit will see us through life's darkest moments. You see, when we are tempted beyond our own endurance, we will find ourselves automatically reaching for God. And when we stretch out our hand to him, we discover that God's hand has already reached out to us.

A third reason Peter and the disciples went back to their fishing boat was because, in spite of its drawbacks, it was a known. You see, when we are faced with the threat and anxiety and insecurity of something unknown, we will always tend to revert to something familiar. Anybody who has ever gotten married has experienced this feeling. In spite of their love, young couples experience real threat before the wedding when they are faced with a new lifestyle, a new partner. Just the other day I asked a bride, "Did you ever consider breaking your engagement?" "Yes," she replied, "just before I started down the aisle!"

So Jesus had called the disciples to be fishers of men--to fish in some new ponds. They were asked to take on a new mission, a new lifestyle, and to go to strange cities and new lands--they were called to be leaders and teachers, and that was a far cry from fishing. Can you blame them for having fears and insecurities and uncertainties? Can you blame them for reverting to something known, something familiar?

You see, there is a fundamental principle involved here that you have heard me repeat many times. The pain and hurt of being who and what you are must be greater than the pain of changing, must be greater than the threat and uncertainty of being different. For example, a social worker once shared with me a case he was wrestling over. The court had custody of a child who had been badly abused in his home and the social worker had the authority to place the child with foster parents. Yet, the child wanted to go back home. Why? Simply because a new home, a new environment, a new school, a new way of life, even new parents, was more threatening than the pain and hurt at home. Home, in spite of the bad parts, was a known he could cope with, while a foster home filled him with even greater anxieties. So with all of us. We are psychologically more secure with the known than with something new and unknown. So we often find it difficult to strike out in a new life, in a new Christian commitment because we are unsure where it will take us.

So Peter and the others went back to the same old fishing place. The unknown, the uncertainty, the anxiety over new fishing ponds was too much. Surely it was painful to be back on the old boat doing the old things, yet the new life Jesus called them to seemed so painful they couldn't leave.

Jesus calls us to a new life, a new way of living, a new mission. And often we don't respond because we are really afraid of being different. We say things like, "I'd like to commit my heart, but what if Jesus calls me to Africa?" We say, "I'd like to surrender, but I can't afford to tithe." We say, "I'd like to accept Jesus as the Lord of my life, but I'm afraid I would have to give up some things I'm doing that I really enjoy." Yes, the pain of changing is greater than the pain of being as we are.

But something happened to Peter and the others. They did leave the boat--the security of the past--the old fishing place. But it wasn't pain or fear or anxiety that made them change. No, it was a different emotion altogether. It was love. There on the beach that day Jesus said to them, "Do you love me?" Peter spoke for them all when he said, "Lord, you know that we love you." They left the boat that day--left the sea, the nets, the old fishing place. As far as we know they never fished there again. What made the difference? What changed them? It was love. When they knew

