

Going Fishing ... Together  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
I Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

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We are about to hear about divisions in the Corinthian church! For any who think church controversy is a modern invention, Paul will prove the contrary. Now, I will admit I was tempted to parallel divisions in Corinth with divisions in America, and Jesus' calling of his first disciples as a call to radical Christian activism. Yet, for those who hope I will go there, I need to tell you I did not feel led into that temptation, though I would suggest there is ample teaching in our Scripture lessons for the church itself, on this Sunday when we are commissioning, ordaining and installing new leaders.

After opening his letter to the Corinthians with a glowing salutation, and perhaps even chatting about the upcoming game between the Corinthian Patriots and the Spartan Steelers, Paul quickly launches into a castigation of the divisions in the church at Corinth. Corinth sits at the crossroads of cultures and religions, and elsewhere in this letter we learn the church membership includes slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female. Paul delights in this diversity and oneness in the body of Christ.

Now word has come to Paul, this oneness is fractured – “I have heard from Chloe's people, there are quarrels among you.” Details of the quarrels are not provided, but church members seem to have broken into loyalty groups, perhaps based on the person who baptized them. It would not be different than thinking back on the pastor who brought one to faith, married you, or was there at a time of crisis or point of grief. In this church there are memories of Pastors Deke and Dick, Pastors George or Bill, and others. In Corinth, such loyalties seem to have become divisive cliques.

With that background, and before we are invited to fish with Jesus, let us hear of division in Corinth.

[Read I Corinthians lesson]

Three years ago, also on the fourth Sunday of January, I was preaching what I thought would be my final sermon at the church I served in Troy, NY. A new pastor had been called and received into the presbytery the day before. A recognition would be held following the service for both my ministry and that of the music director, who was moving to Chatham, Massachusetts. The Scripture texts were the same that day as today, and we also ordained and installed church officers. One difference was the Pittsburgh Steelers had not made the playoffs, and the Patriots had been eliminated the week prior.

I preached, and was recognized that Sunday, and at the start of the week, as I was clearing out my office and packing my books, word was received the new pastor had had a medical emergency and would need to delay the move from Texas. Long story short, I stayed on through Easter. The more things change, the more things stay the same, as last month it was agreed I too would continue on with you, a little past Easter.

Three years ago, I recall focusing on the church and Paul's words to the Corinthians in a sermon titled, “The Pottery Barn Congregation.” Today, while including Paul's concerns of division, I want to interweave Jesus' call of four fishermen to leave their boats, businesses and families to fish for people. Listen to whether or not they hesitate. Matthew 4:10-18, the call of the first disciples.

*Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.*

*From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*

*As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.*

Two summers ago, our six oldest grandchildren visited from out of town, in separate weeks. Lynn had bought and borrowed fishing equipment for them to use, and worms for bait, which even the boys were not enthusiastic about spearing with a fish hook. As the worm supply waned, a neighbor brought by a jar of bright yellow, garlic-flavored Powerbait, which was stinky but it did not writhe as one put it on the hook. As it turns out, each experienced a thrill in catching and releasing at least one fish from the pond on which we live, or the spillway across the street. Truth be known, they caught, and we adults released the fish.

I fished with our children when they were young, and accompanied the grandchildren that summer, but I am not a fisherman. I do, however, know that for those who take their fishing seriously, it is critical to have good equipment. The same can be said for a woodworker, a photographer, a golfer, a cook, a musician – it is critical to have good tools, instruments, equipment. Often that equipment is geared to the specific work to be done, or fish to be caught, and in some cases sized to fit the individual who will be using it.

As new leaders are commissioned, ordained and installed this morning, I think of each bringing the equipment of ministry with which God has gifted them. The gifts are varied, for in our work as the church, we need those God has equipped for both finances and ministries of care and compassion; for ministries of worship and music, and fellowship and mission; those equipped with gifts of teaching and spiritual nurture enabling all ages to grow in their faith and commitment.

No single trustee, elder or deacon can do it all. No one pastor or staff member can do it all. Nor, for that matter, can just the leaders of a church do it all, and if we took it one more step, no single church can do it all. We are in this together, each and all called by Christ and equipped by God. Paul is aware of this, and celebrates the Corinthian Church's diversity, but grieves and scorns the Corinthians for what has become their parochial loyalties. *"I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."*

Paul then rhetorically asks, “*Has Christ been divided?*” Unity in Christ is a difficult work, particularly with diversity of gifts and people, of race and class, and even theology. Paul’s point is Christ is divided and diluted when people begin to bond in affinity groups. Paul will elsewhere counter any notion that one gift of ministry is greater than another.

One of the subtleties of groups within the church is they can say they are open to all, but by innuendo people sense it is “by invitation only.” The subtlety of rejection comes if someone attends but is not truly welcomed. Even in the tasks of ministry, we can divide by implicitly saying, please join us... if you are willing to do things the way we have always done them. Small groups in a church are a tremendous way to grow in fellowship and support, but they can also become exclusive. I would simply suggest that groups in or even marginally associated with the church that require an explicit or implicit invitation, can be a source of the dividing of Christ Paul is addressing as he hears people saying, “I belong to ...”

Christ is not divided, but people are drawn to Jesus for different reasons, and I would like to look at this using the metaphor of bait used on the fishing hook. At first, I thought of all those following Christ having to use the same bait, but that would go against our understanding that those fishing the seas out of Gloucester are not going to be using either worms or garlic flavored Powerbait.

So, I thought of the various ways in which we were attracted to the bait of Christian faith. For some, Jesus’ teachings were the first baited hook of Christianity on which we bit. For others, the bait that hooked us was the personal relationship with Christ as Lord and Savior. Others bit the bait of social justice, as we found in Jesus a strong advocate for the least and the lost. Others of us were reeled in by the strength found in the fellowship of the church that provided a safe place for worship and spiritual growth.

I believe Paul’s admonition is to accept the different ways in which we have come to faith and into the church. The problem in Corinth that can be seen in today’s church arises when one’s entry into the church, one’s figurative baptism if you will, is dismissed by those who believe their entry is more legitimate or perhaps even what they consider essential for true Christian faith.

In one sense, bait could be seen as simply a strategy to lure people into the church, and we use different baits, different strategies to catch different kinds of fish. The singer Taj Mahal sings a song entitled, “Fishin’ Blues,” the refrain to which is:

*Here’s a little tip that I would like to relate.*

*Many fish bites if ya’ got good bait.*

*I’m a goin’ fishin’, Mama’s goin’ fishin’,*

*And the baby goin’ fishin’ too.*

We have good bait. What I would suggest is while there may be different baits, the brand is the same. So, in our small groups, our teams, our boards, our committees, we trust each other to honestly pose the question: is this bait of Christ?

In this way, bait is our common lure. “I will make you fish for people,” Jesus said, and I could almost hear him add, “and my teachings, indeed my very self, even my cross, will be the bait you will use.” The four fishermen might have known each other, but likely did not know the other eight Jesus would call. Their response was immediate. They did not ask who else was going to be fishing with Jesus for people.

Just so, as leaders and members of this particular community of faith, let us head to the shore to fish, fully aware that in the same boat there will be social activists and evangelicals, those who celebrated Friday's inauguration and those who attended Saturday's rallies. I think it must be a God or Jesus thing to call such diverse people – I see it as a blend of divine humor and wisdom. Jesus will call creedal Presbyterians and contemporary worshipers, and even people about whom we have some questions. Yes, let us take the pole or net with which God has equipped each of us, and the bait Christ has placed in our tackle box, and let us go fishing...together.