

Catching Fish That Are Not Hungry

One blessing that occurred on my sabbatical was a fishing trip for salmon on the Sacramento River. My father hired a fishing guide who took us on an incredible trip. My father has been fishing for salmon for decades and he wanted my sons to have the thrill of catching a twenty pound salmon.

Pacific Northwest salmon are born in spawning beds in rivers. Once born, salmon journey to the ocean living from three to eight years. At some point, salmon return to the river and journey back to the spawning bed from which they came. Prior to returning to spawn, a salmon stores food as fat and is no longer eating once it enters the river. The stomach of the salmon actually disintegrates rendering the fish not hungry. So why would a fish, which is not hungry bite bait on a hook or strike a lure? It turns out that salmon are programmed to eat (they are predators), and when they pick up the scent of a bait fish their brain tells them to bite it, even if they aren't trying to eat it. Animals for the most part do not take more than they need.

Humans blessed by God with the distinct attribute of "free-will" are able to make choices and consequently we may choose to take more than needed or even less if desired. Our Lord has also hard-wired humans to "instinctually" desire Him. Augustine wrote: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." In many ways humans are like salmon, they habitually "bite" at things not fully aware of the reasons. In the church we refer to these things as passions or natural desires within us, given by God to lead us to Him. When these "desires" are misguided and/or misused they lead to sin and spiritual death. Humans may be compared to salmon heading up a river to spawn, "biting" instinctively accepting everything that is presented not discerning whether or not it may be beneficial and truly satisfy the heart.

God is like a master fisherman who wants to hook us. As master fisherman, He knows what to use for bait, what might draw us to "bite" even though we are not hungry for Him. Indeed, man fills this inner desire for God with all sorts of substitutes which render the heart numb to things spiritual and deaf to the word of God. Yet, our Lord is a persistent fisherman who never relents fully aware that we are not interested in Him.

When we went out with our fishing guide he was limited to fishing one stretch of the river because his main engine was not working. All day we went back and forth over the same fishing hole propelled by the backup motor. That day, several others were also fishing the same area but after a few unsuccessful passes they would head along to another part of the river. As the day went on, we hooked and landed three salmon from that same area. The reason was because a multitude of factors were needed to take place at the exact moment for a salmon to bite. The fish move from the shallows at night into the deep during the day. There were four lines in the water at the same time drifting by the fish in the holes. Only one line was presented in such a way that the fish

which had no desire to eat, instinctively took a bite. God is also like a “limited” fisherman because we are so rarely in the right place at the right time to be hooked.

There are three things which become opportunities for our Lord to catch a human heart. Just like a spawning salmon, if one becomes aggravated, has their instincts to feed exploited or if there is a threat to survival, we may “bite.” Life’s circumstances can become very aggravating at times. Pressure at work, within the family or with children can be devastating. We have a choice on how to deal with things when the unexpected happens. The thoughtful Christian is examining those choices and discerning the good from the bad. Prayer may be the last resort many turn to during these times; which is fine if it leads one to God. The problem is that God may be turned into something that we just “use” and stop when circumstances change positive; consequently, a relationship with Him never develops that encompasses the entirety of one’s life. Indeed, God may even be the one allowing “aggravations” to occur in order to use them for good.

Secondly, our Lord knows that our hearts are restless until they rest in Him which means that humans instinctively seek to satisfy their hunger. We may be “biting” and indeed “caught-up” in pursuing things that turn out to have very negative consequences. It is by experiencing what is not “food” that we learn to feed on that which is truly good and beneficial to the soul. Eventually we get tired being taken where our hearts do not truly desire to go.

Finally, male salmon may strike at other fish when they sense the presence of a threat to their survival. When a threat to one’s survival is present it is perhaps the most powerful “bait” God has in His tackle box. Facing one’s death is always a life-changing event. Being created with free will, how one reacts and deals with that threat makes all the difference. It is a choice to see God in suffering or not to see Him; to remain deaf to God in illness or to hear Him; to remain alone in suffering or to find His embrace and love.

Salmon return to the place where they are born in order to die. The salmon knows when its life is going to end and it prepares for it by storing up fat in order to reach the spawning beds. Once there, it has spent all its energy and fat reserves – there is nothing left. It is not the act of spawning that kills the salmon, it is the fact that they no longer eat and the stomach dies. Then it is ready to give life and perpetuate itself through its offspring. Sounds a great deal like it is in dying that one finds life, it is in taking up one’s cross that one becomes a disciple. The moment our Lord catches us is the moment life, true life in Him begins.

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