

The Net

Matthew 13:47-50

Introduction

As you hopefully know by now, this Lenten season we are earnestly praying and growing in our understanding of the second petition of the Lord's Prayer:

THY KINGDOM COME

On these Thursday evenings, our focus has been in the 13th chapter of Matthew's Gospel where we find several stories (or parables) that give us greater insight into how Jesus defines that kingdom. Each of those parables begins with the same phrase:

The Kingdom of heaven is like _____

There are seven of these parables. You may have noticed that we have not been taking them in order. When I invited Michelle and Sandy to share the preaching load for these services, I asked them to choose the parables they felt led to use as their texts and to tell me what day worked best in their schedules. I have filled in the blanks with the remaining parables.

- We still have one more week in this series, but tonight my text is the last of the seven. The parable of the net.

To introduce this sermon, I want to take you back to the beginning – the real beginning before Jesus started to teach parable #1. Matthew 13 opens with these words:

Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables ... (Matthew 13:1-3)

So, there Jesus is. In a boat. Along the shore. Six parables down. One to go. What should it be about? A net! A fishing net! Of course! Like the one I am sitting on!

Jesus, the master communicator, often used the props that were around him to communicate the truths of the Kingdom of God.

- To the woman at the well, He talked about living water.
- To Mary and Martha at the gravesite of their brother, He talked His coming resurrection.
- To farmers, He talked about the harvest.

And while sitting in a boat along the shore He talked about fishing. The people not only heard the message, they may have even been watching as some nearby fishermen were actually DOING what Jesus was describing. The ultimate visual aid!

The nets that surrounded Jesus as He sat in the boat and maybe pointed to the nearby fishermen that day were called "drag nets."

- I have to confess ... It took every ounce of willpower I have to resist making a 1960s television reference ... but as you can see I didn't have quite enough willpower to fully resist.

The parable you are about to hear is true ...

So let me give you ... Just the facts.

The dragnet is the oldest type of fishing net. It had been used by fishermen long before Jesus was born.

- The net was shaped like a long wall 300 feet long and 12 feet high. That is a football field long and twice as high as I am.
- The bottom of the net had weights with sinkers, and the top of the net had a huge thick rope that ran through it, and to the rope were attached cork floats.
- Two boats would work together, stretching the net out tight and then dragging it back to shore.

When Jesus called his first disciples, he found the first four working this two man boat partnership:

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them... (Luke 5:6-7)

One description I saw said there would need to be 16 men on each boat to handle the weight of the net and all the fish they would catch.

- This way of fishing and this style of net enabled the fishermen to catch even those fish who were hanging out of the bottom of the lake.
- After dragging the net back to shore, the fish were then sorted, and the process was repeated ... up to eight times each day.

So, Jesus says, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net. What does He mean? I make three observations.

#1: IT TAKES A WHOLE LOT OF PEOPLE TO CATCH FISH

If our image of Kingdom-style fishing is one man standing on the shore casting a single line and pulling in one solitary fish, this parable teaches us that we are missing the boat (PARDON THE PUN).

I think when we hear the call of Jesus to those early disciples ...

Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Matthew 4:19)

... our natural tendency is to think in terms one, not many. One solitary person, not a team of people. We have so individualized the Christian faith that we miss the team effort the Kingdom requires. The truth is ...

One fisherman, no matter how dedicated and hardworking, cannot handle a dragnet.

That's just the facts!

One of my former bishops, Clarence Kopp, would stand before our annual conference every August with the stack of our churches' annual reports in one hand and a portable calculator in the other.

- He would tell us two statistics, meant to spur us on to work harder on our evangelistic efforts.
- He would say something like this:

Our 45 churches reported 10,000 members at the end of last year. Those same churches reported 100 new Christians professed faith in Jesus in the last 12 months. That means it takes 100 Christian to reach one new believer every year.

And then he would go on:

There are 1.9 billion people in the world who don't know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. At the rate we are working, we will have the whole world evangelized in just 19 million years!

Evangelizing the world is a big job. Evangelizing Springfield Ohio is a big job too – one that requires the efforts of a big group of people working together.

God has called each of us to fish. Some fishing happens individually. But most Kingdom-style fishing happens in boats. And it takes all of us.

#2: THE GOSPEL IS FOR EVERYONE

I grew in St. Mary's OH near Grand Lake St. Mary's. Every year there is a major fishing competition up there for crappie.

- Some of you like to go to Lake Erie to fish for walleye.
- Some other adventurous people I know like to go out west when the salmon are running.

In each of these instances you are fishing for one particular type of fish. Just one. You know where those fish are, and you go only for those fish.

And you know such interesting facts as ...

- Right now, the crappie at Grand Lake are in pre-spawn and spawning stages, so you can find them in about 15 feet of water around docks, brush and other submerged items.
- And you want to fish for them early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

There are no such instructions in this parable that Jesus told.

The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and **caught all kinds of fish**. (Matthew 13:47)

The message here is that the Good News of the Gospel is for everyone. That's just the facts.

- This is not a fishing expedition for Jews only.
- When Jesus said that, the audience probably gasped! What? The kingdom is for us and our children!

Now put that into today's context:

- Here at Grace we don't just fish for North American white people with a certain economic and educational level who grew up in Lutheran churches and who love the liturgy.
- Whenever we fish, we cast the net – we stretch it out wide – with the understanding that we are fishing for whoever is hears the news.
- And that our nets might be filled with all kinds of fish, some of which may not look or talk like us.

One of the commentators I read in preparation for this sermon said that God was very clever in naming the most popular communication device in the world the “INTER-NET” because He thought it would be a tool for casting the Gospel out wide. That made me smile.

- When you post something on Facebook, you never know who might read it.

#3: THERE IS A SORTING THAT HAS TO BE DONE

This is the hard part of the story. After the net is dragged up onto the shore, the fish have to be sorted. Here's how the text reads:

Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets but threw the bad away. (Matthew 13:48)

Jesus makes it clear this is a picture about it will be when the Kingdom comes for the final time. He adds:

This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:49-50)

Even though we are fishing for all kinds of fish, not every fish makes it into the “good” basket. That is, not everyone who hears the Gospel will respond to it. And some of those who respond will be pretenders to the faith.

I was reminded of another passage from Matthew:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:21-23)

This is a direct contradiction to the world's teaching that God would never send anyone to hell. But the parable makes it clear that God will, and He has. That's just the facts.

The Kingdom's fishing expedition nets a few things that are not truly Kingdom fish. They are pretenders. I've used this poem in a sermon before, but it seems to fit well right here, too.

Three Dollars Worth of God

I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.
Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,
but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk
or a snooze in the sunshine.
I don't want enough of God to make me love a black man
or pick beets with an immigrant.
I want ecstasy, not transformation.
I want warmth of the womb, not a new birth.
I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack.
I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.
— Wilbur Rees

And in the end, the \$3 Christians will be sorted out, and what a painful time that will be!

APPLICATION

We want to be Kingdom fish, the kind reflected in our memory verse for this Lenten season:

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14)

Amen.