

## ***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

### *Fish Stories*

Matthew 17:24-27  
John 21:1-13, Jonah 1:17

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Matthew 17:24-27 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>24</sup>When they came to Capernaum, the people who collected the half-shekel temple tax came to Peter and said, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?”

<sup>25</sup>“Yes,” he said.

But when they came into the house, Jesus spoke to Peter first. “What do you think, Simon? From whom do earthly kings collect taxes, from their children or from strangers?”

<sup>26</sup>“From strangers,” he said.

Jesus said to him, “Then the children don’t have to pay. <sup>27</sup>But just so we don’t offend them, go to the lake, throw out a fishing line and hook, and take the first fish you catch. When you open its mouth, you will find a shekel coin. Take it and pay the tax for both of us.”

(Break for first service to offer blessing of God’s word.)

I am excited, today we get to tell fish stories. “Why?” you might ask, “do we get to listen to fish stories in a place when we are supposed to hear a message about God’s divine grace in the world. Let me tell you...because the people who put the Bible together seemed to like fish stories a whole heck of a lot.

Jesus found disciples that we believe tried to follow Rabbis, but failed so they took up fishing. Then he said, “Come and follow me.” Those fisherman went on to share God’s love and grace with others.

Jesus even liked taking naps on boats, calming storms, and in one story we will hear a bit later he had disciples throw nets in and almost sink a boat from how good a fisher person he was.

Then there is Jonah, “The Big Fish Story.” Whatever you have heard it was not a whale it was a fish, let’s be clear.

There is also the creation story when all the animals that swim, “fish” we created.

Oh, and if the quote from one of my favorite comedic authors is true.

What a tourist terms a plague of insects, the fly fisher calls a great hatch.

**Patrick F. McManus**

Then I think we could name the Moses story a fish story too, because of the plague of locusts and when they split the sea you know they picked up a few unsuspecting fish that missed the memo that day.

Rachel Held Evans who authors the book we are using as we study the Bible this summer, and understand that it was put together in 400 CE, used to be AD, but we decided common era was easier to remember. Rachel who wrote the book we are using was at a dinner party. She posed this question to an Episcopal Priest, “What is the one story in the Bible you will never preach on?”

As Rachel popped a cube of cheese into her mouth, sliding it off a toothpick the priest thought for a moment, bringing her mouth to her chin in that thought look and said, “The one where Jesus has Peter go and get the fish with a coin in his mouth. It is hard enough to preach a sermon on taxes, that story just makes in weirder.”<sup>1</sup>

So, I am not really going to preach a sermon today on this text, except to say someone in this room should study that text sometime and let me know what sermon I should preach on it.

No instead, this is a Sunday about Fish stories. Now, in Montana you have to understand the etiquette of telling fish stories. Let me lay down the rules.

1. When you are listening to a fish story, don’t listen too close, instead be planning what story you will tell next.

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<sup>1</sup> Evans, Rachel Held. Inspired (p. 175). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

2. Never admit the true size of the fish. If it is a good fishing hole pretend the fish was tiny. If it is an awful place to fish, exaggeration is a must.
3. Finally, I hope you weren't listening because you should have your next fish story ready.

Last week I had the privilege to sit down and hear some real fish stories from Tom Parker. He told me this one about his grandfather Peter Thompson, who was the mayor of Laurel at one point. Also, I had to check some facts with Peg because I was too busy thinking of my fish story to remember the details.

Story goes the Pete went into a bar and a man shared with him that he had caught a huge Ling down in the Yellowstone at a certain bridge. The man couldn't stop talking about the size of thing fish. Pete said, "Well you won't believe this I went down to the river the other day threw my line in and pulled up a railroad lantern." (Now, Pete was talking about one of those old gas powered lanterns that is a hefty size to pull up with a fishing line.) Then Pete said, "The other thing you won't believe is, that lantern was still lit."

Fishing stories have both the tallest tales you can imagine, and buried within each of them is a lesson for how to either fish better, or how not to do it. Like any good fishing story our Bible is full of tails that carry analogy, understanding, philosophy, hope, despair and even more a desire of those writing it that God might be willing to risk a deep relationship on us silly humans.

Patrick McManus also said:

Scholars have long known that fishing eventually turns men into philosophers. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to buy decent tackle on a philosopher's salary.

**Patrick F. McManus**

Let me share another little story with you:

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The Fisherman's Dream

A fisherman once sat in the midday sun, gazing out to sea, watching his little fishing boat riding at anchor, and thinking to himself how good it was to sit in the sun with no worries, watch the waves breaking and enjoy God's creation.

But his daydream was interrupted when a smartly dressed and rather overweight businessman came up to him and broke into his reverie with a sharp question: 'What are you doing lazing around at midday? Why aren't you out fishing?'

Somewhat taken aback, the fisherman replied, 'I've done my day's fishing. I've taken my fish to market, and now I'm relaxing in the sun.'

'But why don't you put out to sea again and catch some more fish?' his questioner insisted.

'Why would I want to do that?' replied the fisherman politely.

'Well, then you would make twice as much money.'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'Well, then you could buy a bigger, better boat, and catch even more fish. You could even employ other people to do the fishing. My word, you could own a whole fleet of fishing boats if you weren't so lazy.'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'Well, if you owned your own fleet of boats, and employed other people to do the fishing, you would have as much money as you could ever dream of.'

'Why would I want that?'

‘Well, then you could spend the rest of your life just doing whatever you wanted to do, sitting in the sun, relaxing and enjoying yourself, with no worries...’

Source unknown<sup>2</sup>

Jesus talked in story, we shared about this last week in the message in church. Stories push us beyond our boundary, they invite us to imagine what character we might be in the story. In fact as Methodists we are called by the founder John Wesley to let scripture, the stories that God followers have written down to shape us. Gregory Mobley says, “The task of theology is the linking of our individual story with the biggest story we can imagine.”

What bigger story is there than the hope we have that God and the sense of God we have received is about a love and force that binds us to one another, calls us to something greater, and reminds us that we are a part of a story of that Love found in Jesus growing bigger and bigger until it overwhelms the universe.

Some people say, there are two kinds of truth. Little “t” truth are those things that we track every day, who actually said what and how it all happened. Then there is Big “T” truth, which we all know in our hearts. Big “T” Truth happens when we can see the bigger picture and all of the small misgivings of yesterday play out to make hope, joy, peace and love possible for generations beyond us.

It is big “T” truth that something around guns is going to have to change in our country for us to escape the madness and violence we have seen happen this weekend and in the over 200 public shootings this year.

As faithful people we need to learn what big “T” truths god calls us to.

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<sup>2</sup> Silf, Margaret. One Hundred Wisdom Stories (pp. 80-81). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

To do this let's take for example this piece of little "t" truth that helps us get to a big "T" truth. God does not speak very much in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. In fact some would argue that God never speaks, the Holy Spirit does. While this is not overtly important to our faith. It is strikingly different from the old testament, or Hebrew Bible. One that some people debate trying to dig up places God might have spoken, even when the account talks about angel, not God speaking.

Yet if you read scripture closely you can be sure of one thing, God at least speaks less in the New Testament. And friends the good news is that the best explanation is that different writers and styles of writing are sharing God's revelation in the New Testament, in a way that would share that information best with the people at the time it was written.

Let me use another fish story for example of God's speaking in the Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, Jonah. God speaks directly to Jonah several times in the story. God tells him to go share a message of salvation and hope with a people that Jonah wants nothing to do with, then reminds Jonah that God has got all the details at the end of the story. God even as a character sends a huge fish(again not a whale) to swallow Jonah when he needs a ride.

I say this information about where God speaks as a character in the Bible is a little "t" truth because the big "T" truth is that God is still speaking even though he isn't a character in the New Testament in the same way. God is present in the actions of Jesus, but even more I think it is important that we learn from the fish stories of the New Testament that God is present in the silly disciples, people who are just like us, silly humans.

Before I share a final fish story I need to say this, I still can't fly fish worth a darn. I have read great Montana novels like "A River Runs Through It," I know God can be found on the river, but I just can't get the casting down. Then I stumbled past this last Patrick McManus quote and if you aren't a fly fisherman you may not get it, so bear with me.

"I have practiced ignorance most of my life and am intimately familiar with all its variations and applications...Let us now apply ignorance to fly-fishing. Suppose your flyfishing is like mine—no offense intended—and your main objective is somehow to get a fly to plop on the water in

the hope that nearby there's a fish lacking in matters of style and taste." —*Ignoramus*, October 1997

McManus must have been a disciple in training, I must be a disciple in training, and I would dare say we all are disciples in training because the last story I share shows that ignorance may be one of the way God speaks through to remind us that God still speaks and is showing up for us still.

A few weeks after our first story about Rachel Held Evans she found herself at another Episcopalian dinner party. She is a sucker for those some Episcopalian food I guess, probably cause they have good drinks.

Anyway, she shares this about our final story from the Bible:

Not long after my exchange of fish stories with the priest at the dinner party, I found myself at yet another Episcopal church at yet another buffet table, this time asking the random strangers who had gathered about their favorite Bible stories.

"The one where Jesus meets his disciples on the beach," said a young mother, referring to a story from John's gospel.

Early one morning, shortly after Jesus has risen from the dead, the disciples are out fishing once again when they spot a mysterious figure on the shore.

"Friends, haven't you any fish?" the stranger asks (John 21:5).

When they answer no, he tells them to try casting on the other side of the boat. Sure enough, the net gets so heavy with fish, it nearly sinks the boat. The disciples immediately

recognize the man as Jesus, and Peter is so overcome with emotion, he jumps out of the boat to swim to his teacher and friend. (Ol' Pete spends a lot of time jumping out of boats.) When the rest of the disciples catch up, lugging their catch behind them, they see Jesus has made a charcoal fire over which he is cooking some fish. He has bread too, and invites the disciples to join him for a meal. The text notes they catch a total of 153 fish, "and although there were so many, the net was not torn" (21:11 ESV).

"I like that one too," I said to the mother, and then posited the theory that the number 153 in rabbinic numerology signifies "completion" and perhaps corresponds to a specific prophecy in Ezekiel that describes a great river full of all kinds of fish flowing out of a restored temple. It's worth noting, I added, that John emphasized that the net was full but not torn, which means the net might symbolize the church, holding a great diversity of fish together in unity. Early Christian art depicts Peter and John holding a net on either side of a stream flowing from a temple, suggesting they made that connection too.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking about all that," the woman said with a smile. "I just like the idea of God frying up fish for breakfast."<sup>3</sup>

Friends as disciples we are called to simply know that God speaks to us through stories that remind us we are worthy of being caught up in God's love, and that we are then called to catch others up in that love.

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<sup>3</sup> Evans, Rachel Held. *Inspired* (pp. 188-190). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.



Even us silly, fish story telling humans. God wants us to do something to know that in order for God cook breakfast we might have to cast our nets differently in this world.

Shalom and Amen