

January 25th, Third Sunday after the Epiphany
The Rev. G. Thomas Mustard

An avid fisherman was stopped by the game warden at Smith Mountain Lake not too long ago as he exited his boat with two buckets of good-size bass. The game warden said, “May I see your license?”

The man answered, “I don’t have a fishing license. I didn’t know I needed one. You see, sir, these are pet fish.”

“Pet fish?” the warden said.

“Yes, sir. Every night I take these fish down to the lake and let them swim around for a while. Then I whistle and they jump back into the buckets and I take them home for the night.”

“That’s the best fish tale I’ve ever heard,” the warden said. “You know fish can’t do that.”

The man looked at the warden for a moment and then said, “Here, I’ll show you. It really works.”

“Okay. I’ve got to see this!” The game warden was skeptical, but curious.

The man poured the fish into the lake and stood and waited. After several minutes, the warden turned to the man and said, “Well?”

“Well, what?” the man said.

“When are you going to call them back?” the warden asked.

“Call who back?” the man said, with a sincere, puzzled look.

“The FISH!”

“What fish?” the man said, as he turned to place his boat on the trailer for the trip back home.

There are hundreds where that one came from. You probably have some of your own. Fish stories are almost as numerous as fish. I don’t doubt that Peter, Andrew, James, and John told a fish story or two during their hours on the Sea of Galilee. Peter would definitely have some to tell; about the time he was invited to traipse off toward the rabbi on the water. Or, how about the trip when they had caught nothing until the rabbi yells at them from the shore and they threw the nets to the opposite side of the boat and couldn’t haul it in because of all the fish.

It is rather amazing that fishing, once done in order to earn a livelihood or to simply live, has now become a sport at which one might earn a good living; just in prize money.

I read an interview some time back with one of those champion bass fishermen. The question was asked about any particular secrets to the man’s

success? “It’s simple,” the man said, “I try to remember three things. One, keep yourself out of sight. Two, know as much about the bait as you do about the fish. Three, learn to be patient.”

I would suggest to you that Jesus must have known that those three identical things would also work for catching people for the Kingdom. I don’t think it was accidental that the first disciples earned their living from fishing. Those qualities that make for successful fishing also make for effective witnessing for God.

We may see in Peter, Andrew, James, and John certain things that would be helpful for us as we learn to be more effective evangelists, sharers of the Good News. First, these were highly successful men in their chosen vocation. We sometimes talk and sing about the simple, poor fisher-folk as if they were starving to death as fishermen and had nothing to lose in accepting Jesus’ invitation to follow him. That is simply not so! Jesus saw in the very success of their work the potential for successful discipleship. The point of that is that God wants us to be successful in our chosen vocations because he can and does, if we allow him, use that success to lead us to see that the gifts and skills necessary for that success can be used to lead others to him.

Highly successful people who give God the credit and the glory make very successful witnesses for the Gospel. That is why Jesus called four very successful businessmen as the first disciples.

Now, back to the champion bass fisherman for a moment. He advised, first of all, to keep yourself out of the way. I am most leery of ministries that purport to extol the Lord’s name that are, in fact, named after a person. What tends to happen is that the original intent of the ministry is swallowed up by egotism and the seductions of the world become so strong that all manner of rationalizations and justifications are given for profane extravagances. When we proclaim ourselves and become highly visible and then are found to be people with feet of clay, the Gospel suffers. People find in that a ready-made excuse for denying the claim of the church on their time, personal allegiance, and their possessions.

Successful fishers of people are those who have recognized the truth of St. Paul’s words, “It is not ourselves we proclaim; we proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord.” We tend to forget how that verse continues. St. Paul goes on to say, “And we are your servants for Christ’s sake.” The most successful fishers of people are those who keep themselves out of the way while quietly giving themselves in service to others. It is as true today as it was then; the best fishers of people keep themselves out of the way.

The second thing the bass fisherman said was that success depended

as much on knowing as much about the bait as one knows about the fish. At the very least this advice means we should be engaged in a regular discipline of Bible study and prayer. We don't learn very much about scripture and prayer from watching other people do it. We get to know the drawing, wooing influence of God by first of all experiencing it in our own lives and spending regular time with that conscious contact with God.

It is a sad thing that many people believe they stop needing to learn about God and God's will for one's life right after confirmation. An important secondary meaning of this bit of advice is that we need to be with other people. We do not get to know other fish by isolating ourselves from them. We need to study human nature; allowing the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and anthropology to inform our theology. God does not choose to operate in a vacuum. God works in, around, under, and through people. We need people in our lives. We need to remember that God created us with one mouth and two ears on purpose. The logical reason for that design is that we need to listen twice as much as we talk. It has been my experience that I have not learned much while talking, especially during a sermon. It is as true today as it was then; the best fishers of people know as much as they can about the bait and the fish.

Finally, the bass fisherman said the best fishermen learn to be patient. Patience is an acquired skill. Some call it a virtue and in many ways it is just that. We are not born with it. We come into the world as little bundles of id, massive instinctual drives that tell us that we want what we want when we want it. If I have one glaring character defect that has caused the most difficulty in my life it would have to be a lack of patience. I do want you to know that it is better than it was, but I have a long way to go. I still have difficulty understanding why people can't see my brilliant, well-reasoned point of view and live accordingly. Every so often God sends little reminders that it is not my job to get others to see my point of view, but to see his!

Patience seems to be a matter of prayerful practice. That is, impatience does not yield to willpower but to prayerfully turning things over to God's will, care, and guidance. It appears to be true that the more one practices prayerfully turning things over to God, the more patient one becomes. It is amazing how that works.

Would you like to be more effective in your fishing for others? If so, remember to keep yourself out of the way, learn as much about the bait as about the fish, and learn to be more patient. Please be clear in your thinking as a fish swimming in this vast ocean; God in Christ calls every single one of us who confess him as Lord and Savior to become a fisher of others.

We may never become a champion fisherman. That's okay. God does not call us to be recognized by others, but to be faithful. That way we will never have to hide all the fish we catch. Amen.