Go Fish

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Earlier this summer, my family visited dear friends in Chicago. Douglas, his son, and a number of friends had just returned from their annual fishing trip to Canada. He had a number of fishing tales, but one was particularly memorable. Because summer days are light longer up north and evenings are a good time to catch fish, Douglas and a few others decided to go fishing again while the rest of the group remained at the cabin. As it began to get dark, they decided to head back, but to their great surprise and dismay they realized that they had run out of gas. They started to use the trolling motor to get back in, but this was going to take a very long time and the electric motor would likely die before they returned.

It was getting really dark in this remote area. Douglas and the others were literally sitting in the darkness with inadequate resources, hoping and praying that they would get home. Suddenly, two sisters—retired women who spend the summer on the lake—happened upon them. They, too, had gone out to fish and were on their way back, and they gladly figured out a way to tow the group back to shore. What would have normally taken about 20 minutes took well over an hour. As you can imagine, my friend was not only relieved but very grateful and joyful to be home and reunited with the others. As I heard that story, I thought, “That will preach.”

You see, like my friend, we’re all running on empty spiritually. Apart from Christ, we are lost—in the dark, helpless, and hopeless—unable to achieve or attain our salvation by our own efforts. All people need to be rescued by the grace and power of Christ. And those women who set out to go fishing, ended up catching fish as they reeled them in. As followers of Christ, we have been given a new vocation: we are called to become the kind of people who are willing to do what is needed to bring people to their true home that is found only in Jesus.

Our scripture lesson makes this point very clear through another fishing story. Jesus asks Peter, a fisherman, if he can use his boat as a platform to speak to the crowd. After he is done teaching, Jesus tells Peter, “Go fish.” This is rather ironic: an itinerant preacher—the son of a carpenter—telling a professional fisherman when and how to fish! It’s the middle of the day, and Peter is busy cleaning the nets. He’s probably tired and maybe wants to go home. But notice Peter’s response: “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” Even though Peter shares the reasons not to do what Jesus says, he does it out of respect for Jesus and his authority.
Peter’s first response is to listen to and obey the word of Jesus. And the result is remarkable! He catches so many fish the boat is overflowing and begins to sink. It’s more than Peter can handle, so he calls James and John to help.

What has taken place is no accident. It’s a miracle! It’s by the grace and power of God that Peter has caught so many fish in the middle of the day. So notice the next response: “But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” Peter’s second response is one of humility. Humility is simply knowing your place. Peter’s response reflects that he understands who Jesus is and he understands who he is. Jesus is Lord, and Peter is a sinner. Peter assumes that a man of God would not want anything to do with an everyday sinner. He is assuming that God works with and uses the devout and saintly types.

But it turns out that humility and admitting our inability and sin is the best prerequisite for service. When we are aware of our inadequacy and inability to measure up, we can then turn to God and depend on Him and His supernatural resources of grace and power to do in and through and for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Peter’s confession becomes his resume for service.

Jesus goes on to assure Peter and all of us by saying, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Rather than being unworthy, Peter is ready to follow and to serve Jesus. “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

For years, this passage bothered me. I wondered, are we really supposed to imitate Peter’s third response—to leave everything to follow Jesus? What will I miss if I do that? There’s actually a new term called FOMO—short for the fear of missing out. It’s the “anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on a social media website.” Our fear is reflected in asking, “Have we taken the wrong job or connected with the wrong people or made the wrong commitment or chosen the wrong event?”
John Ortberg writes in his book, *All the Places to Go*, “For all of its dangers, FOMO tells us something fundamental about ourselves. We have an insatiable hunger for more. We have a longing for life beyond what we are experiencing right now. Handled rightly, FOMO can lead us toward God’s open doors.”

It did for Peter and the other disciples. They had been listening to Jesus’ teaching for a while and had become so convinced of who Jesus was and what he could do, that their greatest fear was missing out on the chance of a lifetime of following him, the Messiah or the anointed one. So, they left everything to follow Jesus. What do you fear missing out on? Do you believe there is something out there that is better than following Jesus, the Lord of the universe?

Now this passage tells of the unique call of Peter and the other disciples. This is not everyone’s call. We know Jesus told some people who wanted to follow him to stay where they were and to tell their story. What this encounter does reveal is that to follow Jesus, there are things we have to leave behind. And most importantly, we have to allow him to be the Lord of our lives and prioritize everything else around him. So, here is the “So what?” What does this mean for us?

I confess that I used to see my life like a pie chart, consisting of work or school, family and friends, recreation, health, finances. I would seek to balance the many parts of my life, and I thought of my faith life and spirituality as one of the pieces of the pie. But Jesus doesn’t want to be a piece of your life that you squeeze in when you have time or the inclination. Jesus wants us to arrange our lives so that he is the center of our lives. He want us to see him as imbedded in all of it—not just one part of it. Jesus is Lord of life—all of it—the whole kit and caboodle.

So what keeps us from arranging our lives to follow Jesus? I would say the biggest reason in our culture is busyness. In his book, *Simplify*, Bill Hybels shares two great questions to ask ourselves: What would my schedule look like if God were in charge of it? How would God have me spend my time today?

And then he shares a very thoughtful challenge: My schedule is far less about what I want to get done and far more about who I want to become. The challenge is to arrange our lives and our schedule with the end in
mind. Who do you want to become? We are going to be busy, but where is our busyness leading us?

In Matthew 4:19, we read Jesus’ call to the disciples saying, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” At the recent Leadership Summit, one speaker restated this verse in a way that really captured my attention. “Follow my lead, and I will transform you into people who have incredible influence over people’s lives.”

Jesus is Lord, and so he invites us to follow him. This isn’t a once-in-a-lifetime decision. It’s a lifestyle of listening to Jesus and following his lead as Lord of the universe. It’s a series of decisions one after another after another that impacts how we think, and what we do, and how we arrange our lives and schedules.

It involves prioritizing my relationship with him. It’s not about willpower, because the will has no power. We can’t change ourselves by our own effort. It’s not about trying harder or doing more. It’s about trusting Jesus and his supernatural resources. Jesus says, “I will make you.” "I will transform you into people who have incredible influence over people’s lives.” This is key to our life in Jesus. He is the one who is doing the work. He is the one who is changing and transforming us into his image. Jesus accomplishes for us what we can’t accomplish on our own by his grace and power. But how does he do it?

How does he transform us into the people he wants us to be? The means of grace are spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are the practices, relationships, and experiences in which we offer ourselves to God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Perhaps a better way of thinking of our lives is by laying it out in concentric circles.

Personal practices connect us to Jesus. Worship, study of scripture, and prayer are the classic spiritual disciplines that help us to keep Jesus at the center of our lives. Worship certainly includes gathering with others on Sunday morning, but it’s more than that. It’s a way of living our whole lives as an expression of our love for God with an attitude of gratitude for all God has done for us. Study of scripture is the way we listen to God allowing His truth to renew and transform us. Prayer is learning to live with a deep awareness of God’s presence and love so that we are in conversation with Him all the time. These and other disciplines help us to
learn to let go and let God be in control of our lives and our relationship with Him and others.

Relationships connect us to others. Ours is not an individual but a communal faith meant to be lived and experienced in relationship with others. If we are married, our relationship with our spouse is the most important relationship followed by relationships with our children, and then other family members. But it’s important to have relationships beyond our family as well. Most of us have acquaintances, but we need to cultivate what Stan calls “friends of the heart” or spiritual friends, with whom we share vulnerably and honestly, find support for our struggles, and even dare to confess our sins.

This is why we are encouraging everyone to engage in Worship +2. Worship connects us to God, but we want children, students, and adults to find spiritual friends in a group—a place to grow together with others. Groups are a place where you can know and be known, love and be loved, serve and be served, celebrate and be celebrated. This is what we are made for.

And then the last circle shows that life experiences connect us to Christ’s ministry in the world. Understand that our real, everyday, ordinary life is the place of transformation—our marriages, families, friendships, neighborhoods, work places, recreation, and on and on. If we ignore the realities of our real life, we cannot do what Jesus would do 24/7.

It’s important to keep in mind the seasons of our lives. Whether we are single or married, have young children or are an empty-nester will impact our lives and how we spend our time. My time with God and with others changes with every new season in my children’s lives and with changing realities in my workplace, but the priority of making time for God does not.

The seasons of suffering shape who we are and what we are able to do, whether grief, illness, job loss, or financial difficulties. But it is also in these times that we become most aware of our need for God and His grace. It’s important to find the support needed, given our season in life, which is why we have ministries like GriefShare, Passages, and Stephen Ministers.
Service is an important part of our faith—a way we love God and love our neighbor. Choosing to voluntarily step out of our comfort zones through service turns out to be one of the best ways to grow and be transformed. God doesn’t need us to do anything, but He delights in our participating with Him in His incredible work in the world. Jesus wants us to have incredible influence on people’s lives. He wants us to share in the joy of using the best of who we are for His grand purposes. We don’t have to do everything, but we do need to know who we are—how we are shaped, and then find the right fit—our place to serve for the glory of God, the abundance of our own lives, and the good of others, whether that is working with children, youth or adults, in caring, teaching, leading, administrating, and sharing the good news.

As fall begins, there is always a lot going on, but let’s not miss out on living for what matters. It’s easy to find all the reasons not to. However, in his book, Soul Keeping, John Ortberg shares Dallas Willard’s words to him: “You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God.” Nobody can do that for you—not your spouse, your children, your boss. You are the keeper of your soul.

And that’s why we, at VPC, encourage everyone to develop a spiritual growth plan. This isn’t about doing one more thing. It’s about arranging your life to follow Jesus—whatever that means for you. And the reason is this: “You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing deep contentment, joy, and confidence in your everyday life with God.” So be intentional in connecting with Jesus, with others, and with Christ’s work in the world.

I want to say a little bit more about Jesus’ call to share the good news with others. Remember the fishing story I told about my friend Douglas? Those two sisters had the joy and satisfaction of being a part of a rescue story. I’m sure Douglas and all those involved in that fishing story will be telling it for years to come.

Friends, that’s what witnessing is—sharing about Jesus, his goodness and love, and what he has done in our lives. Sharing the good news is letting God use us in His grand adventure of finding the lost sheep, rescuing people from the kingdom of darkness, and reeling them into the kingdom of light.

So why don’t we do it? Why are we hesitant to share the good news with others?
It has to do with what we believe—about God, ourselves, our calling. I’m so grateful for this sermon series and the work Phil and Debbie Kratovil did on the devotionals, because I have been challenged to think and reflect more on what I really believe. I want to ask you some questions I have been asking myself. Do you believe Jesus is Lord? Do you believe that scripture is true? Do you believe people are lost without Jesus? Do you believe lost people matter to God? Do you believe the Gospel is good news and really changes people’s lives? I do believe—all of these things. And I believe Jesus has called me and all of us to follow him and become fishers of people.

Jesus wants to transform us so that we have an incredible influence on the lives of others. Three simple words and actions could influence the lives of others. No matter who we are or how much time we think we have, this is doable: Prayer, Care, Share.

1. Prayer: Begin listing and praying regularly for a few neighbors, co-workers, or classmates. If you can’t do that, then get out and intentionally meet some neighbors. Pray for their needs as you become aware of them and ask God to work in their lives.

2. Care for them by being friendly and ready to listen. Build relationships and be responsive to needs that arise. Reach out with random acts of kindness. Really love your neighbors as Christ has loved you.

3. Share. Let God use you as you share your home, office, or school space freely. Share a meal or a coffee break. Participating in the Global Friends is one way of sharing your home, your time, and your life with those far from home. Be ready to share your story—how God has worked in your life—and to share good news of Jesus as God opens doors to do so. If you don’t know how to, then learn.

Friends, when Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people,” he wasn’t asking us to do one more thing. It’s way more radical than that. He’s asking us to rearrange our lives so that he can transform us. As our mission states, we are Becoming like Christ Together for the World. Only you can discern what that looks like, given your real, ordinary everyday life.

The invitation from God is to become the kind of people who are available and willing and ready to have an incredible influence on people’s lives. So let’s do it. When we walk out these doors today, let’s join Jesus is his incredible mission in the world. Let’s go fish!