

When I lived in Maine I decided to take up fly-fishing. There are a number of beautiful trout streams, and I thought I would enjoy the beauty of the rivers and the rush of the water. There was something aesthetic about watching a fly fisherman cast. It would be great to catch a fish on a fly I tied myself. So I went to L.L. Bean's and bought the whole outfit – fly rod, reel and line, waders, fishing vest. I bought a fishing license. I read books about technique and about fly-tying, and I spent hours in the backyard practicing my casting. Finally, after all my preparations, I went fishing on the Carrabasset River. I had fun, but no fish. I went several other times, with no luck. Finally, I found a small stream and using a dry fly, I coaxed a trout onto my hook. I was excited, as I reeled in my 7 inch, barely legal, brook trout. Pound for pound, that brook trout was probably the most expensive fish I ever ate, but it was worth it.

Happily God has more luck on his fishing trips. Our readings today are stories about the big ones he caught. Of course, God is fishing for men, not fish. It seems he sometimes fishes using hooks and line, one fish at a time. For Isaiah, God cast about in his dreams, and hooked him with a vision. I suspect it is not a pleasant experience for a fish to be hooked. I'm sure there is some pain involved. It was not a pleasant experience for Isaiah either. He saw the Lord sitting on a throne, saw the six-winged seraphs, and felt the trembling of the thresholds, and he was sure that he was lost, unworthy to see the Lord and live. "I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips." So one of the seraphs touched his lips with a live coal. That had to hurt! But it also purified him and blotted out his sin and guilt.

In our reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul defends his authority to proclaim the good news. He too had been hooked. "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle...But by the grace of God I am what I am."

We remember that Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus, knocked him off his horse, and blinded him. It involved pain for him, too, as he realized that his persecutions of the church worked against the will of God. But he too was forgiven, and given into the care of the Christian community.

Then in our gospel today, at the request of Jesus, Simon Peter let down the nets, even though he thought it silly, and caught so many fish that the nets were about to break. Peter recognized the miracle, and fell at the Jesus' knees saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Being in the presence of the holy can be excruciating when we don't believe we are worthy. But Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, from now on you will be catching people." So Peter too was hooked, and they left everything and followed him.

There is more than one way to catch fish. Commercial fishermen generally do not use hooks and lines. They use nets. It is a more gentle method, without sharp hooks, and it catches more fish, and it catches all kinds of fish indiscriminately. Not all the fish will be "keepers." Some may be too small, and are thrown back to grow some more. Some may escape in a panic as the nets are hauled in. Sometimes God lets down his net and catches all kinds of people. In fact I believe that his net of grace catches all of us. Some of us may be too small, not ready to encounter God's grace, and need more time to accept being caught. Some of us may escape, finding the net of God's grace too frightening. Some people may need to be caught by a different net to find God's grace in a different tradition.

However we are caught, it can be a painful and frightening experience. We have to acknowledge, like Isaiah, and Peter and Paul, our own sinfulness, our own unworthiness. Perhaps that is why we resist God's call to us, why we try to escape his net or his hook. It is

hard to acknowledge that we have been living by our own desires, and not God's. It is hard to give up the things we thought were so good. It is hard to begin to live in a new unfamiliar way.

You see, when we have been caught, things cannot be the same again. We see life from a new perspective. When we are caught, we have new things to do. When we are caught we are given a new vocation. When the Lord asks, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah responds, "Here am I; send me!" When Paul was caught, his zeal for persecuting the church was transformed into a zeal for proclaiming the good news. When Peter was caught, he became a fisher of people. When they brought the boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus. That was their new vocation.

When we have been caught by God's grace, we are given a new vocation too. Does that mean that we have to leave everything in order to follow him? Sometimes it does. At the church where I did my field education, one of the parishioners was a rather high-powered lawyer, earning a six-figure income, maybe more. He had argued before the Supreme Court five different times. But he became hooked, and decided to go back to school to get a degree in education, so he could teach in the public schools in Chicago. Some of us who have been hooked give up other careers to become priests or deacons. Perhaps you have heard about Greg Mortenson. He was a mountain climber trying to climb K2 in Pakistan, but got lost on his way back down, and nearly died. He was taken in by an impoverished village, and nursed back to health. He was hooked by their kindness. Long story short, he realized he had been leading his life in selfish ways, and ended up dedicating himself to building girls' schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. His book *Three Cups of Tea*, which may have more influence than any number of bombs, has become required reading for the military leaders in Afghanistan,. While not

explicitly Christian, I believe he was hooked by God to change his life and take on a new vocation. God works in wondrous ways.

For most of us, being hooked will not lead to such a dramatic vocation. What Jesus asks of us for vocation is simply to follow him, to be his disciples. When I was working with a church to develop a mission statement, I had suggested using the word disciple. One of the group thought that was dangerous language, because it suggested that we were a cult following a charismatic crazy leader. He had not been hooked yet. Well, perhaps we are, but our leader is good, his charisma traverses over 2000 years, and his craziness is actually the truth that the crazy world does not want to hear or follow.

H.King Oehmig has suggested that following Jesus, for most of us can be boiled down to three G's:

First, Go to Church. There are not many people whose faith has grown deeper, whose discipleship has grown stronger, by playing golf on Sunday morning.

Second, Give significantly. God deals only in gifts, not wages. It is out of uncalculating generosity that we give of time, talent and treasure. As followers we are to faithful, not out of necessity, but gratuitously, as an act of praise and thanksgiving.

Third, Give up Grudges. Jesus never curses those who persecute him, not even his executioners, he only forgives. Our desire to be right has to be superseded by our desire to absorb God's righteousness.

Whether we have been caught by hook or by net, whether we are called to dramatic ministry or a life of quiet example, we are all called to follow Jesus. We are called to give up our lives, our time, our treasure, our grudges. Pound for pound, we may be the most expensive fish there are. But to God we are worth it.

