

The universal symbol of a person taking his ease – the sign on the door, “Gone fishing.” You came to the medical office to get a checkup, but the doctor decided he had done enough for one day; “Gone fishing.” You came to the lawyer’s office to put First Baptist Church of Gaithersburg into your will, but you were met with a locked door and a hastily scrawled message, “Gone fishing.” By the way, come back another day, if that’s what you want to do, or contact the Executive Director of the D. C. Baptist Convention Foundation – that would be me – for I am always fishing for people willing to make legacy gifts. End of commercial!

“Gone fishing”. Not just the sign of a person taking his ease, but all too often, the sign of a person who is tired, someone who has worked too long and too hard, who needs peace and quiet and something to do that just removes all the stresses of the moment. “Gone fishing” – it means, “I am fed up to here with all the stuff I have to do. I’m outta here!” “Gone fishing”.

And so seven men wandered to the lakeside one warm spring afternoon. Friends they had been, and fellow travelers. The last three years or so they had invested themselves in an enterprise that had had its ups and downs. But nothing like the events of the last few weeks. Those weeks had been full of incredible happenings – a march to and through the city, a series of nasty encounters, and then – it still pained them to remember it – the arrest of their leader and his swift summary execution. This little band of men had experienced that forboding feeling you have when you can see where things are headed, and it’s not good; and then that crushing grief when you realize that everything you have given yourself to for three years has been swept away. A lot of stress in all of that, enough to make anyone want to go fishing and get away from it all.

But that was not the end of it. The death of their leader was not the only thing they had dealt with. Beyond anyone’s capacity to expect, three days later He was alive again. Up from the grave He arose, with a mighty triumph over His foes, and they saw Him with their own eyes. They met with Him in an upper room. They traveled with Him on the road to Emmaus. Jesus of Nazareth, their incomparable teacher, who all along had demonstrated that He was not like other men, was now alive and among them.

Joyful though that was, they also found it stressful. They could not cope with the range of emotions they felt. There is, after all, something called eustress as well as distress, but, good or bad, it’s all stress. So, what do you do after your world has been turned upside down? What do you do when you need time to make sense of such extraordinary events? You get away for a while. You go fishing.

But, you know, sometimes even the things we love to do do not heal the wounds or ease the pain. I don’t go fishing, but I do love music. And so when I feel overwhelmed, I go to my piano and start playing. Sometimes it works to move with Mozart or to bask in Bach. But sometimes even that does not work, for my fingers fumble and my memory lapses and the music just won’t come. I am in worse condition than before I started because I cannot make the notes come together into harmony. Music, fishing, whatever your escape is, sometimes it just won’t work.

And so there they are, the seven of them, out in a boat, getting nowhere. Dip the nets and draw them up; seaweed. Dip again and draw up again; the splash of the water reveals nothing, no catch. And their tensions deepen. Will they ever be relieved of all their stresses?

And then on the shore, Jesus, giving guidance. A hundred yards away, so near and yet so far, the Lord of life, offering leadership. And when they follow His command, and put out their net on the other side of the boat, the net is filled with so many fish they can scarcely manhandle it into the boat. Jesus! He always makes a difference. He always brings something new to life. He always has a solution to the issues. And He always has an invitation. The invitation this time? “Come and have breakfast”. Have you gone fishing and came up with nothing? “Come and have breakfast.”

I remember the first Earth Day, in 1970. I remember it because the University of Kentucky, where I was Baptist Campus Minister, was among the schools that put on an Earth Day observance. I had been asked to offer the invocation at that assembly, and did so gladly. I came to wish, however, that I had been invited to do the benediction instead, because I seriously wanted to tell the Lord how mistaken was the speaker of the day. Marlow Cook was one of Kentucky’s United States Senators, and he spoke about the Book of Genesis and its command to multiply and replenish the Earth. Said the Senator, who in the next election suffered a well-deserved defeat, “We have made a mess of things by following that Biblical command.” He was talking about over-population, of course, but I didn’t like it because he was not respecting my Bible. I got hung up on Bible interpretation and didn’t really listen to much else that he said that day.

Since then, nearly forty Earth Days have come and gone, and we are still wrestling with the Bible. But I read it through a different set of eyes today. I see new things.

I

For one thing, I see that God has given us a world of plenty, but that we are still depleting God’s gifts. I see that God has given us a world that is ample and lush and that can feed all of God’s children. There is food in

abundance, energy resources are everywhere, all sorts of things sustain us. But we insist on following the same old paths to depletion.

Jesus' disciples kept on fishing out of one side of the boat, never dreaming that on the other side there would be more than enough – not until Jesus prompted them to change their habits. And so today we keep on supposing we can continue to live the way we've always lived, and somehow things will be all right. We imagine we can keep on driving our cars as far and as fast as we like, and gasoline will go back to mere pennies. I filled my car up last night and thought I would have to take out a home equity loan to pay for a tank of gasoline! But that has not stopped me from consuming the stuff.

We imagine we can keep on fishing the bay for all the crabs Maryland can mallet, and that they will dutifully reproduce for us. We imagine that we can keep on eating all we want to eat, when we want to eat it, and that there will be no health problems out of all that cholesterol. We are creatures of habit, bad habit, and we suppose that we really will not have to change. Somebody will do something and we can buy our way out of the problem.

But no, we need to follow the Lord's leadership. We need to hear Jesus' call to fish out of the other side of the boat. We are in a time when scientists and scholars are finding new sources of energy, new ways to improve crop yields, new ways to stay healthy. Let's embrace those things. Christians, let's use our spiritual discipline to curb our consuming appetites. We Christians of all people should be among those who need not be anxious about what we shall eat or what we shall put on, for our heavenly Father knows our needs and points the way to provide for them.

You know, when I think about this, I am reminded of the old adage that says that you can give someone a fish, and he will be hungry again tomorrow, but if you teach him how to fish, he can sustain himself. I am so glad that our American Baptist missionaries are doing this on the mission field. In past weeks you have heard how Raphael Olero and the mission church in Kenya have built wells, so that people can have clean and healthy water. You heard from Suzannah Raffield about how in Thailand our missionaries teach young women productive skills so that they can support themselves without falling prey to the sex trade. All over the world, missionaries are showing that people living in unproductive ways can be taught new ways. In God's world of plenty, when it seems there is not enough, listen to the Lord's leading, and He will show another way.

Gone fishing? Frustrated about the cost of everything? Let's remember that God has made a world of plenty, but that getting what we need from it will take some new directions. "Cast the net to the other side."

II

Now when I started preaching here a few months ago, several of you said, "We want you to keep politics out of the pulpit. We want spiritual messages and not politics." Not to worry, because, if you go online and read some of the nearly 400 sermons I have posted there, you will look in vain for words like "Democrat" and "Republican". You will not find the names of McCain or Obama or even Clinton – well, not Hillary anyway. I am pretty sure that your search would lead you to the other Clinton during the days of Monica you-know-who! But no, I have never preached partisan politics.

However, let me assure you that God is interested in politics. Let me assure you that God cares about more than religious things. God cares about the total person. God cares about heart and soul and mind and strength. Read Matthew 25, the account of the great day of judgment, when the Lord says that we will be judged by whether we fed and clothed and comforted those in need. Read that and you can never again suppose that God does not care about politics. He does. He does indeed. And so it is impossible to keep issues out of the pulpit, though clearly it is best never to get into endorsing candidates. Don't worry about my preaching partisanship. But preach positions and problems I must.

And so I introduce you to a fellow believer, a Baptist, a man who in fact studied for the ministry, and who remains involved in Baptist life. I introduce you to Brother Albert Gore, Jr., and to his inconvenient truths. Mr. Gore is a person who cares passionately about this earth. A little story: nearly thirty years ago, when I was on the D. C. Baptist Convention staff, helping to provide continuing education for pastors, we decided to offer a conference on environmentally sound church building management. Got that? Environmentally sound church building management – hardly an exciting topic then and probably not a bell-ringer now either. But somebody said that there was a little-known congressman from Nashville, Tennessee, who was interested in the environment and who was an active Baptist. Al Gore agreed to come and speak to maybe fifteen pastors, and charged no fee. I will not mention that now he gets a hundred thousand dollars every time he does his "Inconvenient Truth" presentation, but in those days he spoke simply because he was passionate about this issue. I will always remember him saying, "Pastors, if you care about the environment, that will do as much to fulfill the Kingdom of God as all your preaching of salvation."

Mr. Gore was echoing what I think we all know instinctively, and that is that our God wants His children to be fed and clothed and housed. Our God wants His children to be cared for. Our God is not interested in a fake spirituality that ignores real human needs. Our God wants us, His church, to do whatever we can for the last, the least, the lost, and the lonely. Our God wants health for us all.

Listen to Jesus' invitation to His disciples that day. How simple! And yet how profound. **"Come have breakfast."** "Come have breakfast." Let's eat. Let's enjoy the bounties of God's nature. Come and be fed.

A former archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, used to say that Christianity is the most materialistic of the world's religions. He did not mean that there is something in Christianity that makes us greedy. He meant that the Christian faith embraces the material world – Jesus the risen Lord is a real, physical body, eating bread and fish. Christianity takes this world seriously and cares about how people live.

"Gone fishing?" God wants His children fed and clothed and housed. The will of the Lord for everybody is, "Come and have breakfast".

III

But this Earth Day message would not be complete, nor would it be Biblically accurate, if I did not go on to another dimension. For in this passage there is something very peculiar and yet, once we understand it, it is very compelling. There is a number given for the great catch of fish. Simon Peter went aboard the boat and hauled the net ashore, **"full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn."** What in the world is that all about? Why did someone count, and why was this number, 153, reported to us?

There are a number of intriguing theories, none of which can either be proved or disproved. But let me offer just one. Jerome, the fifth century Christian scholar and Bible translator, said that the ancients had counted 153 species of fish. Of course now we know that there are more than 29,000, but the point is that in the ancient world it was assumed that there were exactly 153 different kinds of fish. So, said Jerome, and I like this – the number symbolizes God's care for the entire world. For all His creatures, all His works, all His people. And the net was not torn. God cares about all His creatures, His works, and His people and wants to bring them in without losing any of them.

If I am to be a follower of Jesus, then I must care for all things. I must care about the air, the earth and the seas. I must care whether my church building is energy efficient and whether my grocery store gives me plastic bags and Styrofoam that will never decompose. I must care about whether my use of insecticides destroys the earth itself. I must care about whether industry builds power plants that pollute the air and damage the streams. I must care about all of God's creation.

And I must care about all of God's people. For if the theory be correct that the number 153 is a symbol for all of humanity, then I must care about all of

God's people. I must care about whether they have health. I must care about whether they are fed. I must care about what sort of education they receive. I must care about their being trained to work productively and support their families. I must care about all of God's people.

And I must care about all aspects of God's people. I must care not only about health and food and education and training. I must also care about their spiritual lives. I must care about their very souls. I must make sure that my church reaches out to everyone, of all races and classes, all nationalities and backgrounds, and teaches all of them how to be alive in this world. I must take the initiative to reach, witness, teach, and share Christ, in all His fullness, with my community, my nation, and even with my world.

I must go fishing. I must become a fisher of men. I must become an evangelist who brings good news to every aspect of a person's life. I must show them that "red and yellow, black and white, they are ALL precious in His sight" and so is their green world. Earth Day means that we care. No, let me go deeper than that. Being Biblical means that we care. Being Christian means that we care. Following Jesus means that we care about saving people – souls and bodies, hearts and economics, minds and health. Let's go fishing.

In the earliest days of the church, believers used the sign of the fish to identify themselves. Scrawling in the sand two arcs that suggested a fish with its forked tail, Christians communicated who they were. In Greek the word for fish, "ichthus", was an acronym that translates as "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." If you made the sign of the fish, you told the world who you were and who He is. It was your way of showing that you intended to be alive in the world, alive for Him.

Some folks today put those Christian fish signs on their cars. That's fine. That's a good start. But I want my car, my home, my church, my government, my community, my witness, all of it, to be a sign that I have gone fishing and I want everyone to be alive in this world.

Jesus! He always makes a difference. He always brings something new to life. He always has a solution to the issues. And He always has an invitation. "Come and have breakfast". Have you gone fishing and came up with nothing? "Come and have breakfast." **L'chaim.**

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