

## “Good Fish, or Not?”

Matthew 13:47-53

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

---

### Matthew 13:47-53 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

I am so glad that our gospels contain a generous supply of fishing stories. Fishing has been an integral part of my family life, and so the sharing of “fish stories” has also been prolific! My grandfather would tell stories of fishing in the icy lakes of northern Ontario, Canada. Aunt Jean loved to fish for bullheads in the muddy pond a couple of miles from Gilletts Bridge in Bradford County, PA. My father always took us fishing in the mighty St. Lawrence River, which during my childhood, was just teaming with Northern Pike, small and large mouth bass, panfish, bullheads, and the occasional musky or eel! And, of course, the biggest fish ~ the ones that shook off the hook ~ were the subjects of most of the stories!

My grandmother hardly ever fished, but she liked to tell stories, some of which I would not feel comfortable repeating during worship!! However, this adaptation of a popular statement has always stuck with me.

*“A young woman was preparing for her wedding. She had spent weeks caring for the final logistical details, and as she worked on getting her wedding dress for the big day, she started to think more deeply about the significance of her impending marriage. The bride’s mother was helping her, and so, wanting to gain the benefit of her mother’s wisdom, the bride asked, ‘Mom, can you give me any advice that will help me as this marriage begins?’*

*“The MOM thought for a moment and finally she said, ‘Yes, I can. Here’s a really important lesson I wished I had learned a little earlier on in my own marriage to your father. It’s this: If you give a man a fish, you can feed him for a day. But if you teach a man to fish, you can get rid of him for a whole weekend!’”*

The parable of the nets and the fish is the last of the seven parables in Matthew’s 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, through which Jesus is teaching the disciples and crowds more about the kingdom of heaven. During this month, we have heard that the kingdom of heaven, or the reign of God’s Love, can be compared with an extravagantly generous sower, with a field in which weeds and wheat are allowed to mature together, with a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large bush, yeast making the dough to rise, a valuable treasure and a pearl of amazing beauty.

Now, Jesus teaches, that the kingdom of heaven is like a net. You might remember that a couple of Jesus’ own disciples were fishermen, and that much of Jesus’ ministry took place in the area around the Sea of Galilee. When Jesus spoke about fish or fishing, the people listening knew what Jesus meant. It was not like the fishing that I engage in on vacation, casting bait or a lure into the water hoping to catch one or two good-sized fish for dinner. “Commercial” fishing of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, consisted of dropping large nets (about the size of this sanctuary) over the side of a boat. When the net filled with fish, the heavy net and fish would slowly be hauled into the boat, or dragged onto the shore. This technique means that you will not only catch the kind of fish you are hoping to catch, but you will catch all fish trapped within the span of the net – wanted or not. Then the fish must be sorted into the “keepers” and those that will be thrown back or thrown out.

## “Good Fish, or Not?”

Matthew 13:47-53

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

---

It seems pretty simple. Right about now you may be thinking, “Yes, just as I suspected. Christ is going to throw out the **‘bad fish.’** So, I need to be sure that I am one of the good fish.” Well, that is right, and an important point in this parable. But there is an even more important message that becomes more clear in Jesus’ explanation of the parable. This whole chapter full of parables helps to set the context for this last one. All along, Jesus has been building up to a vision of the kingdom of heaven as a kingdom of justice, mercy, peace, and generous love. And, it doesn’t take much to understand that in order for God’s kingdom to be this way, it has to be populated by people who live and embody the same values.

And, Jesus goes on to remind us that those fish/people who do not embody kingdom values, will be thrown out. This is where the second very important lesson comes into play. What does Jesus say about who will do the sorting of the good and the bad in the end? The Fishermen? The disciples? NO! Jesus makes it a point to say that at the end of the age, the angels of God will come and separate the evil from the righteous. In other words, God alone is the arbiter of good and evil, **not us!**

So, it is not our job to determine who is in and who is out, whose sins are forgiven and whose are not, whose spiritual gifts are most valuable and whose are not. That is a difficult message for us to hear, because we like to be the ones in control! We like to be the ones trusted with making decisions based on our own good judgement. And here Jesus is saying in essence, “this one isn’t yours to control.” **God’s grace is wild**, and we cannot ever think or pretend to act like we know how God’s grace is working or will ever work in someone else’s life. Through this parable of the nets and fish, Jesus is telling disciples then and now that we don’t get to decide who’s in and who’s out. Our only concern should be to **be good fish**. Our task is not to try to take control of a situation that is not ours to control, but instead to create an environment in which God’s grace will be transformative.

You know, whenever we go fishing, we choose our bait and throw our line into the water, but whatever happens after that is beyond our control. We will not be the ones to decide if a 46-in musky will bite on our lure, or if we will come up with a cute little perch the size of a bait fish. God can produce usefulness out of either, even if we do not! So, Jesus’ message in this parable is clear: don’t worry about everyone else, just **be** a good fish yourself. You can’t control who’s in and who’s out; you can’t control who likes you or not. The best we can do is to love our neighbors and love our enemies, and then trust God to sort out the rest. In Jesus’ parable, the net caught all kinds of fish. The spiritual application of this is that the gospel is offered to everyone without discrimination.

Jesus invited the disciples, and invites us today, to follow him. That’s how our fishing journey began, with a simple invitation from Jesus to follow and become fishers of people. That is where our focus should be. That is where our focus **NEEDS** to be as we endeavor to create an environment for transformational change in all persons’ lives. That is what our focus needs to be as we endeavor to create an environment of growth even in this community of faith. I am a firm believer that this kind of kingdom work must begin with prayer. And so, ***I am going to invite you on a fishing expedition with me that today will begin with prayer.*** As God invites us to be good fish, who are invitational in our witness, we must tune in to God’s guidance on the expedition.

So, take out the card that you received with your bulletin this morning. I am going to ask you to write four things on this card. In the top half of the card, write just the first name of a person you would like to join you in worshiping God here at Kenmore UMC. Then, write the name of a ministry (existing or needed) that will help that person to engage in meaningful relationships, spiritual growth, and/or Christian service.

## **“Good Fish, or Not?”**

Matthew 13:47-53

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

---

On the lower half of the card, write both of those names again. Tear the card in half. Keep one half for your prayer reminder, and place the other half in the offering plates/basket, so that more folks may join you in those prayers.

Remember, it is not our job to sort the “ins” and the “outs.” In Jesus’ parable, the net caught all kinds of fish. The spiritual application of this is that the gospel is offered to everyone without discrimination. It is only our job to be the best fish we can be as we create an environment for God’s grace to flourish.

*What kind of fishing story do you want to create during this season of faith-living?*

THOUGHT:

“We cannot pray in love and live in hate and still think we are worshiping God.”