

## “Gone Fish’n”

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### Old Testament: Psalm 8 New Testament: Matthew 28:16-20

James Boswell, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish biographer, often referred to one of the most important days of his life when, as a child, his father took him fishing. He could quote verbatim the things his father said that day, and he often referred back to the lessons he learned while sitting on the bank of that stream.

After Boswell’s death, a student of his decided to see what the father’s perspective on that day happened to be. He spent countless hours going through the father’s journals until he found the entry for that day. Boswell’s father had written a single sentence: “Gone fishing today with my son; a day wasted.”

As fathers and mothers, older brothers and sisters and friends, and grandparents and aunts and uncles, we are keepers of lessons learned. And as such, we all have the opportunity to make a difference in someone else’s life, an extraordinary, meaningful, life-changing difference. What’s important isn’t that we see the significance of our role in another person’s life, but that we make ourselves available to those who look up to us. Had Boswell’s father not “wasted” a day “gone fishing” with his son, James Boswell might not have become the great literary figure of history that he is.

Jesus’ final words to his disciples, as recorded in the Gospel According to Matthew, are “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” The baptism part is easy. Primarily, that’s God’s job. We sprinkle the water, but God does the work. We sprinkle – or pour or dunk depending on denomination – but it’s really an outward sign of God’s inner workings in our lives. Baptism is the easy part. Teaching, however, that’s a bit harder – quite a bit harder.

Teaching someone in the faith “takes something” of us. We have to be willing to give a little of what we have to another human being – to open ourselves to sharing our knowledge and love of God with those whom God has put in our lives. And quite frankly, that’s easier for some than it is for others. And that’s OK – *God can work through anybody*, even if we’re just going through the motions like James Boswell’s father – just willing to “waste” a little time on someone else.

Sometimes the opportunity to touch another person's life with inspiration and guidance comes not because we feel we have anything to give to that person in our life, but because spending time together is just the right thing to do – take your child fishing, and maybe you help him or her become a great historical figure like Boswell, or at least another among God's fishers of people, another disciple with his or her own role in leading others in the faith, one generation to the next.

And of course, it works both ways – we may not feel like spending time with a parent, an older sibling, grandpa or grandma, but that might be just how God wants to touch our lives this day. The people who first received these words from Jesus – “go therefore ..., teaching them ...,” they knew their role in mentoring others in the faith would not be easy. The earliest Christians were persecuted by the Roman Empire –marginalized, abused, imprisoned, and even executed. To protect themselves, they actually had to develop ways of sharing the faith in secret.

Most of us here have seen the Jesus Fish, or what's called the ichthys. Did you know this was a secret symbol used to mark meeting places and tell friend from foe? “...When an (early) Christian met a stranger on the road,” writes Elesha Coffman in *Christianity Today*, “the Christian sometimes drew one arc of the simple fish outline in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc, both believers knew they were in good company.”<sup>1</sup>

And we use this symbol in the same way today, don't we, on bumper stickers, T-shirts, business cards and the like? But today, rarely if ever do we find our lives in danger for leading another person in the faith – at least not in this or many other countries. No matter how uncomfortable or frightened we might get in just thinking about teaching someone else about our faith, it's not going to kill us.

In fact, as a member or friend of First Church, you're already helping to teach people about your faith. That's exactly what the church does. Whether you know it or not, you're leading other people in the faith – teaching them, as Jesus commands us, to model their lives after Jesus. Whether it's through the Wings or Menninger Bible studies; our worship space, music, praise songs and sermons; Sunday school classes and forums; the LOGOS youth program, mission projects and stewardship campaigns, and, of course, Presbyterian Women: all of these ministry programs are dedicated to directly teaching people about Jesus. And everything else we do – pastoral care and Deacons; Trustees; fellowship; finance and memorial activities; new-member outreach; meetings of committees, Session, and the congregation – everything we do supports people in coming to faith, and nurtures their spiritual journey.

So, we all have a role in what Jesus commissioned his earliest disciples to do. We can all take pride in that as a congregation. But notice Jesus did not send his disciples out to form committees or build church buildings. He sent them out to baptize and teach. Now, as individuals we can't baptize people. But each and every one of us can teach. Each and every one of us has something to share with someone about our faith. Think about who that person is in your life with whom you're called to share the faith.

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<sup>1</sup> [October 26, 2001 – “Ask the Editors - Christian History.”](#)

I got a call last week from church member Jason Todd asking about ways he could mentor another young man from his workplace in the faith. After giving him some online links and resources, it dawned on me that Jason is a new Christian. It was little more than two years ago that Jason and his wife Amanda joined the church. And they didn't join like many of us join – having always been a part of the church and just affirming or transferring our membership. Jason and Amanda were adults when they first came to faith in Jesus Christ and became ready to join the church.

It was after an evening of dinner and board games at the Signer household that Jason's grandparents, Jim and Helen, first learned the young couple was interested in church. "As Jason and Amanda were leaving that night," said Helen, "Jason asked, 'What are you doing Sunday,' and we said, 'Going to Sunday school and church and probably taking your brother out to dinner. Do you want to go with us?' And Jason said, 'Yes.'"

We didn't pursue it," explains Helen, "but said to ourselves, 'That will happen, but not at all.'" Jim and Helen had been praying for years that Jason might grow in the faith, but they didn't think it would ever happen. God can work through us to bring someone to faith, *even if we don't think it can happen*.

"Sure enough," said Jim, "they did show up at church on Sunday, and Jason said as they were leaving, 'Grandpa, we'll be here every Sunday we're in town.' And I can tell you, they have been, along with their children, Chase and Lucas.

How did the Signers achieve this? How is it that a young man, who a few years ago, knew nothing of the church and our faith, is now mentoring another young man from his work? "We emphasized belief over membership," said Jim. "We pursued a bit, but left it to mellow; didn't wear them down with invitations. We were more interested in their walk with the Lord than membership in an organization. We encouraged it, and told them we would be delighted, but that they needed to follow their own hearts on that. And then one day they said, 'We need to talk to the preacher.'" They joined the church shortly thereafter.

Jason now serves as a Trustee, Amanda works in the nursery, and both are active volunteers with the youth and elsewhere. And little Lucas, he's a baptized member – a future leader of this church – who, along with his brother, Chase, will have a chance to personally embrace church membership in eighth-grade confirmation.

Do you have what it takes to lead another person to faith; and then point them to the doors of this or another church in living into that faith? As you can see from Jim and Helen's example, it's just a matter of being together as a family, or friends, or coworkers and being open to the Holy Spirit working in our lives. *And* realizing that our "day wasted" "gone fishing" may be the Lord's day of triumph.

Humorist Bob Orben tells how his son came home from college one year for the holidays: "I asked him, 'How are things going?' He said, 'Good.' I said, 'How's the food?' He said, 'Good.'"

I said, ‘and the dormitory?’ He said, ‘Good.’ I said, ‘They’ve always had a strong football team. How do you think they’ll do this year?’ He said, ‘Good.’ I said, ‘How are your studies going?’ He said, ‘Good.’ I said, ‘Have you decided on your major yet?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘What is it?’ He said, ‘Communications.’”

The church, which the Lord put in charge of communications for the Good News of the Gospel, must seem to the eyes and ears of the world, a lot like Bob Orben’s college kid – one-word answers covering up the brilliance of a life of promise and hope and untold blessings. Regardless of what we see as our gifts and talents as Christians, we are not removed from the role of teaching the faith to others. If we call ourselves disciples of Christ, then we’ve accepted his call to teach the faith.

Think of it as someone whose gifts do not include mercy and giving. Does that mean he or she is excused from those aspects of discipleship? No. We are all called to show mercy and to give of ourselves to others. And so it is with teaching the faith. Regardless of how well suited you feel for this role, God does enable you to teach something to someone about what it is to be a Christian. We don’t need to know everything; just something that the one being taught does not yet know.

Christianity is an inherited faith, passed on from one generation to the next. We can all find a “Timothy” to be “Paul”, or a “Jason” to be a “Jim and Helen”, or a coworker or friend to be a “Jason”. The older person can mentor the younger. The younger can develop the youth. The youth can teach the children. And thus, *through us, God can lead people to faith.* Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Amazing God, Creator and Confronter, open our hearts to hear your voice in unexpected times and places. Appear to us in forms we cannot deny. Challenge us in ways we cannot avoid. Lead us in paths from which we cannot turn back.

Lord, remind us that we must "be" the church if we are to "be the church" in mission. Help us to continue to grow in the likeness of Christ by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. Only by continued growth in him can we be released for mission to the lost, the poor, and the broken.

We want to be your instruments, O God, extending the ministry of Jesus and his kingdom to all the ends of the earth. Help us to teach and proclaim your message, to heal illnesses, and to reveal the mysteries of the faith. Give us the gift of perseverance. By your Spirit, enable us to do and to act in accordance with your commands as set out in the gospel, and may the fruit of the gospel be increased in us many times over.

Compassionate God, we know there are people in this world – people in this very place – who suffer, who know little of the rich harvest that we enjoy and receive as a blessing. Grant them your peace, and extend your providence to those most in need.

Show us what we can do to provide for the needy, comfort the afflicted, guide and inspire the lost.

For we too were once needy, we too needlessly suffer afflictions, and we have certainly been lost, lost until you found us, claimed us as your own, and inspired us to be your followers. Thank you for sending Jesus Christ to lead the way, to inspire us, and to teach us, even teaching us how to pray, as we do now, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.