

Children's Talk and Sermon
for Sunday, 3 July

Children's Talk: The Lord's Help

Have you ever been frustrated? Have you ever been so frustrated that you became angry and wanted to yell and shout and explode, or to run away from everyone and hide?

It is frustrating to try your best and still not get what you want.

- You can run as fast as you possibly can, and still be slower than someone else
- You can try your best to remember the rules, and still forget
- You can hold back your anger with all your might and still get upset and do something unkind to your brother or sister

We sometimes think that if we try as hard as we can things will work for us. But that isn't always how it goes.

The Lord's disciples, His closest followers, found this out one time while fishing:

John 21:1 After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed Himself: ² Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing."

They said to him, "We are going with you also." They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing.

They tried all night long to catch fish. But they caught absolutely nothing. Imagine how tired, sad, and frustrated they would have been.

But that is not the end of the story. Someone came along who could help them:

⁴ But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Then Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any food?"

They answered Him, "No."

John 21:6 And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.

John 21:7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

This time, when they tried again, they were so successful they could barely fit all the fish into the boat! What was different? The difference was that the Lord was with them this time. They weren't just working on their own.

When we get stuck and frustrated, we need the Lord too. We need to pray to Him and ask for His help. We need to think about what He would want us to do. And then we need to actually try again. Just like the disciples, even though they were tired after a long night of fishing, were willing to try again when the Lord told them too.

That doesn't mean things will work out right away. Even with the Lord's help we don't always get what we want. But if we are willing to try again, and ask for the Lord's help, He will be there and give us all the blessings and good things that we

need.

Fishing on the Right Side of the Boat

A sermon by Rev. Erik Buss

Delivered by Warwick Schuurman at Westville 3 July, 2022

How often have you felt totally alone, perhaps even while around other people? When someone who cares for you has hurt you, being around that person can be more lonely than being by yourself. Or being in a crowd, watching other people interacting, can be lonely.

At times, our lives are so busy that we crave a bit of alone time; but even then we wouldn't want to be alone too long. The point of life is being around people, interacting, making a difference, caring for them and feeling cared for. One of the most profound experiences of loneliness comes when we feel that no one is looking out for us. It's as if we are on our own with no help. We have the sense that there's supposed to be someone looking out for us, someone should be caring for us, but there isn't. And when the Lord seems distant it gets even worse. It's as if He's in the boat sleeping while the storms of life rage around us.

Just after the Lord had been crucified was a time like that for His disciples. They had thrown their lot in with the Lord. They had given up everything for Him and had found meaning and companionship in His cause. Our story today talks about a mundane-seeming event that is actually profound – a reconnection with their God and through that with a purpose in life.

After the Lord died, Peter decided to go back to what he knew: fishing. The Lord had appeared twice since His resurrection to let him know that He still lived, but now Peter had to figure out what to do with his life. The Lord wasn't dead, but for a time the dream He had given was.

The story is really about Peter, and the ways he was touched, changed and given purpose. It is relevant to us because we can be like Peter. In the deeper, symbolic meaning of the story, Peter, meaning "rock," is a symbol for our faith, our understanding of what is true and good. He was the one who said first, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." He was also the one who so frequently interacted with the Lord. He took the lead as the intellect often does, especially during uncertainty.

Peter goes fishing and takes lots of others with him. He is out in a boat on water. Water symbolizes truth, and in this context, particularly the facts we know. A boat is our worldview or doctrine – the principles we use to forge our way through crammed into our heads.

Fish are those who know things. Reading from New Church teachings, fish symbolize "those people who are [immersed] in general truths, and are thus more attracted by what is natural than what is spiritual." (Apocalypse Revealed 405) It's that part of us that's caught up in the everyday world. You know lots of things, but are in the middle of it all. You have no perspective, and don't see what that truth means for your life. You don't see how what you know connects to anything higher. These are just the things you are dealing with as you try to get through your day in a respectable manner.

We become fish-like when things are busy. We take truth in and act, but we don't take time to reflect on it, or use it to connect to some higher purpose. When we fish, spiritually speaking, we lift fish out of the water into a boat.

That means we incorporate the Lord's truth into the way we see the world; we lift those truths out of the din of daily life and view them from a higher point of view. Seen from the fish's perspective this is not so good. It's not always easy to lift our

minds out of the everyday world up into something more spiritual. But from the fisherman's perspective it's a matter of life and death that we lift those fish up. If we aren't learning new truths and applying them to our lives we are spiritually starving to death. Life becomes empty, like Peter's was without the Lord present.

Peter fished all night and caught nothing. How often have all of us been in just that situation? We try hard to do the right thing. We try to figure out what to do, but there seems to be a disconnect between our spiritual values – the boat – and the rest of our lives. It's a spiritual nighttime. We want to do the right thing but we don't see our way clearly, and it does not seem to feed us.

After a time – too long for us – comes morning, a time when the Lord's presence is more obvious. We know intellectually that He's always present, but we don't feel it in hard times. He asks, "Children, have you any food?" Such an important question: Is your life working for you as it is? Is it feeding your spirit? Until we can really and truly say no, we can't change. In fact, until then we are likely to resent suggestions for change.

When they say no, He then tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat. Now obviously the fish were not all swimming on one side of the boat. The Lord gave this command purely for its symbolic value. In New Church teaching, the right symbolizes coming from goodness and the left coming from truth. (Arcana Coelestia 10061) You can think of left-brain linear logic and right-brain intuitive whole-person thinking, if that helps, but it's deeper than that.

For us, fishing on the right side means doing something from affection, doing it from love, not doing it merely because it is the right thing to do. It means reaching out to people because we want to help them, rather than out of a sense of duty.

There's a lot to be said for doing things because they need doing. The saying, "Fake it till you make it," is very powerful and important. It keeps us alive in hard times. And in fact, that willingness to compel ourselves is what allows the Lord to change us from selfish into spiritual human beings. But that's not the focus for today. That is not what reconnects us with the Lord. We may be doing the right thing when we compel ourselves, just as Peter was doing the right thing when he fished all night, but it's not feeding our spirit by offering us a vision of and connection with our heavenly Father.

What does it look like to fish on the right side? I think it means focusing on process over content. Think of wanting to help someone: a child struggling with a problem, a friend fighting depression, someone whose marriage is in trouble, a friend who has lost a spouse or loved one. Helping someone on content is making sure he or she does it right – sort out the marriage, solve the problem, overcome depression, deal with the grief appropriately – and specifically sort it out the way you'd want that person to. By contrast, when we help people with the process, we don't especially care whether they "pass the test," and especially if they pass the test in the way we would. We focus on helping them move along the path toward the Lord, with their whole lives.

Why do people change their character? It's not because any of us says something brilliant or true. They change because they have, within themselves, a desire to change. So when we try to help people, the first point of contact needs to be with their heart, and then their head. Once they want to change, once we have connected with their heart, then they might be open to being guided by the truth.

This does not mean that we love others in a mushy, vague sense. We need to be clear within ourselves that we are still fishing. We are serving others spiritually by helping bring them out of the water into the boat, just as those who love us do the

same for us. We don't abandon our principles and act from kindness that looks like love but is not. We have to fish from the right side – reach out from love, be interested, and genuinely interact from compassion.

Perhaps this means just listening at first, or asking questions. Maybe the solution has nothing to do with the problem we see. The point is not that content – correct behavior – does not matter; it is critical. It's that if you do not convey love and trust in the person (and if you are not truly feeling it) you will not be able to help. And, if you do not respect people's free will enough to help them work it through as they see it, you won't help, but hurt. You may have the clearest sight in the world about their problem, but until they want to hear it, it's of no help.

The wonderful thing about this story is how dramatically it works. When we really pay attention to people, when we show them that they matter to us, we find that we can help change lives. And like Peter, suddenly we recognize the Lord in the picture.

Think about this: When we are fishing, we are helping others from love, and doing that does not mean that they see the Lord. The fish don't see the Lord; Peter did. It means that we see the Lord. The Lord's presence becomes living in us. And perhaps like Peter, we will want to be with the Lord right away. Then the Lord feeds His disciples. When the disciples got to the shore, there was already a fire with fish on it. He told them to bring some of their fish also. This is symbolic of the fact that true feeding comes from the Lord's presence within us. Yes, we catch fish, but in reality, the fish – the spiritual food – was already there inside us. We simply had to create the space that could receive it.

We're not going to spend time on the end of the story except for one thing: The Lord goes through the "Do you love Me?" series of questions when Peter starts asking questions about John: what about him? The Lord responds, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me." In other words, "Stop questioning and pondering about others. Your job is to use what you know. Go and do it. Treat other people with love."

To us the Lord could say, "Stop worrying about how effective others are. Stop worrying about the state of the world or of the church. Stop thinking about what you could do if you had more energy, money or joints that weren't sore. Learn to interact with everyone you see from love and compassion, using the truth you know."

Most people trying to live a spiritual life know lots of spiritual truth. At times we can see its beauty and power. But truth by itself is cold and lonely. It isolates us from others and from the Lord. If we stay with truth alone, or if we focus too much on truth, we'll end up discarding it as irrelevant. It has lasting value to the extent that we fish from the right side: reaching out to those we know, seeking to serve them from love, respecting their free will, looking to the good in them, and seeking to inspire them to use that truth appropriately.

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’” (Matthew 25: 34-40)