

IN DEEPER WATERS

Mark 1:14-20

January 25, 2009

(ORDINARY TIME)

**We are yours, O God, most holy,
We belong alone to you;
You have told us what our names are,
and you know us through and through...**

**May your love and Spirit fill us,
May you be our all and all;
May your holy will possess us,
may we ever heed your call.**

When I was a kid -- just a *little kid*, mind you -- we lived in a little place called Elmwood, West Virginia. Population very few. In fact, you could fit everybody in Elmwood on a Volkswagen bus when I was a kid. Now, of course, the peaceful little community has been taken over by townies. People from Wayne and Spunky -- the Spunky addition, folks call it back home. And that's where we lived. In the heart of Elmwood, West Virginia, with it's beautiful rolling hills, the scenic railroad (tracks), and Ferguson Pond. Where, in the wintertime, if it was really cold (like it has been this winter), the Ferguson kids would come from town and skate on the pond and play ice hockey with their friends.

And sometime in the fall (or maybe late summer), the Greater Wayne County Coon Hunters Association would have their annual raccoon chase right there. Which was the most spectacular thing I had ever seen in my life. They'd have a raccoon -- a real live raccoon, mind you -- in a wire cage attached to a rope and a pulley which they would hook to a pole or a tree on the other side of the pond. And they'd line up their hound dogs -- blue ticks and ridgebacks and oversized beagles -- on the other. And when the referee blew the whistle, the hunters would let go of their dogs all at once, and somebody on the other side would pull the poor raccoon across the water -- just barely out of reach of those big, baritone-barking hound dogs. And when the dogs saw the

raccoon, they'd jump in the water barking and swimming as hard as they could. And the first dog to swim all the way across the pond and reach the other side won. I don't know what he won. But it was something, I'm sure -- a milk bone, or a nice new collar, maybe... the respect and admiration of his peers, I don't know... But it all happened right there in Elmwood.

So it was a wonderful place to live -- even on an ordinary day -- because of the pond. And this was before they built the dams at East Lynn and Beech Fork. And the pond next to our house was the best "fishing hole" in the county. And people would come from all around to fish there. But the greatest fisherman of them all was my uncle, Charlie. It was all he thought about, all he lived for, I think. He was there at the pond one day telling tales and fish stories with some of the regulars who fished there almost as much as he did. And fishing with other people does something to you, I think. It takes away your inhibitions, in a way. Makes you open up and tell things that under normal circumstances you would not share with other people. And it happened to him, seasoned angler that he was. He just opened up and said to the other fishermen there, "You know fellows, my wife told me this morning that if I go fishing again she's going to leave me." And a hush fell over the little band of fishermen. You could've heard a minnow whistle it got so quiet. And Uncle Charlie m at them and said, " Man, I'm ... I'm going to miss her."

Isn't that awful? It was like that ad in the paper that said, **"Wanted: Woman who can cook, clean house, take out the trash, mow the lawn, tie flies and build fishing rods, clean wild game and fish, has hunting dog and drift boat. Please send picture drift boat and dog.**

Anyway ... You'd see Charlie out there three or four times a week with his green gum boots and his old fishing hat and a new rod and reel, just waiting like Captain Ahab himself to catch the big one. But I don't think he ever did. It always got away. And every time it did ... it got a little bigger. And so did the stories he told -- the stories *all* the old fisher folks told. Tales about the Big One. The Boss, they'd call it. The Chairman of the Board. "Biggest fish I've ever seen!" they'd say. "That fish was so big you'd have to have two cameras just to take its picture." Oh, you haven't heard such tales since election day, I'm sure. Rainbow trout so long you'd find a pot of gold at the end of them. Catfish big as bird dogs. And the one that got away ... well you wouldn't believe it if I told you. You

know the tales they'd tell. Fish barely bigger than a minnow would become the Loch Ness monster of Elmwood -- Elmwood, West Virginia.

And Uncle Charlie always had some outlandish tale about how he caught them. "I caught that fish with nothing but a plug of chewing tobacco and a bal peen hammer," he said once. "Held a big plug of it over the side of the boat. And when that big old fish jumped up to take a chew, I hit in the head with the hammer." Or he'd tell us he just whistled for them like one of his birddogs and the fish flung themselves out of the water and right into the boat." Right into the frying pan, you'd have thought, to hear *him* tell it.

But the one that topped them all was a true story, he claimed. Every Sunday afternoon, he said, when he was a boy all the fisher folk in the neighborhood would gather on the porch of the old country store there in town for a Coke and some peanuts. And they'd talk. They talked about all kinds of things -- the weather, I suppose, and politics maybe, and religion. But sooner or later they'd always end-up telling fish tales. How many they caught that weekend and how big.

And, believe it or not, most of them usually caught ordinary sized fish. Nothing all that spectacular, really. Except this one old farmer, he said, who *always* caught the big ones. Enormous fish. And my uncle Charlie said the game warden heard about this and showed up there at the store one day when they were all there. And the old farmer had caught a huge fish that day. So the game warden inspected it right there on the spot. And then he turned to the farmer and said "If you don't show me your fishing spot, I'm going to have to take your license." And the farmer said, "Well, come out to the farm in the morning and I'll take you fishing."

So, the next morning the game warden was there with his rod and reel. And the farmer told him to climb up on the tractor. And they rode the tractor out to a big field. And they went through the field till they came to a little pond. And the warden thought, "This can't be right." Because there wasn't anything there but an old wooden rowboat. That's all. Just an old farm pond and a row boat that had seen better days.

Well, the farmer told the game warden to get in and they rowed out to the middle of the pond. And that's when the warden noticed that there weren't any fishing poles. And he was just getting ready to say something to the old farmer about it, when all of a

sudden the farmer reaches into a box and pulls out a stick of dynamite. And then he lights it and throws it into the pond. And boom. Water and smoke are everywhere. And when the smoke clears, the farmer paddles the little boat around and he starts picking up fish. And the warden is just dumbfounded. He can't believe it. Can't even speak for a moment or two. And when he finally finds his voice, he starts in on the farmer about how he can't believe what just happened and starts screaming to the farmer about all the rules and regulations he's broken. Laws have been broken here, he said. And while all of this is going on, the farmer calmly reaches into the box, grabs another stick of dynamite, lights it, hands it to the warden and says, "Are you going to fish or talk? ✘"

Jesus was a fisherman, you know. He was a woodworker first, of course. A carpenter like Joseph. But he was a fisherman, too. It was one of the first things he did when he started his work. He went fishing. Fishing for people.

He started fishing about the time John the Baptist got arrested. Mark says he went through Galilee preaching the gospel, proclaiming the Good News. "Repent!" Did you ever think good news would sound like that? "Repent. Turn around. It's time for a makeover, a brand new you. Because ..." What did he say? "Because the kingdom of God has come near." And that's good news, says Mark. God is close to you. God is here. Turn to him. Go to him. Let him make your life over."

That's the kind of fisherman Jesus was. He was fishing for people. Not trying to catch them up, mind you, or "get his hooks in them." But he was fishing with a net. A net called the gospel, the good news that God was with them -- that God was *for* them, mind you, and not against them. And with that net he was lifting them out of the deep, churning waters of emptiness, and sin, and despair ... and into the boat. With him. With God. To be safe in God's mercy and love.

That's why this part of the church is called the nave. It comes from the Latin word *navis*, which means "ship." Because that's how Christians down through the ages have thought of the Church. It's like a ship, a boat. And in lots of old churches this part of the sanctuary looks like boat -- a boat that's turned over to be a shelter from the storm. And that's what Jesus was building. He was building the Church -- the Ark of Safety, some

people call it. Not lots of little boats, mind you, for each one of us. But one boat, one ship, one Church for all of God's people.

So right away, says Mark, Jesus started building the Church. And the first thing he did -- right here in the first chapter of Mark -- was this: he called people to follow him and help build the Church with him. But you know the story ...

He was walking along by the lake (the *Sea of Galilee*) they called it. And he saw a couple of fishermen there. Simon and Andrew his brother. And Jesus looked at them and said, "Follow me. Follow *me*. Come with me. Learn from me ... and I will make you real fishermen out of you. I'll teach you how to fish for people."

You know what he meant. But I wonder if they did. Maybe they didn't have a clue. Or maybe they had *just* a clue about what he meant... Mark doesn't say. All he says is that they followed him. Right then and there. They didn't ask a lot of questions or ponder the situation or seek advice from their family or friends. They just up and followed him, this man who preached the good news about God.

And Jesus kept walking. He walked a little further along the shore, and there were some more fishermen, mending their nets. Brothers, named James and John, who were there with their crew and with Zebedee, their father. And Jesus called them the same as he called the other two. And they did the same thing. They dropped what they were doing. They left their nets and their father -- they left the family business. They didn't call a meeting or talk about it over supper. Or even say to Jesus, "What's in it for us?" They just followed him. Right then and there. Immediately, says Mark. As if it was urgent. Pressing. Something that just couldn't wait to be done... Right then and there, says Mark, they quit their jobs, and they followed Jesus.

And it was pressing. And it was urgent. It was something that was needed. Right then and there. At that very time, in that very place. Because there." "Follow me," says Jesus, "because there is a greater catch than this. There are bigger fish to fry. More important things that need your attention ... They're called people. Other people. And they need to be caught. Lifted up from deeper waters. Because so many of them are going under. So

many of them are lost or loosing the battle. So follow me. Follow me now ... and I'll make you fishers of men. Fishers of people.

And they did. They followed Jesus. And he taught them and shaped them and gave them his Spirit. And they became fishers of people. And instead of lifting their nets to pull fish from the water, they lifted people up from the deep – out of sadness and sorrow, out of doubt and despair, and out of the sin and the emptiness that was dragging them down deeper and deeper. And they lifted them up to the One who could give them life. *Real* life.

And the thing that gets me is they were ordinary people. They weren't bible scholars or preachers. They hadn't even been to seminary, for heaven's sake. Peter had never preached a sermon in his life. Never taught a Sunday School class. He was a fisherman. Like one of those guys on "The Deadliest Catch" on the Discovery Channel. An ordinary person. And yet, the first time he stood up and told Jesus' story three-thousand people were converted right there on the spot. Three-thousand people lifted up from the deep.

And Luke says that after that those same ordinary fishers, and farmers, and bean-counters and bookkeepers devoted themselves to prayer and the breaking of the bread and learning the scriptures ... **"and day by day the Lord added to their number all of those who were being saved."** Ordinary people. Same kind of people you'd find around here. What a catch! Can you imagine ... Bringing that many people out of the deep?

Jesus is still at it. He's still calling ordinary people – people like us, mind you – to follow him. And he means to do the same thing with us. He means to make fishers of everyone of us. Every last one. Because there are still a lot of people out there who need someone to lift them out of the deep. Someone to care about them. Someone to talk to. Someone who'll listen. Someone who will help them in some way to believe that what we talk about here on Sunday mornings isn't just make believe. But it's real. God is real. And that someone is you.

Come follow me, says Jesus. Follow me now. Follow me here. Right here in this place. And I will make fishers out of you. Fishers who cast nets of love and acceptance and hope and rescue people from loneliness and despair – from fear and doubt – from darkness and dullness and sin and deadness. ✕ And you can. You can do that.

Bishop Willimon, my old teacher, was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke. And one night, he says, one of the fraternities invited him to come to their house (the fraternity house) and give a talk. Because, he said, it's required there. The Dean makes all the fraternities have a certain number of programs each year in order to give fraternities some semblance of respectability. And Will's topic they gave him to talk about that night was "Character and College." And he says when they told them this he thought, "Good. It's perfect." He thought, "Lord, thou hast delivered them into my hands." He just couldn't believe that those fraternity boys were dumb enough to invite an old guy like him to talk to young guys like them about 'character.'"

So he went to their fraternity house and knocked on the door. And he said, "The door opened and I was greeted by a young boy who looked to be about nine years old." And he thought, "What is a kid doing over here at this time of the night? Surely we have rules against young children in the dorm this late."

And the kid said, "They're waiting for you in the common room," Follow me. I'll take you there."

And Will said they wound their way back to the common room and the whole fraternity was gathered there, glumly waiting for his "talk." And he said as he started his lecture he noticed that the little boy climbed up on the lap of one of the fraternity brothers. And in just a few moments, he fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college kid.

Well, Will said he hammered them on morals and decency for a good half-hour or so. And when he finally finished his talk he asked if they had any questions or comments. And it was silent. Dead silence. "So," he said, "I thanked them for the honor, and made my way out. And I heard the college kid say to the little boy, "You go on and get ready for bed. I'll be in to tuck you in and read you a story."

And Will said, "When we stood just outside the door, the fraternity boy lit up a cigarette, took a drag on it, and thanked me for coming out."

And Will said, "Let me ask you, who was the kid there tonight?"

"Oh, that's Darrell," he said. "The fraternity is part of the Durham Big Brother program. We met Darrell that way. His mom's on crack and she's having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't care for him. So we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us." He said, "We go over and pick him up. And he stays with us till it's okay to go home. We take him to school, and buy him his clothes, and books, and stuff."

"That's amazing," Will said. He was thinking, "Maybe they should have been the ones giving me a talk."

"I tell you what's amazing," he said as he took another drag on his cigarette, "what's amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else."

It is amazing. But it's true. He picked Simon and Andrew and James and John and a fraternity brother. And Jesus picks you and he picks me to be fishers -- people who live and speak and share the good news that God is with them and for them. And that in his love, all things are made new.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObLSB

