

CATCH: Catching New Life

Mark 10:42-45

Romans 12:1-8

We catch people by serving our Lord.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
February 9, 2020

Let's talk about greatness. At some level, most of us want to be great at something. We want to be great at what we do vocationally or great at some talent or hobby that we pursue. We want to be great husbands, wives, moms, dads, or grandparents. Some us even aspire to be great in faith, spiritual giants in our time. The world has certain criteria of greatness—wealth, power, fame. But true greatness often looks very different from the world's idea.

Some of you may remember the *Chicken Soup For The Soul* books that were so popular some years ago. In one of those books, there was a story about a sacker in a grocery store named Johnny. Johnny's job was to put groceries in sacks, probably paper sacks, for customers at the end of the check-out process. Some of you remember the days.

Johnny had Down's Syndrome, but he really loved his job. After hearing a presentation about putting your personal signature on your work, Johnny decided to do something positive. His dad helped him set up a program on the computer to print out copies of Johnny's "thought for the day," some little sentence of inspiration, encouragement or uplifting thought. Starting the very next day, Johnny would put his "thought for the day" in one of the grocery bags for each one of his customers. It was his own personal signature on what most people would consider a pretty dull job.

Not long after Johnny started giving his thought for the day, the store manager came out of his office to find that the line at Johnny's check-out lane was three times longer than the others. The manager rushed around to get more lanes open, but nobody wanted to change. They all wanted Johnny to sack their groceries. One woman said, "I used to come in here once a week to buy groceries. Now I stop in every day because I want the thought for the day!"

Suddenly Johnny was the key factor in the transformation of the workplace. Johnny was the most important employee in the store. Other employees, from the pharmacy to the meat department, were finding ways to put a special touch on their jobs.¹

If a mentally-challenged sacker in a grocery store can bring about great change in his environment, what do you think we might do in our homes,

schools, church, and community if we are powered by the Holy Spirit of God? It could be great!

Jesus had a different idea of greatness. One day his disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest in the coming Kingdom of the Messiah. James and John even asked if they could have the seats of honor in glory. Jesus told them he was not in charge of the seating chart in heaven, but sensing the rising tension in the group, he thought it might be a teachable moment. So he gathered his disciples around him and said, *“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*²

Jesus had a different idea of greatness. It was the greatness of servanthood. Martin Luther King, Jr., called people to a similar kind of greatness, but of course, he got it from Jesus. King said, “Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”³

We can achieve spiritual greatness because God has already put the resources in us to be great. Greatness comes when we maximize the potential God has given us. King called it a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love. Paul called it spiritual gifts. At several points in his letters, Paul talks about spiritual gifts, the resources God has placed in each of us that we can maximize for spiritual greatness. One of the lists in is Romans 12. Paul says, *“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”*⁴

I love the way Eugene Peterson translates this last little bit in *The Message*: “If you preach, just preach God’s Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, don’t take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don’t get bossy; if you’re put in charge, don’t manipulate; if you’re called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don’t let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.”⁵

Understanding our spiritual gifts is a key to spiritual greatness, and serving according to the gifts we have been given is a key to effective witness and fruitful ministry. There’s a great little study that we have done several times called *Serving From The Heart*. If you have not taken it, I would encourage you to do that next time it rolls around. It’s really helpful. But until we offer *Serving From The Heart* again, you can take a spiritual gifts inventory just to see how you are gifted for service. Take your bulletin home and go to the website listed and take the survey. You may be surprised or encouraged or even inspired by the results. And if you take the survey and want to talk to a pastor about how you might fit better into the ministry of the church, any of us will be happy to have a conversation.

The point of this lifestyle of servanthood is given by Paul in those first words in Romans 12. Let’s hear it from *The Message*: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.”⁶ Or as the version we read says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed.”⁷ That’s the point: using the gifts God has given us, we will not be conformed to the dull, boring, purposeless, meaningless, self-seeking and ultimately destructive ways of the world. We will be transformed by the grace and love of God into the amazing person and awesome Christian God created us and gifted us to be. That transformation will make us different; it will make us stand out; but it will make us great.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., preached on this text, he coined the term “transformed non-conformist”: “Christians have a mandate to be non-conformists. The Apostle Paul, who knew the inner realities of the Christian faith, counseled, ‘Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ We are called to be a people of conviction, not conformity; of moral nobility, not social respectability. We are commanded to live differently and according to a higher loyalty.”⁸

This is the transformation that will make a difference, make a witness, make disciples, and catch people.

We have been talking about welcome and hospitality and invitation for the last few weeks under the banner “CATCH,” because Jesus taught his first disciples—and therefore us, too—to fish for people. We have talked about being relentlessly outward-focused, about why people need Jesus and why they need the church and why they need *this* church, and about the weary, heavy-laden people who can benefit from a relationship with Jesus Christ. But maybe you have been a little intimidated or uncomfortable with the thought that you might be supposed to go out and preach the Gospel to people. Do we really expect you to start conversations with strangers and offer them new life in Jesus without even knowing them? Maybe some of you are gifted in that way, but most of us aren’t.

So how do the rest of us fish for people? I believe it has everything to do with understanding, claiming and developing our spiritual gifts. Debi Nixon, Adam Hamilton’s right-hand person at Church of the Resurrection, wrote in the *Catch* material that we should **explore** our spiritual gifts. That’s where we take the survey and the class and try to figure out what God has gifted us to do in the service of the Kingdom. Then we need to **experience** the spiritual gifts. Try some things; get your hands dirty; it may take several attempts before you find a ministry that fits. But as you experience different spiritual activities, look for two things: effectiveness in a particular ministry, and a deep joy in doing it. If you love it, and you’re good at it—from rocking babies in the nursery to visiting nursing homes, from teaching Sunday School to feeding the homeless—it’s probably your spiritual gift. Then you will be **encouraged**. The people who are also in

the community of faith with you will recognize and affirm your gifts. We build one another up as we work together for the Kingdom.⁹

Does that make sense? Does that help? Does that make you ready to go fish for people in a way that is consistent with your giftedness?

Last Sunday I mentioned a great catch in a Super Bowl game a few years ago. Then I watched Super Bowl LIV last Sunday evening. There was another great catch that came at a critical time in the game. With less than four minutes left in the game, the San Francisco 49ers were ahead 20-17. But the Kansas City Chiefs had the ball at about mid-field. Quarterback Patrick Mahomes dropped back to pass and receiver Sammy Watkins took off down the field, outrunning the defender Richard Sherman. Forty yards down the field, the perfectly-thrown ball came sailing into the outstretched hands of Sammy Watkins, putting the Chiefs in position to score the touchdown that put them ahead and won the Super Bowl.

If you think about it, our mission, our spiritual service, our fishing for people, is very similar to a forward pass in football.

1. The quarterback and receiver are both part of the same team, each with an important job to do in order to carry out the game plan. We are part of the body of Christ—team Jesus—and we have a part to play according to the gifts we have been given. Our job is to carry out the game plan established by God for the salvation of the world.

2. The quarterback threw the ball expecting it to be caught. He had called the play, and everyone knew what they were supposed to do. God has made the plan and called the play for the salvation of the world. It involves the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the world. We each have our part to play, but if we don't play it, God will use someone else to accomplish God's purposes. Unlike a competitive football game, God's victory is assured.

3. Finally, the receiver was able to make the catch because he had run the pattern and was in position with his arms and hands outstretched, ready to receive the ball. If we put ourselves in position to receive the blessings of God, if we stand before God with our arms open and our hands ready to receive, God will bless us with effectiveness, fruitfulness, joy, and victory!

This is the secret to our greatness: it's not our greatness at all. It's the greatness of God given to us and alive in us through our spiritual gifts. Jesus said two things that we call great. One was the Great Commandment. It was Jesus' summary of the Law of Moses: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and ...love your neighbor as yourself.*"¹⁰ The second great saying is called the Great Commission: "*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.*"¹¹

Pastor Rick Warren gave a compelling vision for the church several years ago with these words: "A great commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission makes a great church."¹² This is how we make a great church. I have to believe that at some level, that's why we're here today: because we want to be great at being a church, and because we want to be great at being Christians. We may not be there yet, but we're on the way.

Here's how we do it: love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength; love your neighbor as yourself; be a servant of others, not their master; use the gifts you've been given to invite, welcome, and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

This is how we become truly alive. This is how we catch new life for the church, the body of Christ. This is how we become truly great!

¹ Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *A Third Serving of Chicken Soup For The Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1996), 242ff.

² Mark 10:42-45.

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/757-everybody-can-be-great-because-anybody-can-serve-you-don-t-have>.

⁴ Romans 12:4-8.

⁵ Romans 12:6-8, *The Message*.

⁶ Romans 12:1-2, *The Message*.

⁷ Romans 12:2.

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Transformed Non-Conformists," in *Strength To Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 17ff.

⁹ Debi Nixon with Adam Hamilton, *Catch: A Churchwide Program For Invitational Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 70f.

¹⁰ Matthew 22:37-40.

¹¹ Matthew 28:19-20.

¹² Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 102.