

**CATCH: Becoming a Relentlessly
Outward-Focused Church**

Matthew 4:12-22

*Fishing for people requires
relentlessly casting our line.*

A sermon preached by
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Several years ago I attended a conference in Atlanta for large-church pastors. One of the presentations I will never forget was given by a layman named Robin Burrus. At the time he was the Chair of the Administrative Board of First United Methodist Church in Marietta, Georgia, a church with about 5,000 members.

Burrus' day job was the CEO of Tip-Top Poultry Company in Marietta, a major chicken-processing concern. His father bought the company in 1954; Robin became the CEO in 1986 and passed the reins of leadership on to his son-in-law in 2015. The mission of the company is "to honor God by offering a quality product at competitive prices to meet the needs of the consumer." The inspiration behind their mission is the Golden Rule: "do unto others as you would have them do to you."¹

Burrus explained that their company does one thing: chicken. That's their product. Their product has many forms. They supply chicken to food companies like Gerber baby foods and grocery store chains like Kroger and Winn-Dixie. They ship products around the world. They have another line of chicken products that is sold exclusively to high-end restaurants. This family-owned and faith-based company grows and thrives because they offer one product—chicken—in many forms.

The connection with the church is simple, Robin said. We have many forms of ministry: children's programs, youth ministry, fellowship groups, Bible studies, Sunday School, missions, music—you name it, we do it. But through all of these avenues of ministry, we have one product, one focus, one mission: the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is all we sell—a personal relationship with the Son of God. We are in the business of helping people become disciples of our Lord. That's all we're doing, in all our forms of ministry, from preschool to Pacesetters. We are offering Christ. That's how we honor God.

Right here and now, at the beginning of the New Year, it is a good time to remind ourselves what it is that we do and why we do it. Using the theme "Catch," we are going to think and talk for four weeks about the purpose of ministry. What is the mission of the Church? Why are we here?

I think to answer that question, we have to look at the purpose and mission of Jesus. Why did he come? What was his vision and mission for ministry?

The vision of Jesus was the Kingdom of God. He came proclaiming the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world. His first sermon was very basic: “*Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near!*”²

The mission of Jesus was to introduce people to the Kingdom of God. In his encounter with the tax collector Zacchaeus in Jericho, Jesus gave a mission statement: “*The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.*”³ Jesus told stories about a shepherd leaving the flock to find one lost sheep, a woman turning her house upside down to find one lost coin, a father waiting for a lost son to return. He went around the region of Galilee healing people and proclaiming his message. In Matthew 9 we read, “*Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*”⁴ The ministry of Jesus was all about introducing the Kingdom of God, especially to the lost, the weak, the sick, the hurting, broken and oppressed people of his time. This is still the mission of the Church today.

In order to fulfill our mission to the lost, we are called to fish—not for fish, but for people. In Matthew 4, following his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, Jesus called his first disciples. Simon, who would later be called Peter, and his brother Andrew were fishermen from Bethsaida, a village next to Capernaum, where Jesus had moved to start his public ministry. (Some of us visited the ruins of Bethsaida last Friday.) Jesus was walking along the shore of the lake, and Andrew and Simon were standing in the water, casting their nets, trying to catch fish. Jesus simply said, “*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*”⁵ I doubt they had any idea what Jesus meant by that, but they knew Jesus, and so they dropped their nets and came along. A little later, maybe in Bethsaida or maybe back in Capernaum, Jesus called James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They left their poor old dad holding the nets and went with Jesus, too.

The mission of the Church, and therefore the mission of every follower of Jesus, is to do the work of Jesus, to seek and to save the lost, to fish for people, to have compassion for the sheep without a shepherd. In fact, immediately after that statement we read in Matthew 9, Jesus goes on to say, *“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*⁶ In fact, the last thing Jesus told his disciples in the Gospel of Mathew, as he appeared to them in Galilee following his resurrection, was *“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.”*⁷ That’s still the call of the church today.

Why? Because the fish are drowning. We don’t normally think fish would drown; water is their natural habitat. But one time when I was living in Lake Village on Lake Chicot in southeast Arkansas, the Game and Fish Commission for some reason had a controlled fish kill. They introduced a chemical into the lake that prevented the gills of the fish from absorbing oxygen out of the water. The fish would literally suffocate and float to the top of the water, where people could pick them up with nets.

I don’t want to push that analogy too far, but the fish we are called to catch are the beloved children of God. And these fish are drowning in a sea of despair, gasping for the oxygen of God’s grace. The children of God are drowning in a sea of trouble, and we have the safety net that can save them. Look around and see the marriages failing, the families torn apart. See the young people making horrible choices that can ruin their lives. See the people struggling economically, fighting poverty and hunger in our own community. Look at the ones suffering the pain of physical illness and the heartbreak of grief. And we know Jesus—Jesus who can heal our hurts, Jesus who can give us hope, Jesus who can help us cope. Never have we been called to fish like we are today!

There are challenges to the church that wants to follow the call of Jesus to fish for people today. The Pew research organization has documented the decline of church affiliation in America over the last several years. Fewer people are claiming membership in churches, attendance is more

sporadic, and those who are unaffiliated with any church, even though they believe in God, are the fastest-growing religious group in America.⁸

I think one of the reasons behind the decline of the church across the board is the persistent conflict and division within the churches. Disputes over politics, human sexuality, and other issues distract us from our mission. The fish we are trying to catch—those who don't know Jesus—perceive the church as covering up for the moral failures of its leaders, being too judgmental, too political and anti-homosexual.⁹ And it makes them not want to bite.

But I think the greatest challenge to successful fishing is simply the apathy of the disciples of Jesus. We have just become lazy with our fishing. Understand, this is not about you; this is about us. I bear responsibility for this in my own practice and teaching. We just don't care enough to offer people Christ on a regular basis.

Kay Kotan, in her book on invitational evangelism called *Get Their Name*, says that the average United Methodist invites someone to church every 38 years!¹⁰ I don't know how she got that statistic, but one thing is for sure, you won't ever catch a fish if you never put a hook in the water. Fishing for people is the mission of the whole church.

Many people in our church point to the late 50's and early 60's as the "Golden Years" of First United Methodist Church in Fort Smith. Dr. Fred Roebuck was pastor. We were averaging about 1100 people in both worship and Sunday School during that time. Shortly after I came here as pastor, someone gave me several bulletins from those years, perhaps hoping I could re-create the magic. The worship order looked pretty standard, but I noticed that each bulletin had a report from each Sunday School class about the contacts that had been made during the previous week. They actually turned in records of how many personal visits, cards, and phone calls they had made to the sick, those who had been absent, and prospects for membership. Guess how many contacts were being made by the lay people of this church when we were averaging 1100 people a Sunday. About 600! Six hundred people a week were being comforted and encouraged and invited to follow Jesus. It's no wonder the church was full.

Many things have changed in our culture in the last 60 years, but I believe this central mission has not changed. We are called by Christ to fish for people. We are called to CATCH—to catch our purpose as a church, to catch a passion for the mission, to catch people who are drowning without the grace of God. To be catchers for Christ, we are called to be “relentlessly outward-focused.”¹¹ The real work of the church happens outside of the walls. All the ministry that happens inside the walls is good, but it is preparation for us to be the church in the world. A fisher is successful only by relentlessly and persistently casting a line or a net into the water where the fish are. A church can only be successful by relentlessly focusing on the world around us and the people Jesus loves who need to know him.

You can be relentlessly outward-focused at work. There are people you work with daily who need to know the grace of God. Or there are customers and vendors who can be amazed at the attitude you bring to your job.

One of the most successful fast-food franchises in the world is Chick-fil-a. As you know, it is a faith-based operation. You can tell it when you walk in the restaurant. They train their people to have a positive attitude, to be cheerful and happy and helpful. Everything they do for you is their “pleasure” to do it. I think the attitude of the employees is one of the keys to their success. What if you brought a fisher’s attitude to your work?

You can be relentlessly outward-focused at home. Sometimes the people who need the love of Jesus the most are right in front of you. Those people you live with or are connected to by blood and marriage are God’s beloved children, too. Sometimes they are struggling, too, in all the ways that people struggle. Who knows them better than a family member? Maybe you could give them a word of grace or encouragement or invitation that would make a difference in their lives.

You can be relentlessly outward-focused in our community. I am proud of the way our church reaches out in our community. We have people involved in every mission, every non-profit, every helpful thing going on in Fort Smith. We put a priority on helping people and being involved. We can’t stop. The needs around us are growing day by day. The help we give is a special kind of help, because it is empowered by the love of Christ for the people we serve, no matter how poor, how destitute, how messed up

they are. The goal is still the same—that each person we touch would come to know Jesus in a personal way, to have a personal relationship with the Lord who saves them. Then our fishing will be complete.

So I want to leave you with a challenge today. I want you to be ready to fish. We are called to fish for people. We need to be ready to capitalize on the opportunity when one arises. The First Letter of Peter says, “*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.*”¹² So get ready. Prepare yourself spiritually in prayer. Ask God for courage and wisdom to say the word when someone needs it.

Then develop an elevator speech. An elevator speech is a sales pitch you can give to someone while you’re riding up or down on an elevator—one to two minutes tops. Write down what you would say if someone asks, “What do you believe? Why are you a Christian? Why do you act the way you do?” There is no wrong way to do that, but to do it well, it is good to actually write it down, time it, and memorize it.

I’ll tell you what I will do. If you write an elevator speech and email it to me, I will read it, and I will make any comments I feel would be helpful. Then I will call you, and we will pray together for God to give you an opportunity to say those words to somebody.

Finally, adopt a fish. Think about your colleagues, your schoolmates, your friends and family, and take on a project to catch for Christ. It may be someone who doesn’t have a church home, or someone who dropped out of church for one reason or another, or someone who never tried faith before. Pray over that person; strengthen your relationship; and wait for the opportunity to say a word of invitation or encouragement that will make a difference in their lives. Offer to bring them to church and buy them lunch after. Be relentless, one person at a time.

There’s your challenge. Be ready to fish. Be spiritually prepared. Develop your elevator speech. Adopt a fish. This is what Jesus calls his disciples to do. This is our mission. This is our life.

¹ <http://tiptoppoultry.com/corevalues/>.

² Matthew 4:17.

³ Luke 19:10.

⁴ Matthew 9:35-36.

⁵ Matthew 4:19.

⁶ Matthew 9:37-38.

⁷ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁸ <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

⁹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian; What A New Generation Really Thinks About The Church ...And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012).

¹⁰ Bob Farr, Doug Anderson, and Kay Kotan, *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church By Building Relationships* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013).

¹¹ Debi Nixon, *Catch: A Churchwide Program For Invitational Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 15.

¹² I Peter 3:15-16.