

MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

TO FISH (OR NOT TO PHISH)

Scripture: *Luke 5:1-11; Luke 8:4-15*

If you have an email address, you've probably received them. They're annoying. They're dangerous. And they clutter up inboxes. I really hate those emails supposedly from some foreign lawyer or government official or bank executive telling me that there are millions of dollars just waiting for me to claim as my own. They claim that there's no risk to me. They even claim that receiving this money is totally legal, even though it isn't really mine. All I have to do is respond to their email with a few pieces of information—my full name, my bank account number, my home address, and my home phone number. If I provide this information, they'll take care of everything else, transferring the money and then a few days later removing their share and leaving a few million dollars for my kindness. It seems like such a win-win situation, unless you're one of the tens of thousands of people who have responded to these emails and ended up with an empty bank account and a self-defeating, how-could-I-have-been-so-stupid attitude.

The people who send these emails sound like they actually care about you. They say they want to make sure there's no risk to you and that there aren't going to be any legal ramifications. They seem so nice, trying to help others benefit from their good fortune. Sure, they claim they're trying to get access to millions of dollars, but they sound very generous, offering to give you millions of dollars for merely lending your account for a few days. The problem is that these email scammers aren't really thinking about your well being. They're practicing a form of identity theft called phishing (commonly spelled with a "ph" instead of an "f"). The idea is to dangle some sort of bait in the sea of the internet—money seems to work well—then the thief just has to wait for the people to start biting, offering up their bank account numbers and surrendering their identities. It's a very simple process that allows huge sums of money to pour into a scammer's bank account with very little effort.

Peter and John and several others of Jesus' disciples also practiced fishing, but of a different sort. Instead of casting out their nets and waiting for the fish to jump right into the boat, they had to work very hard. When Jesus approached them one morning, they had spent all night casting their nets and hauling them back into the boat. Now, these nets were very heavy and very large. Imagine throwing one of these large, heavy nets into the sea, then pulling the large net through the water, sometimes struggling against the fish that are trying to escape, sometimes struggling against the waves, but always having the water resistance and the soaked, heavy cords that make up the net. Sometimes there wouldn't be anything in the nets, and once again the empty nets would have to be thrown out into the water. These fishermen would do this every night and return each morning to wash and repair their nets. After using Simon Peter's boat as a pulpit, Jesus tells this tired worn out fisherman, who had caught nothing all night, to push out away from the shore and let down the nets. After hearing Jesus' teaching, Peter does as this teacher commands, and his trust is rewarded with a wonderful haul of fish. Following this encounter, Jesus invites Peter and his fellow fishermen to follow him and become fishers of people.

One thing I've always loved about Jesus is that he redefines words. Both those phishing on the internet and his disciples who were fishing in the water were doing their practices for their own benefit. Those phishing on the internet are hoping to have people throw money at them. The disciples were hoping to sell the fish they had caught. Both types of fishermen are working for their own benefit, not for the benefit of the fish they're trying to catch. But if you pay attention as Jesus teaches his disciples throughout the New Testament about how to become fishers of people, you will soon realize that the point of this type of fishing is not for personal gain. Jesus is constantly looking for ways to reach out to others. Jesus feeds the five thousand and doesn't charge a dime for the meal. He extends his hands to the sick without requiring that they come to the synagogue with him the following week because attendance had been a little low recently. Jesus never looks for what he can extract from those around him. He's never looking to make a deal. Instead, Jesus constantly has other people's best interests at heart. In other words, God is not bait that we string out into the waters of the world so that we can reel in more people, complete with their resources and their connections and their gifts. Instead it's about tossing the whole bait bucket into the water and feeding the fish so that they will truly see the generous, loving God in whom we have secured our identity.

This past month we have talked about how we find our identity in God and how living authentically as children of God will give us an anchor to weather the storms of life and the building blocks to become more like the God who calls to us. Last month we talked about what it means to be an ambassador for Christ, what it means to represent Christ in this world. The key is finding our identity in Christ so that our representation as ambassadors might be real and honest. Those who are not grounded in the identity of the nation they represent are poor ambassadors for their countries. Those who are not grounded in their identity with God are poor ambassadors for Christ.

It is my prayer daily that my identity is becoming so shaped by God that when people look at me, see how I act, hear what I say, and encounter what I think that they might see God more and more in my life. Not so that I might be revered. Not so that I might be praised. Not so that I might be considered greater than anyone else, but simply because I love the God who is love, the God who loves me even when I fail, because I do. God has shown me so much love, and it is my desire to share God's generosity with all those around me.

In the opening chapter of his book *Another Country*, James Baldwin describes a jazz club and writes about the deep need of our world that our generosity often must meet. He writes, "The joint, as Fats Waller would have said, was jumping.... And, during the last set, the saxophone player took off on a terrific solo. He was a kid from some insane place like Jersey City or Syracuse, but somewhere along the line he had discovered he could say it with a saxophone. He stood there, wide-legged, filling his barrel chest, shivering in the rags of his twenty-odd years, and screaming through the horn, "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" And again--"Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" The same phrase unbearably, endlessly, and variously repeated with all the force the kid had.... The question was terrible and real. The boy was blowing with his lungs and guts out of his own short past; and somewhere in the past, in gutters or gang fights...in the acrid room under the smell of the precinct basement, he had received a blow from which he would never recover, and this no one wanted to believe. Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? The men on the stand stayed with him cool and at a little distance, adding and questioning.... But each man knew that the boy was blowing for every one of them."

This is the world we live in, a world that is desperate for love and acceptance.

Everywhere we see people desperate for love. There's the single mother overworked with a sad, tired look in her eye. She loves her children, but wonders if anyone loves her. There's the middle school student trying to fit in with the right crowd, crushed when one of his friends doesn't defend him when he's getting picked on. There's the businessman, dressed in his fine suit, struggling under deadlines, hoping for approval and maybe even a promotion. These aren't unique situations. We see these people every day, singing the song right along with that saxophone player. Do you love me? And where are we, where are the Christians who find their identity in God, who find their identity in love itself? Where are we?

If I may borrow another illustration from Jesus, we will find that for the world we should be a farmer who isn't very good at farming. In the eighth chapter of Luke, Jesus tells of a farmer who scatters seed everywhere, not concerned with the return he may or may not have, not worried about what type of ground might receive the seed. Jesus tells us the seed is the word of God, the message of a God who loves and is love. The farmer spreads it everywhere. We should be that farmer, spreading the love of God to all, regardless of whether there will be a return on our investment. Like Jesus' definition of fishing, the farming is less about the benefit for the farmer, but instead about the dispersal of the seed.

Today six people are entering into a covenant of membership in this local church. They are publicly announcing their identification with Meridian Street United Methodist Church, yet in entering that covenant, they are claiming anew their identity in Christ. They are stating that they desire to be part of this church, a church that claims to be part of the body of Christ, that desires to follow Jesus, just like the disciples on the seashore. They and we have been called to follow with our new identities, learning how to be fishers and farmers, always seeking the best for those of the world around and showing them that they are loved...by us and God.