

Sermon – April 26, 2026

John 21:1-14

This morning, we heard a miraculous story about fishing. Fishing is often about stories isn't it? – how many fish you caught, what strangers you met while fishing who might have shared best techniques or locations, what kind of weather you experienced, what mishaps took place, the best camera angle to make your fish look bigger than it is, and what kind of great conversations you had while waiting for a nibble on the end of your line.

I want to tell you the story of a fishing miracle that lives on in Reimer family lore. I was not present, but my brothers, Thomas and Micah, were. I contacted them both to make sure I got it right and their stories pretty much matched up.

Throughout their childhood, my dad took Thomas and Micah on annual fishing trips - a tradition that continues today even after our dad has died. Now my brothers are joined by my husband Mike, brother-in-law James Cressman and, for his first time this summer, my son Christof will go along. They will leave on our dad's birthday.

One year, dad, Thomas and Micah went to Black Lake in the Haliburton area. The boys were little and still learning to fish and they both talk about how bad the bugs were. In his excitement, Micah cast his rod too enthusiastically and the rod went flying into the water. There was much disappointment, so dad gave Micah his rod to use for the day. They continued to fish patiently without one of the rods, and, eventually, they caught something. They reeled it in and they discovered that they had caught a fish! Then they discovered that they had also caught the rod they had lost. And then they discovered that the rod they had lost had a fish on the end of *its* hook!

In the gospel of John, we hear about the disciples struggling to catch fish. They are fishermen by trade and they go out at night, supposedly an optimal time because, as one biblical scholar suggests, the fish can't spot the nets as well in the dark. Despite their best efforts and lots of waiting, they don't catch anything.¹ In the morning, Jesus appears to them on the shore for the third time after the resurrection. And, again, the disciples don't recognize him until he speaks. It seems he is known by the nature of his words, not his physical appearance.

¹ https://ourrabbijesus.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/NLD_TOC_plus_Miracle.pdf

Jesus tells the disciples to throw their nets on the other side of the boat, and sure enough, they catch 153 fish! Quite the haul! Jesus' advice is that they switch up their approach and it works. Did this miracle of abundant fish happen because Jesus had some kind of control over nature or were the fish already on the other side of the boat and he simply taught the disciples to change their perspective and their technique?

It's interesting how the disciples have to fail first before they learn a different way. They need to try things out in order to grow. Even seasoned fisherpeople will tell you that they never stop learning new things. I'm reminded of Tim Schmucker's recent sermon when he encouraged us to keep trying again and again, even when we don't get it right the first, second or third time. A simple but profound resurrection message!

I am not a skilled fisherperson, but it seems to me that fishing requires a lot of patience. But maybe the patience of the disciples in this story is precisely the problem. They keep waiting and trying the same thing and it doesn't work! Their patience gets them stuck. They need a new plan and they are quick to shift when Jesus tells them to.

This week, I interviewed a number of fisherpeople about what fishing means to them, including Willem and Mathias Unger Alexander, two of the finest fishermen I know. Mathias said something interesting about patience. In his words:

“Most people think that fishing is all about patience but it's really not. If you haven't had a bite in ten minutes or so you are either in the wrong spot or using the wrong bait.”

Willem also said: “I don't stay patient... If they don't bite, I get in the canoe and fish somewhere else.”

Both Willem and Mathias remarked on how they love the excitement and action of fishing. Willem especially enjoys “the moment when, after a good fight, the fish gives up and becomes dinner.” I love the dinner part too, Willem.

I also spoke with Diem about her love for fishing. She doesn't fish for sport, but to catch something good to eat. She has some great recipes for fish, if you're interested!

Diem reminisced about bonding with her adoptive dad while fishing, fishing with cousins in PEI, fishing with a friend close to Lion's Head, and fishing off the docks

close to her place in Toronto. She also echoed Willem and Mathias' words that one needs to move on if one isn't having any luck. She talked about fishing as an act of hope – hope that what you are doing will have good results. But what struck me most was when she talked about experiencing moments of “zen” and connection while fishing. How her body connects to her hand, her hand to the rod, the rod to the line, the line to the water, and the water to the fish. I interpreted this interconnection between the self, the technology of the rod, and the natural world, as a sort of attunement or oneness with creation.

My brother Micah grew up to be an excellent fisherman and thinks of fishing as a form of therapy. He is a community mental health worker for Communitas Supportive Care Society in Abbotsford, British Columbia where their motto is “ensuring abundance for people of all abilities.”

He has taken clients with serious mental health issues on fishing trips. He told me about one client who could never sit still and suffered from auditory hallucinations, hearing intrusive, distressing voices. It sounds like this client finds it very hard to experience peace within himself. When he and Micah went fishing, this client talked about having a rare moment of stillness from involuntary movement and silence from negative thoughts. Micah also shared some science-based evidence that when we fish, or spend time in nature, we experience a serotonin boost – a brain chemical regulating our mood. When there is a social element to fishing, we get the added release of Oxytocin, which enhances bonding and trust. Oxytocin, nicknamed the “love hormone”, is also the hormone that is released when people give birth and when mothers nurse their babies, bonding them together.

It appears that fishing provides an abundance of blessings: it answers a need for nutritional sustenance, it teaches discipline and technique, it provides connection with creation, it promotes social bonding and builds community, it heals, and it makes for great stories!

Stories of fishing bookend the Jesus and disciple encounters. In John 21, we hear about the last of Jesus' resurrection appearances to the disciples when they are fishing. And when Jesus first meets a group of his future disciples, they are fishing. In Matthew 4, Jesus was “walking by the sea of Galilee and he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea...And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As Jesus went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat

with their father...mending their nets and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him” (18-22). These future disciples see something special in Jesus, they drop their nets, leave their livelihood, and follow him.

Why does Jesus choose these fishermen to be his disciples? To spread the good news and become fishers of people? Based on the things we heard about fishing from Willem and Mathias, Diem and my brother Micah, a few qualities of discipleship come to mind: hard-working, adventurous, goal-oriented but also present in the moment, trusting and hoping that their work will lead to good things, flexible enough to change course and adapt to different conditions, faithful to their cause, drawn to teamwork and social bonding, focused on wellness and healing, and connected to creation.

And what about the fish themselves? What is our relationship to them? We must protect their habitats and honour them with gratitude for sustaining us. While the disciples received an abundance of fish, today we are tasked with not taking more than our share and for fighting for clean waters for people and our more-than-human community members.

The water we all share is sacred. It feeds us and cleans us and brings us delight when we swim or paddle a canoe. Some of our holy water has been desecrated. There are fishing-reliant communities in our own resource-rich country that can't drink their water let alone eat their mercury-infected fish. We acknowledge this reality and pray for your guidance in how we can repair this perversion of God's creation plan.

Jesus promises us to be “living water” – nourishment for our bodies and spirits, the source of eternal life. Living water in the Old Testament also refers to fresh, flowing water from springs or streams, as opposed to stagnant water in cisterns. In Jeremiah, God is described as a “spring of living water.” We are baptized and reborn in this living water.

I would like to conclude by telling you one more miraculous fish story. Well, technically it's about a mammal that looks like a fish.

I was about five months pregnant with Christof and I had started to feel him swimming inside of me like a little fish in safe, warm waters. I could still travel, so Mike and I went to Florida to relax on the beach. I love to swim and when you're pregnant, swimming makes you feel like you are weightless. It's heavenly. I waded

into the ocean and when my belly hit the water, I saw something racing towards me. I froze in fear. As it got closer, I realized that it was a dolphin. It swam right up to me and then turned around and splashed me playfully with its tail and swam away. In that moment, I felt like God had blessed my growing child.

Please join me in a closing prayer:

God, you are our living water. You burst through the dry cracks of the rock, your waves part as we cross to safety. You are not stagnant water, but teach us to pivot and flow around obstacles in our path. You anoint us, purify us, and transform us into fishers of people as you have fished for us. We are nourished within your creation and we are connected to you as the hand is to the rod, the rod is to the line, the line is to the water and the water is to the fish. Give us the humility not to seek dominion over creation, but to stand in relation to all living things as created holy by you. Let us not take more than our share, but find abundance in just enough.
Amen.