



TOUCH POINT

Catch and Release – Touchpoint for January 17, 2024

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (NRSVUE) Conversion of Nineveh

³ The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²“Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

Mark 1:14-20 (NRSVUE) Jesus Calls the First Disciples

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.”

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

I must confess, the idea of fishing for people has never made sense to me. I just accepted it because well, it’s the Bible and it must be important. Now, I’m wondering if the author was stretching a point as well. So I decided to look at the context in John 1 and stretch the Touchpoint that arises in me.

The guy who had no place to lay his head. The one who left everything to set out on a journey of aloneness. Jesus, the human being, greeted John, and was baptized. He heard the voice of God playing the part of Morgan Freeman when coming out of his baptism. He’d been told that he was a son and that he was not alone, that he belonged. He’s on a spiritual high. Then Spirit led him into the wilderness, and he is harassed by the world’s greatest inner critic, the hound of hell. Vulnerable in his hunger and sleeplessness, Jesus keeps his eye on the proverbial ball: his true identity. He chooses emptiness over filling the void with temporary pleasure. In his true identity, Jesus chooses temporary suffering. He had been given his identity. That’s what it’s all about – identity! All the desperate attempts of the air of evil lurks to discredit our identity. Our inner critic, our ego, is vulnerable and desperate at times. Perhaps that is what baptism is for.

Simon and Andrew may have been desperate to feed their families, desperate to pay their taxes and willing to fish at illegal times (yes, I watched the TV series, *The Chosen*). It’s part of the human condition that Jesus was not unfamiliar with.

In my work as a spiritual director for people in their first weeks of sobriety, I speak of flipping the script. In our wilderness moments of anxious cravings and life’s challenges, we have a choice.

Do I turn to what is deadly familiar or do I choose to abstain?

The inner abuser is attempting to steal my birthright, my identity. I used to choose temporary pleasure and got long-term suffering. This suffering is involuntary, and a natural consequence of my yielding to temporary relief. Now I am learning to voluntarily *choose* temporary suffering and receive long-term pleasure. I call it

'Learning to Flip Our Script.' Paul says, "I consider my present suffering, nothing, in comparison to the joy that awaits me."

Jesus went through this in the wilderness, but I must believe he remembered his identity and where it came from in his responses to Satan. Satan was fishing for a deadly response out of desperate need, hoping Jesus would sell his soul. When the market sees we are desperate for something, the price and the stakes become higher and higher. We are the prey, and our souls are the lures. In his physical pain and soulful anguish Jesus didn't take the bait.

Satan is called the Prince of the Air. Of the air! What a joke! Evil and all its negativity does not have power except that which is given. It demands a response and receptivity to give it breath. Until then, it is just air. Spirit is breath. The breath we breathe. Evil has lost an eternal battle and simply annoys us in its desperate, vulnerable state.

Jesus just came out of a desolate, lonely place. He needed God's EMTs to resuscitate him. John is arrested in Galilee. Where does Jesus go? To look for companions. He's not going to do this alone! He is going to go fishing for what has been lost in the hearts and minds of people. He is going to respond to his better life-giving angels. Maybe we need to recognize when we are being fished out of our need to be right, enough, or in control. Hooked by the truth of our identity.

Perhaps the only remedy is to be reminded of who we are. Jesus reminded himself and the devil of his identity and where he gets his freedom. To his critics, and to the devils in the world, Jesus declared the words of his Father. Devils, in Greek, means slanderers, liars who attempt to bring you down from a place only God can give you. The words God declared to our brother, Jesus, are declared to us as well: "This is my son, my daughter and guess what, I'm pleased with them, yet they have done nothing to earn it." I still may not understand this fishing for people thing, but I think I've been fished out and I am hooked!

I don't have very many firsthand memories of my father. I was only four when he died. But I know he left a wonderful legacy, and I have one very vivid memory. We were at a church picnic at Encanto Park in Phoenix. I went for a little walk on my own and made my way to the lagoon. I fell in. I didn't know how to swim, and I could feel my body going down under the water. Then I felt my arm being grabbed and pulled in one big thrust. I felt the suction of coming up out of the water. I saw my dad and they tell me my first words were, "I saw a fish!" My body still remembers that feeling of being grabbed and pulled out the lagoon.

Jesus fished people out of lagoons with really good news. Imagine Jesus wandering into the Galilee Treatment Center, lovingly placing his hand on a patient's shoulder, and saying, "Hey, I have good news for you. You might not go to hell!" Would this be good news? No, in all the stories I read, Jesus is more like my dad.

Makes me wonder. If Jesus communicated eternally Good News, why is the news we bring so conditional?

Billy Graham and others said, 'Come forward and pray the prayer,' a practice which began only in the early twentieth century. Research by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary states that this 'Sinner's Prayer' was created "because of the efforts to simplify and reproduce methods of evangelism." This is not fishing for people; this is baiting people, especially when someone is feeling vulnerable, desperate, hungry, and hopeless, like Jesus was... maybe someone feeling alone and unworthy of truly unconditional good news. A person wants to believe they can do something to make it real, to make their bad feelings go away... to make up for actions causing a fear of punishment... to be a member of *something* greater themselves instead of *someone* greater than themselves. They are vulnerable. They want a transaction where they can retain power.

There is nothing that will take away the natural consequences of our choices. However, if we ask for help and choose temporary suffering, we can be reminded of our given identity. Our friends can help fish us out of our false beliefs and our old narratives.

Intrinsic belonging is different than the feeling of belonging that so many self-help books speak of. Intrinsic belonging is what we have whether we feel it or not; it is the Divine's declaration. It need not be installed by a water potion or a decantation. It can only be an awakening of eternally true Good News.

One of my favorite writers, Father Brennan Manning, who wrote *The Ragamuffin* said in an interview, "I don't believe we are divided by politics or religion. We are divided by only this. Those who are aware and those who are unaware." Therein lies the awakening. Now that's good news!

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir, Remember Me)

Be still, know that I am God

Calm Me, Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Dwell Among Us

(Salt of the Sound)

- 1) Keep moving and living and breathing in us
- 2) Keeping working and singing and speaking through us
- 3) You dwell among us...
- 4) With all this life I long to see, more of You and less of me
- 5) Lord send Your Spirit here to work in us.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(The Scottish Festival Singers)

Benediction

Sevenfold Amen

(The Emmanuel Quartet)

Amen.