

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Cor. 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20
Third Sunday After Epiphany

Gathering in Love*

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Emmanuel Church in the City of Boston
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Good morning! What a blessing it is for me to preach and preside today. It seems just like yesterday when I first arrived at Emmanuel in the fall of 2012 as an intern and a postulant for the priesthood in this diocese. Thank you for being part of my vocational journey during these past few years.

As many of you know, I am now a full-time New Yorker. A few weeks ago, my spouse Michael and I went to the Museum of Modern Art, or MOMA, in midtown to see an exhibit of the late-career works of Henri Matisse, the great 20th century French artist.

It's probably more accurate to say that Michael went to MOMA, and he dragged me along. I'll be honest – I'm much more of a medievalist than a modernist, and so there was probably a little bit of grumbling and dragging of the feet going on.

So we're walking through what seems like an endless exhibit, and I'm looking at my watch, thinking mostly about what's for dinner. Sort of like sitting through a bad sermon. You know that it will end; the question is *when*. We turn a corner, and suddenly there's an entire room of church art before us – stained glass, vestments – that Matisse had designed at the end of his life for a small chapel in the South of France.

I was completely swept up by the beauty, surprise, and mystery of that room. Now *I* was the one who wanted to look at everything and read all the curator's notes on the walls. All of a sudden, Michael was the one looking at his watch! I was hooked.

One of the items in that room was a sketch for an altar cloth that was decorated with embroidered fish. At first, I thought that was a rather odd choice by Matisse for an altar cloth. Wheat and grapes, maybe. Bread and wine, perhaps. But fish?

As I thought more about it, however, the fish motif at the Eucharistic table made a lot of sense. After all, Jesus's miracles of feeding the masses were not just about multiplying loaves, but also fish. And Jesus himself eats broiled fish after the resurrection.

But more than the connection between fish and eating, in some ways it can be said that Christianity is itself a religion of the fish.

Did you know, for example, that one of the earliest surviving images of Christian art is that of a fish? It's a carving of the prophet Jonah – the same Jonah from today's first reading – who is being spit out of a whale, or more accurately a "great fish," or *dag gadol*, in the Hebrew.

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Jonah, for the early Christians, symbolized the resurrection and escaping from the jaws of death to everlasting life.

As some of you may know, God told Jonah to go to Ninevah and to preach repentance to that great city. Jonah decides to get all passive-aggressive with God, and so he boards a boat that was sailing in the exact opposite direction. (If Ninevah is here, then Tarshish is all the way over there.) Jonah was thrown overboard by his fellow passengers, swallowed by a great fish, and spit out after three days. Ultimately Jonah relents. He was swept up by God's call, albeit with some grumbling and dragging of the feet. Not that I could relate to that at all.

The symbol of the fish also had a deep significance in the early church. The Greek word for fish – *ichthus* – is an acrostic for the phrase “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” That is, if you take each of the letters of *ichthus* – I, CH, TH, U, and S (that is, *iota, chi, theta, upsilon, and sigma*) – they correspond to the initial letters of “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior” in Greek: *Iesous Christos, Theou (H)uios, Soter*. So the symbol of the fish was actually used as a secret code for a safe space for Christians during times of persecution.

And, of course, our gospel reading today from Mark also relates to fish. We hear Jesus' call of his first four disciples – Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John – and we learn that they were all fishermen. The significance of their occupation becomes obvious, of course, when Jesus tells them: “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

For years, biblical scholars have debated the significance of the disciples' occupation from an economic perspective. Some have argued that fishermen were members of the lower class, and this meant that anyone – rich or poor – could become a disciple of Jesus. You'll actually encounter this perspective in the offertory hymn, which refers to the disciples as “such happy, simple fisher folk.”

Other scholars have argued that these disciples were actually fairly well off. As the text notes, Zebedee, the father of James and John, had hired hands working for him – and thus their family was an important part of the local economy.

To be sure, questions of socioeconomic class are critical when reading any biblical text. But as the words of today's Bach cantata reminds us – God's economy is fundamentally different than the human economy. Our financial notions of capital, interest, debt, and accounts, all pale in significance to the unmerited gift of grace and forgiveness that God gives to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

So what does it mean for us to be “fishers of people”? An important textual clue, I believe, is the word “net,” or *diktuon* in the Greek, which appears three times in today's short gospel passage. Jesus first sees Simon Peter and Andrew when they are casting *nets* in the sea. After Jesus calls out to them, they put down their *nets* to follow him. Later, Jesus sees James and John sitting in their boat, mending their *nets*.

I believe there is a critical connection between nets – and the related acts of gathering up or sweeping up – and being a disciple of Jesus. Now some of you may not like the idea of gathering up others – or being gathered – in a net. Michael certainly didn't when I gave him a preview of this sermon, and I don't necessarily like it either. But I think it's worth taking a moment and exploring the broader theological context of this theme.

In ancient times, the theme of nets and gathering had a strong eschatological dimension to it. That is, God will come at the end time – the eschaton – and gather us all up. I like to think that this divine gathering is not so much about harsh judgment or fire and brimstone, but rather is the merciful culmination of God’s kingdom of radical love that has already broken into our midst but is not yet fully here.

As Jesus says in today’s gospel reading, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.” And as Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “the appointed time has grown short” and “the present form of this world is passing away.” The arrival of God’s kingdom will be characterized by a gathering, or sweeping up, in love.

Gathering in love is, after all, what we do every week here at Emmanuel Church. We gather for worship, music, and fellowship; we gather our financial gifts of thanksgiving at the offertory; and we gather before the altar to receive the Eucharist.

And starting tomorrow, Emmanuel Church will be a gathering place – a temporary day center – on Mondays and Fridays for some of the 700 people who were displaced without notice in early October by the closing of a homeless shelter and a rehab center on Long Island in Boston Harbor. We need your time, talent, and treasure for this important new ministry.

I’d like to close my sermon with another fish image from Matisse’s chapel in the South of France. Right next to the doors to the chapel itself, there’s a beautiful stained glass window of a fish caught in a net and looking up at a star. The window depicts the worldly nets in which we are all entangled, and contrasts those nets with God’s divine net of love.

That is, unlike the nets of this world, God’s net does not lead to entanglement and destruction. Rather, God’s net leads to freedom and everlasting life. To be a fisher of people means sweeping up others into God’s life-giving and freeing net of love.

Henri Matisse was a life-long atheist. And yet he considered his chapel to be his “masterpiece” and the culmination of his life’s work. So how exactly did this chapel come about? The answer lies with a young woman named Monique Bourgeois, who answered an ad in 1941 to serve as Matisse’s nurse as he was recovering from cancer-related surgery.

Two years after answering the ad, the young nurse decided to become a nun, and she entered a Dominican convent. Now named Sister Jacques-Marie, Bourgeois asked Matisse if he might be interested in helping to design her order’s new chapel. Matisse not only said yes, but he ended up spending four years of his life creating the entire chapel, from the architecture to the stained glass to the furniture, Eucharistic vessels, murals, and vestments.

Matisse was swept up by Sister Jacques-Marie’s net of love, and he in turn designed a masterpiece that continues to sweep up others in love.

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” May we live into this calling by gathering up – and by sweeping up – all those we encounter into God’s liberating net of love.

Amen.