

In a former church, I knew two very capable men, one an insurance underwriter and the other who had a PhD in plant pathology. Years ago, when faced with rapid changes in their respective industries, they both chose to take early retirement rather than learn how to use a computer. When I first met them, I couldn't believe it. But the older I get, the more I understand it.

You see, we like to think about change in the evolutionary sense, as a process that takes place over eons of time. Species such as ours have had millennia to adapt to changes in their environment. Until now. We have sea ice melting and polar bears drowning, and sometimes we can't help but feel as though we are drowning, too.

And I'm not just talking about climate change. I'm talking about all the changes we are grappling with on all levels of our lives: in politics and the global economy, in our society and this

community, in our jobs and in our relationships, in our health and in our own hearts. And the changes are coming so rapidly.

While some of us are quick adapters, others are slow assimilators. But we all have one thing in common: fear. If we are quick to embrace change, we have the fear of being left out or left behind. If we resist change, we have a fear of what it will force us to leave behind. Either way, we're afraid.

And so we can appreciate what Peter is going through today. Easter has come and gone, and he goes back home, where he tries to pick up the pieces of his former life. First off, he gets back in the boat to catch a few fish to feed his family. Little does he know that there's no going back. He and his friends fish all night, and they catch nothing. What's the matter? Has Peter forgotten how to fish? In the past three years, have the fish gotten smarter. Has Peter gotten dumber?

Peter must be feeling pretty dumb when the risen Christ shows up the next morning to rub his nose in it: "Children, you

have no fish, have you?" And he feels even more foolish when the Lord says, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat," and he and his friends haul in 153 large fish.

Now one would think that Jesus is setting them up for another sermon on fishing for people. The gist of that sermon would be: obey my command and you'll reel them in. But that's not the sermon that the Savior wanted Peter to hear that day. After eating breakfast with all of them on the beach, he pulls Peter aside, and he doesn't want to talk about fishing.

Remember, Peter denied the Lord three times. So the Lord is going to give Peter three chances to make up for it. He asks him three times, "Do you love me?" And three times Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." At this point, we might expect the Lord to say, "Then, go fish." But he doesn't tell Peter to go fish. He tells him to "Feed my sheep."

Anyone who's ever been forced to make a mid-life career change can imagine what Peter is thinking at this moment: "But

all I know is fish. I don't know anything about sheep. I don't even like sheep. They're stupid and they're stinky. Fish are easier. You don't have to watch over them. You don't have to feed them. Now I've been a fisherman all my life. Why do you want me to stop now and become a shepherd?"

You can draw your own analogies. We all know plenty of folk with stories like this one. If you want to live and work in this valley, it seems that you have to reinvent yourself every five years.

I had a Peter moment myself a few years ago. I'd just finished my PhD and decided that I was ready for my next challenge. So I went to the School of Congregational Leadership in Orlando, Florida, to find out what's new. In one of the sessions I attended, the speaker made a point to say that we've been training clergy all wrong. We've been giving them a lot of book learning without giving them the practical skills they need to grow a church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yea, yea, I've been

hearing that for a long time. But I hadn't heard this: studies have shown that the more education pastors have, the less effective they are. Ouch! That hurts! Well, the Rev. Dr. had gone to Orlando to learn how to feed the sheep, and she came back wondering if she should just Go Fish.

But it's not just me. The entire church has Peter's problem. Used to be that a church could just open its doors, let down its nets, so to speak, and the fish would swim right in. But it doesn't work that way anymore. Many are the times that we've worked hard, fished all night long, and caught nothing, even when we put our nets down on the right side of the boat.

The story in John's Gospel seems to suggest that if we just knew where the fish were, we'd be successful. Thinking that they were letting down their nets on the right side of the boat, churches in the 60's and 70's followed the fish out to the suburbs. Churches left the heart of the city and ended up on the margins of the community, in more ways than one. If

you remember, it was only a fire in the basement that prevented this church from moving away from the heart of Willow Glen. What we all learned is that as long as we still have the old nets, it doesn't matter if we cast them in new places. As long as we keep doing things in the old ways, we won't catch much. That's why this message is for us.

When Christ says, "feed my sheep," instead of "go fish," what he's saying is that the very nature of our work is changing. We can't just go collect all the Christians who are swimming around out there as we used to do. There aren't enough of them and it's not enough to catch them and haul them to shore. It's not enough just to somehow get them in the door. Having their name on a church roll doesn't mean much anymore. So, as Jesus said, if we want to keep them, we're going to have to feed them.

Our work of making disciples today is more like shepherding than fishing. Sheep have to be kept, not just

caught. They need attention. They need protection. They need direction. They need someone to make them lie down in green pastures and to lead them beside still waters. They need a safe place to restore their souls. No outfit is better equipped to do this than a church that loves Jesus.

"If you love me, feed my sheep." One way this church has long fed the sheep is through the Disciple Bible Study program. It's a 35-week study. It's what we call slow food for the soul, and it's a very rich feast. Yet not everyone can sit down for that long at that table. What about all the sheep these days who eat on the run? How do we invite them? How do we feed them?

Here we are, four weeks into our series on Each One Bring One. This is our challenge: each one bring one to Christ in the next year. Since none of us are really ready to do that, we've been talking the past few weeks about what it will take: getting real enough with friends, co-workers, neighbors, and strangers

to have face-to-face relationships with them and some heart-to-heart conversations.

Still, how are we going to issue the invitation? This week, I have a few suggestions. One is a hand-out and one is hands-on. First of all, if you want to feed the sheep and they aren't here yet, the obvious thing to do is literally to feed them. Give them a hand-out; invite them to a feast. Free food and fellowship is how the early Christians did it. We can do it, too. But we can't do it with the same handful of folk who are always trying to make it happen around here. Filling stomachs and spirits is a community responsibility. So, we're going to have to rethink how we do our mealtimes together. This summer, we're going to reinvent Buck-A-Burger to make it more intentionally invitational, and we need everyone's help to do it.

But there's another way to feed the sheep, especially those who are leery of churches, reluctant to graze in our pasture or rest beside our still water. These sheep don't know

that we can be trusted to walk the talk, to love God and neighbor, not in word only, but in heart and in life. And I think the best way to get them to change their attitude is to invite them to help us change the world. What better way for them to see love in action than to come to a fifth Sunday of Service, participate in a Change the World Day, or join us on a mission trip. At just about any time of the year, we have opportunities to introduce someone to our hands-on, hearts-in love for the world.

So, here we have two very practical ways for each one to bring one: give them a hand-out; invite them to do some hands-on. And as we work together hand-in-hand, we'll get through our vocational crisis. As a church, one of these days we'll figure out that we're not fishing anymore; we're shepherding. If we're like Peter and we love Jesus, you know that we're going to love his sheep, and we're going to learn—in spite of my PhD—how to feed them.