

Today, we have the story of the big catch. Not the one that we celebrate here in the Bay Area. Not Dwight Clark catching the 6-yard pass from Joe Montana so that the 49’ers could beat the Cowboys in the 1981 championship game. I’m talking about the big catch of fish in the Sea of Galilee at the start of Jesus’ ministry.

Simon Peter, James and John had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. Jesus borrows one of their boats, climbs in, does a little teaching and then tells them to put out into deep water and let down their nets. They don’t think it’s worth the work, but they do it anyway. And their nets miraculously fill with fish and the fish fill the boats. The men are mesmerized. Jesus tells them that they will from now on be catching people not fish, so they leave their nets and follow him.

Ever since Hank and I became members of the Monterey Bay Aquarium and brought home their Seafood Watch brochure, I’ve wondered how this story translates to people who live in the Bay

Area today. Notice that the narrator doesn't say anything about bycatch. Jesus isn't concerned about endangered species or declining fisheries. Understandably, he isn't out there preaching that we need a smarter, more sustainable way to fish.

Fast forward to the modern era. Churches are still using this story as a guide for how we should go about catching people. How many sermons have we heard on this story? How often have we been encouraged to think that—no matter how many times we have let down our nets and gotten nothing—if we just had a faith and a net big enough, a budget large enough, a preacher charismatic enough, a building attractive enough, a program exciting enough, and an advertising campaign professional enough that we could just throw our nets out there and boatloads of people would jump right in?!

If it ever did work that way, it doesn't anymore. Extend the analogy a little further. Have you ever thought about what happens to all those fish when you bring them ashore? They suffocate in

those nets. They die in those boats. Perhaps that's why some people are so afraid of our nets. So we have to be careful as we are hauling folks into church, piling them into our boats, that their spirits don't stop breathing. Maybe we need a new metaphor. After all, not that many people make a living fishing anymore.

Going forward, we're going to need a smarter, more sustainable approach to making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Jesus lived in a fishing village. It makes sense that he talked about fishing. We live in Silicon Valley, and the word *phishing* has a different spelling and a very different meaning for us now. So what metaphor for disciple making might resonate here?

For fun, I tried to think of a few. If we aren't fishers of people, maybe we can be coders of community or headhunters of humanity or engineers of eternity.

As you can see, I have no future in marketing! But I have recently run across some intriguing examples of disciple making. I

have had two live encounters just in the last few weeks that have been world changing for me.

Some of you have heard me talk about meeting one of the pastors of the Possibility Project in Palo Alto. It started in a Nazarene congregation that had dwindled down to six people in Sunnyvale. Several years ago, their district superintendent appointed a pastor there to lead the remaining members through a process of closing the church and selling off the property.

What got me excited was what they decided to do with the money. They bought up other churches' debt, lowering the interest payments, which allowed those churches to save money. At the same time, they started an endowment. And the earnings from those investments are now paying for two pastors to plant a brand new church for young adults.

This new church didn't build a new building. They didn't start a Sunday School. Instead, they set up two-year residential internships and recruited young adults to come to the Bay Area, to live and

work in Silicon Valley while also doing ministry. To make it affordable, they rented two houses from the Nazarene Church in Palo Alto and put twelve young people in them. They all meet on Wednesday evenings for spiritual formation. They worship in a converted garage on Sundays. And they reach out to their peers in the workplace and in the community throughout the week. One of them has started a co-working space in the Palo Alto fellowship hall. One of them is building a community garden. They are making disciples without the traditional nets, without a traditional boat, and creating new ways of being and sustaining church. As one of their pastors told me her story, I was mesmerized.

At first I thought that this was a one-of-a-kind story, but I soon learned that I was wrong. Last week, I went to a workshop at the clergy gathering in Modesto. Kathi McShane, the senior pastor at Los Altos UMC was doing a presentation about the Changemaker Institute that they started at her church last year. She approached Ashoka, which is a global nonprofit that trains and equips social

entrepreneurs. From their website, Ashoka's mission is to help people who "see the world not as it is, but as it should be...build the pathways to get us there." Ashoka "accompanies them along their lifelong journey, offering cataclysmic investments, strategic guidance, meaningful connections, and an unmatched peer community." Sounds like a church to me.

Since the United Methodist Church is about making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, Kathi saw a chance to partner with Ashoka to "connect the path of following Jesus with the skills of social innovation, empowering all people, young and old, to make an impact as compassion-driven changemakers." [LAUMC newsletter] Ashoka partnered with Pacific School of Religion when Kathi worked there, but they had never partnered with a church before. So she asked them if they would consider doing a pilot project at Los Altos. They said yes.

Last year, 37 people applied to become Changemaker Fellows at LAUMC. Twenty-six were selected. They ranged in age from 11 to

74. For nine months, they met, prayed together. They went on retreats. They each worked on connecting their passion with a problem and learned how to pitch their solution.

One year later, they are celebrating the change. For example, Cole is working on a project to connect seniors with young professionals to solve the problems of loneliness for elders and the high cost of housing for young workers. Caryn has started SEEDS Homeless Youth Outreach for LGBTQ youth at Palo Alto First UMC. Corinne has started the Buffalo Project that will draw on indigenous wisdom to work with men involved in human trafficking. Melissa wants to take her training to other churches to empower them to be changemakers, too.

The Changemaker Fellows came together because they were willing to risk something big for something good. And the result is that they have discovered a new depth in their faith in Jesus Christ and a new language for sharing it. CJ says, “Through the Changemaker journey I have come to discover that I’m no longer

searching for how my faith fits into my life, but rather where is my faith taking me today, tomorrow and the rest of my life?” Kim says, “Trusting God, taking risks, and overcoming fear and uncertainty in order to be a part of God’s work in the world is the most exhilarating, fulfilling experience of abundant life we can know.” Reed, a seventh grader, says, “God is with me. God is with us.” They sound like disciples-in-the-making to me.

These two stories have one thing in common. These churches are making disciples by training people to make a difference. And I see that our folks, especially working folk, are hungry for this. They want to believe that life is more than working and commuting. They want a life that has more meaning. If the church could come up with ways for people to infuse their work life with faith and use their job skills for Jesus, what a difference that could make for them and for everyone around them. I am becoming convinced that making disciples should never be about gathering people in to save the church but training them to go out and save the world. For God so

loved the world, that he sent his Son to save it and now God is sending us.

That makes me think that we should turn our Bible story around in our heads and give it a fresh interpretation. I was reading in the *Merc* this week about the volunteers who are hoping to catch steelhead trout and chinook salmon in Alameda Creek this winter. They are catching them at the Bart Weir in Fremont, a concrete barrier that the fish cannot get around. So people catch them, tag them and release them upstream where they can spawn. Meanwhile, many government agencies and nonprofits are working on removing or building fish ladders around all the barriers in the creek so that one day the fish can swim freely on their own.

Reading that article, it dawned on me that the best metaphor for making disciples in the Bay Area these days is not catching fish but hatching them. We need to think about churches as hatcheries where disciples are raised and then released. We need to consider that we aren't here to keep them contained in our churches. Instead,

one of our biggest jobs is removing the barriers so that these disciples can swim out into the world on their own, into the ocean of God's love, where they will make a life for themselves by making a difference for others.

The reading in Luke ends today with the disciples leaving their nets and following Jesus. That raises the question: what do we, as a church and as individuals, need to leave behind in order to follow Jesus? We dearly want to hold onto our old nets and huddle in our boats, but when you think about it, Jesus didn't catch people, he released them. He told his disciples to "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations...." They had gifts to give to the world, and so do you.

What has God given you that God can use to make a difference if only you will release you and your gift into the world? We had the memorial service for Pat Farrow yesterday. Now, here was a woman with no wealth and not much health, but God gave her a passion for people, especially the poor. And I think this church helped her to

release that passion into the world and she did make a difference. She helped the Housing Action Committee at Sacred Heart change the laws in San Jose and she did that by speaking out and changing hearts. She was our very own changemaker, but each of us can be one, too. (We're doing that with Village House and the Mexico mission trip.) So what are *you* passionate about? And how can this church help you remove the barriers so you and your gifts can be released into the ocean of God's love? Don't be the one that got away. Take the risk of doing something big for something good. There's no catch. The prize is guaranteed: life and lots of it. God is good. All the time.