

As A Fisher of Men, Patience is a Must

I have been fishing a total of one time in my life, and it was among the longest three hours that I have ever had.

It was on a summer day in 2006. I was serving as a transitional deacon, as priests become deacons first, and that summer was spent at a suburban parish, Saint Hubert's in Chanhassen. It's kind of a "get your feet wet" summer for what parish life will be like before you are ordained the following summer.

An elderly parishioner got in touch with me and asked if I'd like to go fishing. Having never been, I thought sure, why not. After getting a one-day license, we headed to a local lake. After some struggles backing the boat into the lake (I kept shouting "turn" at the top of my lungs but he did not hear me, but that is another story), we went out onto the lake for a few hours that morning. Though he had some type of radar gizmo to let us know where fish might be, neither one of us got a thing. Hopefully though he was able to have a nice morning on the lake. Understandably, I think he knew I was a bit like a fish out of water trying this new activity, and did not call me back.

Now if I liked fishing, I'm sure I could learn the sport. I'd probably read up on techniques and learn about spots and lakes, and I'm sure would eventually catch something. But as any fisherman knows, sometimes getting a catch requires a whole lot of patience.

This week, we have some stories of conversion in our readings and in a big feast day on Monday.

The first reading tells the story of the reluctant prophet Jonah, who goes to Nineveh after his attempts to run from God's call prove unsuccessful, most famously being swallowed by the big fish that catches him and then being expelled on the shore. He really doesn't want to see the people convert, but rather wants to see the city destroyed, but nonetheless he is eventually successful in getting people to change their hearts.

The Gospel tells the story of the calling of Simon and Andrew, with the well-known greeting "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17).

And tomorrow on Monday, January 25th, we celebrate the feast of the Conversion of the Apostle Paul, about a month after we celebrated Saint Stephen's day, where Saul was assisting in the stoning of Stephen. Paul of course has that vision of Jesus asking why he is persecuting Him, and it leads to Paul's temporal blindness but symbolizing how spiritually he regains his sight too.

All of these things involved incredible patience; Nineveh converting; Saul going from hardened persecutor of Christians to evangelist; Paul the apostle trying to set up Christian communities but having people fight amongst themselves, being persecuted by the Jewish community and Roman government and suffering greatly; Paul and Andrew being martyred as well while the Church is in its infancy. But what we see in all

of these too is a “can do” attitude; of no one ever giving up. Admittedly Jonah needs some coaxing, but despite the suffering and lack of results, Peter and Andrew don’t go back to being fishers of fish, and Paul doesn’t give up either. Because of what they do, the seeds of the Church are able to continue to grow, and we feel the effects of what they did to this very day.

I have no desire to ever fish again, but as a priest and Christian, I hope to always be a fisher of men, and bring people closer to God. But sometimes this is so hard. There are the faithful people you see every week, but then there are those who are hostile to what we believe. There are people who come once a year or only at a wedding or funeral, often unfamiliar with some of the most basic prayers. There are people in the world who live for the moment; or who embrace “relativism” which holds there’s no real moral truths; there are those who reject so many of our moral teaching as “outdated” or don’t see it’s importance; and there are others who just seem to make so many bad decisions we wonder if they will ever “see the light.”

It is easy sometimes to see the glass as half empty, but again, we are called to be engaged. And this is why patience is so important.

I’ve seen this trait from so many people. My parents, who were patient with me growing up. People who work for change in the world, not giving up on people, be it our pro-life group, or those who work in prison ministry, or catechists and our faith formation staff who work with kids to prepare them for the sacraments and teach the faith, even though some don’t on any given occasion seem receptive to it. Sometimes we don’t see the results right away. Sometimes we don’t see them this side of heaven. But, what we must remember is that even if we don’t bring the fish into the boat every time, what we are doing is making a difference. We are setting an example for others. We’re planting seeds in the minds and hearts of people we encounter to think more deeply about the faith and where they are going in life. We testify to the truth through how we live our lives. And through treating others with love, compassion and patience; through speaking out for the faith even if we are hated for it or mocked for it, let us remember we make a difference. We never know what is happening below the surface of someone, and what a wonderful thing we can do if we can help someone on their journey to heaven.

As close to relating to a fisherman I can get is, as a nature photographer, trying to find a bird I’m after. I scan for the trees, I drive back and forth over the same ground or hike all around, and then finally there’s the excitement of seeing the bird I’m after, and hoping he won’t fly away as I get my camera out. I often go back to the same area multiple times even if there’s more than one time where I get no photos on a trip, because I know eventually the photo will be there. Far more important though than a bird photo is trying to bring people closer to God and help them on their faith journey. And this too, requires many trips and a lot of time. But with a little bit of patience, I think we’re in for quite a surprise as to who we might meet in heaven, when perhaps learn of how through our words and actions, we helped to get there. God doesn’t give up on us, let’s not give up on one another.

God bless and have a great week,

Fr. Paul