

In the name of Jesus,

I have a confession to make. I don't listen too well to my wife. In fact, we have a running joke that, unless she tells me something three times, it hasn't sunk in. I'm sure I'm the only husband here this morning that has the problem. Why do I tell you this? Because Jesus had the same problem with his disciples (ironically, all of them were men!). Today we're in Matthew 13. It's a unique chapter in the Bible. It has seven parables – no other chapter in the Bible has that many. And in all seven Jesus describes what the “kingdom of heaven” is like. In other words, not what things *up in heaven* will be like, but what things *down here on earth* are like with Jesus in control – his ruling activity, how he operates, and how things work under his reign.

You heard the last three parables in the Gospel – all three spoken just to his disciples. Three times he was telling them what the kingdom of heaven is like – three times, just so it would sink in. I want to focus on just that last one, one that was uniquely designed for his disciples, because the earthly part of this heavenly story used an experience most of them were familiar with – fishing with nets. This parable is all about...

NET RESULTS

1. Get in the net. 2. Stay in the net. 3. Use the net.

I have another confession to make. I'm terrible at fishing. Maybe it's because I grew up in Nebraska – the land of 10,000 cornfields; or maybe it's because I don't have the patience; or maybe it's because I just was never able to master that special touch of a fishing pole. No, I've never been good at fishing, but I think I would have been better if I had teamed up with some of the disciples like Peter, Andrew, James, and John. You see, they didn't use a pole. They used a net, specifically a drag net that could have been several 100 feet long. One side was weighed down, and the other had pieces of cork attached to keep it afloat. Then two boats went out into the lake, spread the net between them, dropped the weighted side in the water, and then rowed toward shore, snagging all kinds of fish. That's the kind of fishing they were used to, which is why the last of these 7 parables in this chapter, and the third one just for them, was tailor made just for them: **“The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish” (v.47).**

So how did the fish get in the net? It wasn't because of any particular skill that Peter, James, and John had as fishermen. It wasn't even because they took the initiative and at least got into the boat and got out on the lake. And it was surely *not* because the fish were just a little tired of swimming in the same old pond, and they saw the opportunity to get out and see a different part of the world. How did the fish get in the net? Very simply, because the net did the work. Not because the fish were willing, or because the men were willing, but because the net did the work. Why is this so important for our understanding of the kingdom of heaven, and how Jesus works? How do we sinners get into the net of God's love? Well, it isn't because you fish got bored and decided to give God a try; it's not because you took the initiative. And it surely isn't because you've had some really good fishermen here at Peace; you're not getting into heaven because of

Pastors Keita, or Helwig, Verths, or even a guest pastor. So how do crummy, corrupt, and condemned-to-hell sinners like you and me get into God's net? It's because his net has been cast out to all. Jesus lived and died for all. And that love doesn't discriminate. The net result is this – the net did all the work. Jesus did all the work. To get into the net is his work, and his Word has accomplished that purpose in us. We are in the net! Thanks be to God!

2. Stay in the net

So it's confession time for you now. I asked you earlier to pay attention as the Gospel lesson was read, so you could pick out the part you didn't like. I'm guessing the part you didn't like was the part about the separation: **“This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (vv.49-50)**. Oh, the earthly part of this story really did take place back then, and still does with commercial fishermen today – the separation of all the bad fish that can't be sold on the market, and keeping the good ones. However, the spiritual truth behind that earthly story is something that even the strongest of believers doesn't like to hear. Face it, none of us enjoys hearing about hell-fire and judgment and eternal separation from God. But that's what hell is like. It really is a separation of everything good and godly, as Paul wrote one time that people who end up in hell **“will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thess. 1:9)**. On top of it, nobody in the Bible speaks about hell more than Jesus, so we need to listen to him, and come to the realization that it's a reality. Hell is real, and it's not to be taken lightly or joked about. God tells us about it primarily so we can stay out of it.

That leads to the question, “How do we stay out of hell?” Isn't it obvious?! Stay in the net! And how do we stay in the net? Well, you're already here. Because every single one of our worship services focuses on the Word, that Word puts a protective net around us. You can protect yourself even more with Bible study, which is coming up in just a few weeks here. What is more, you can keep your family safe by using the net of the Word at home. Now I know it sounds odd that fish should want to stay in the net, but then again, so many of Jesus' parables are counter-intuitive. Wandering sheep need to stay in the green pastures God provides, and not cross the fence to the other side. Lost and wasteful sons are to return to the father they disrespected, because there they will find no anger, but only compassion. And merchants are to sell all they have just to buy that one pearl of great value. And fish need to stay in the net of God's love, so they don't become the main entrée at the Friday night fish fry in the land down under (and I'm not talking about Australia!). That's the net result of being in God's net, and by his love we will stay in the net. Thanks be to Jesus!

3. Use the net

There's one more detail of this parable that often goes unnoticed. Look how big the net is! The net result of that net being thrown out is that it brought in all kinds of fish – small ones and big ones, short ones and long ones, good fish and bad fish. You see, the kingdom of heaven is just like that net – the area it covers is huge. It's global. God's love is for all, not just a few chosen fish. And you know what? The first ones to hear this parable had trouble with that truth, just as

much as the 21st century hearers do today. Why? Because it didn't take them long to figure out that they would not only be the fish, but also the fishermen, and they didn't want to deal with bad fish.

Kind of odd, isn't it? Professional fisherman, used to getting their hands dirty with all sorts of real fish, didn't want to deal with messy ministries that were reaching out to messy people with their messy lives. They wanted to sort out the good people to whom they would cast the net, but Jesus made it pretty clear in today's parable that this was not their job. God would send his holy angels to do the sorting. They only had one responsibility, and that was to use the net. Get God's love out there to everybody!

That's our job, too. Let God worry about the net results. Let God be the one who looks into the hearts of people on the last day to find faith or no faith. Let God be the one who sorts out who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. You - just use the net. Proclaim the good news. Share the message of God's love. Build contacts with more people. Strengthen the friendships you already have. Cast that net out again and again. And just like one time with the disciples, who didn't have any luck fishing one night, you may have to try a different tactic. Instead of talking about eternal life in heaven, maybe you have to change it up a little, and talk about the certainty you have in the face of death, or the courage you have to face your troubles, or the calm you have in knowing that someone else is control, even when your life is out of control. But whatever tactic you use, let go of your inhibitions and your judgmental notions and use the net. Talk about God's love in your life often, and just in case you're speaking to a man, repeat yourself three times so that it will sink in. Then, let God haul it in when he is good and ready. And just like he promised, it will not return to him empty, but will give him the net results he has always had in mind.

Right now in the world there are all sorts of people worried about net results. CEO's and business managers worry about their net results – how much money their company is bringing in. Parents are worried about net results – what kind of affect the Internet is having on their kids. But in the end, and at the end of time, there's only one kind of net result that makes a difference – being in the net of God's love. Thanks be to Jesus that he got you in the net. Thanks be to Jesus that he keeps you in the net. And when you use that net to bring in one more keeper, make sure you give the thanks to Jesus, just as surely as that new keeper fish will be doing for all eternity! Amen.