
Prayer for illumination: Almighty God, in a world that is rapidly changing and causing many to fear, we come to you and your word, as Christians throughout the ages have done, to be challenged by your call and comforted by your love. Grant us ears to hear your word today. Amen.

Growing up, I thought of myself as a fisherman. At least I liked to fish anyway. My home state, Iowa, was not the land of 10,000 lakes. It's more like the land of 1,000 ponds. I'd dig up some worms, tag along with older friends and neighbors who could drive, and end up at some farm pond,

that may or may not have a dock to fish from,

that may or may not have a path through the brush to get to a shoreline.

Of course, we had ongoing permission from the farmer to be there.

We'd catch a few bluegills, occasionally a bass if we were lucky. Once in a while, we'd bring some home to fry up. They were typically a lot of bones and not much meat.

Once on vacation in North Dakota, I caught an almost-big-enough-to-keep Northern Pike in Lake Sakakawea. Still, most of my fishing experience was a very low-key version of the fishing that many of you all do these days, out on boats, on big lakes, catching lots of big fish, at least sometimes. :)

One thing you serious folks who like to fish and boyhood me have in common is that we don't have to worry too much about where we fished, we either have permission, or the lake is public.

Not so the fishermen in our gospel story this morning.

It wasn't easy for peasant fishermen in first-century Palestine to make a living, writes Lutheran pastor Niveen Sarras.

To begin with, they didn't enjoy free access to the Sea of Galilee because the Roman Empire and its elite controlled the fishing industry. Herod Antipas, a provincial Roman governor, romanized the region and put it under Emperor Tiberias' control¹

¹Ched Myers in [""Let's Catch Some Big Fish!" Jesus' Call to Discipleship in a World of Injustice."](#)

Antipas wanted to increase fishing in the waters around Tiberias. He created an industry for commercial export, not local consumption. While the local people depended on fish as their main food, Antipas extracted it for profit.

Fishing was also costly because each step of the process was taxed. Fishermen had to get a lease from local brokers, and they had no option but to sell to Antipas' factories, which exported fish to the entire Roman Empire. As a result, many fishermen became destitute.

Jesus spent most of his ministry in fishing villages like Capernaum (*and Gennesar and Magdala*) because there, according to John Dominic Crossan, "the radicality of Israel's God confronted the normalcy of Rome's civilization under Herod Antipas."²

And just what does the radicality of Israel's God confronting the normalcy of the Roman Empire look like?

You, no doubt, are familiar with Luke 5:10 where Jesus tells the disciples there present not to be afraid, and that from now on, they will be catching people.

Luke's language here is the strongest of the four gospels. The others use the language of "fishing for people." Luke's text describes "catching people alive."

I'm sure you know the text of the King James Version, come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men, and women of course, too. Do you remember the little Sunday school song, "I will make you fishers of men"?

You probably have an idea of how this text has been interpreted through the decades.

As followers of Jesus, we are to "catch" other people, so they will be followers of Jesus too. The emphasis is decidedly on *evangelism*.

Getting people to "believe" in Jesus. And there is nothing wrong with this, surely we want people to believe in Jesus.

However, in spite of centuries of evangelical mission work inspired, in part, by this verse, it's not what this verse means. Let me explain why.

Jesus is a rabbi, steeped in his Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. When he uses an image, he does so knowingly, aware of other biblical allusions. And if we look back at the Old Testament, we see the image of catching fish. And it's not really a welcoming in, it's really a judgment, a *critique of those not acting justly and rightly*.

Think about fishing. It's great for us, but not good for the fish!

² <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2022/02/will-we-join-him/> By Niveen Ibrahim Sarras, 22
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The fish gets caught, gets injured, gets eaten!

Ched Myer, in his commentary entitled *Binding the Strong Man* spells it out succinctly:

“There is perhaps no expression more traditionally misunderstood than Jesus’ invitation to these workers to become ‘fishers of men.’ This metaphor, despite the grand old tradition of missionary interpretation, does not refer to the ‘saving of souls,’ as if Jesus were conferring upon these men instant evangelist status.

Rather, the image is carefully chosen from Jeremiah 16:16, where it is used as a symbol of Yahweh’s **censure of Israel**. Elsewhere the ‘hooking of fish’ is a euphemism for **judgment upon the rich** (Amos 4:2) and [hooking the] **powerful** (Ezekiel 29:4).

Taking this mandate for his own, Jesus is inviting common folk to join him in his struggle *to overturn the existing order of power and privilege.*” (p. 132)

If you have been paying attention the last couple of weeks, the “existing order of power and privilege” is certainly doing everything it can to increase its power and privilege. So it was in Jesus's day, so it is today.

This past week, columnist Nicholas Kristof's article was titled

[“The World’s Richest Men Take On the World’s Poorest Children”](#)

In it, he describes the world’s richest man boasting about destroying the United States Agency for International Development, which saves the lives of the world’s poorest children, saying he shoved it “into the wood chipper.”

Kristof says that the world’s richest man has a net worth greater than that of the poorest billion people on Earth, and his personal net worth has **grown** since the election by far more than the entire annual budget of U.S.A.I.D. USAID, does humanitarian work around the globe, treating AIDS, preventing health epidemics, and ensuring education for girls in oppressive countries. It accounts for less than 1 percent of the federal budget.³ Of course, any organization has room to be more

³ President John F. Kennedy pointed out when he proposed the creation of the agency in 1961, it’s also myopic. Cutting aid, Kennedy noted, “would be disastrous and, in the long run, more expensive.” He added: “Our own security would be endangered and our prosperity imperiled.” https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/05/opinion/usaaid-spending-trump-musk.html?unlocked_article_code=1.v04.yoP.3ioMKyEbj7m9&smid=url-share

efficient and trim waste. But as the saying goes, one should not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

A little closer to home, this past week, the cuts made by the world's richest man, acting on behalf of the current President, to U.S. humanitarian work also cut federal funding for Lutheran aid organizations that help resettle refugees, describing the work that various Lutheran aid organizations have done for decades as "illegal."

Our own Bishop Eaton of the ELCA was forced to counter his claims and said:

"Despite misinformation and baseless doubt cast today on funding that supports Lutheran organizations across our country, the ELCA remains steadfast in our commitment and work with our many Lutheran partners and expressions of our church," Eaton said.⁴

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So, what do we do in this world we find ourselves in?

First, we don't get overwhelmed by the flood and flurry of radical and discriminatory actions and executive orders. We stand resolute in our faith in Jesus, who wants us to "catch" people.

Second, we pray.

Third, we act. In biblical terms, we stand on the side of the widow, the orphan, the sojourner (that is, the immigrant!), and the poor. In other words, anyone outside the power structure. The outsider, the marginalized, the "least of the these" to quote Matthew 25.

You see, this story of the call of the disciples is not a story about the disciples changing their vocation from fishing for fish to fishing for people.

Rather, it invites them *to join Jesus in reversing Rome's unjust social order and replacing it with God's kingdom*. Fishing for people is a political and spiritual statement against Roman imperial power. By providing fish, Jesus demonstrates that he, not Antipas, controls the lake.

Yes, we believe this is God's world, not a world that belongs to the rich and powerful to do what serves them.

⁴She also says that "The ELCA is also concerned for other faith-based communities and organizations who have similarly come under attack."

<https://religionnews.com/2025/02/03/musk-spotlights-federal-funds-for-lutheran-social-services-calls-them-illegal-payments/>

And so, I think this is what we are called to do on the East Side, to stand with the oppressed and suffering in order to “catch” those policies and people that diminish and discriminate against the poor and downtrodden. “Jesus is inviting common folk like us to join him in his struggle to overturn the existing order of power and privilege.”

The disciples, upon hearing that they would “catch people,”
brought their boats to shore,
and they “left everything and followed him.”

Might we do the same.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.