Fishers of Men: What does that mean?

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen. One of my favorite things to do with my grandfather was go fishing. When I was young this meant that we would get in his truck and drive for what seemed like an eternity until we arrived at some river bend or swimming hole where it seemed as though we were the only people to have ever set foot there. In fact it was a little stream in the mountains of Pennsylvania where I caught my first fish, a 12 inch Rainbow trout. It was on these little streams and lakes that I first learned how to put a worm on a hook and how to cast my line without catching a tree or another person. I often would be jealous of him as he and his brother and cousin traditionally made a trip up to the Au Sable river to fish for steelhead every year. The two consistent things we heard about these trips when he would return were that one, he had a wonderful time, and two, his waders leaked. But the time did eventually come where he took my brother and I on our own fishing excursions. Before he died he showed us the joy that is fishing in the Florida Keys. We would go to an island village called Islamorada. A town with the slogan, “The Sport-fishing capital of the World”. Now while there was the option to go deep sea fishing we instead went into the backcountry. This is an area with shallow water that varies in depth from 20 feet in the channels to less than a foot on the grass flats. Naturally a variety of species can be caught here and we often started our days catching sea trout, snapper, and grouper that we would take to a restaurant to have prepared for us after our day on the water was over. But as the day got into the late afternoon there would be some excitement for we were about to head to the spot where we could potentially catch a fish known as the silver king, tarpon. Now these are not fish that you fillet and eat. In fact the only reason to try to land one of these fish is for the fight they put up. They put up such a fight that it is actually illegal now to hoist them above the water after they’re caught as they are so exhausted that it could kill them. What makes them such a spectacular catch is the fact that these fish can get up to over 200lbs and they leap several feet out of the water. In fact that’s generally how you know you’ve got one as generally you fish for them at night. Our guide described tarpon fishing as, “An evening of tranquility interspersed with moments of chaos” and that is absolutely correct. Often times you know one is on because you hear a splash in the distance followed by the whirring of your reel as it starts to take your line out to see. But just because you have one on the line doesn’t mean a thing. In fact I would say that out of every 5 fish we had on our lines we maybe landed one or two. And sometimes an entire evening, from about 4:30 until 9:30 would go by without so much as a bite. It was after one such trip, on our last night in Florida, where we had just had a bad day overall, that my grandfather hit us with some wisdom. He said, “Well boys, there’s a reason they call it fishing and not catching.”

That phrase has been stuck in my head this week as I prepared my sermon. Our text for this week is one that I’m certain we all have some familiarity with, at least a portion of it, where Jesus says to Andrew and Peter, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” Now why these two just dropped their nets at this prospect baffles me. After all, fishing for men is far different than fish. Fish rely on their instinct. It’s what defines them. While there are individual fish, I think it’s safe to say that they all act similarly to the rest of their species. Imagine if you would that you cast your line into a lake or stream and all of a sudden a school of bass show up with picket signs around your hook mocking you for your vain attempt to catch them. Naturally that is not something that fish do. Fish are enticed by movement, by smell and taste, that’s what their brains tell them to do. Individuality means next to nothing to them beyond the need to reproduce. Humans are the opposite. Individuality is what makes us unique. It gives us all a different perspective on life. It allows us to set our own goals for our own lives. We have our own instincts as well. We also have the ability to ignore our instinct. It has led to many great feats of human accomplishment and courage. Storming the beaches of Normandy for example goes against every instinct that we as humans have. Ignoring our instinct can also cause humans to do terrible things to each other. Tomorrow will mark the 45th anniversary of the decision of Roe v. Wade, the landmark supreme court case that legalized abortion in the United States. According to Planned Parenthood they performed 321,000 abortions in the year 2017 after performing over 300,000 in 2016. Over 600,000 in two years and that doesn’t take into account independent clinics. Humans have the ability to reason and come to a logical conclusion. We also have the ability to reject reason. In the case of abortion, most of those in favor of it would not say that it is a human being, rather it is a simple collection of cells. Many would say that abortion is just a fraction of the procedures that are performed at Planned Parenthood clinics. Obviously this is but one example, however I found it fitting given that this is a major issue that we as Christians must deal with.

So in this climate, how are we supposed to be fishers of men? After all, to be fishermen don’t we need some sort of bait or net? We certainly do. But we do not have the most enticing thing to offer to people now a days as we live in an age where for the first time more Americans are non-religious than religious. The only thing that we truly have at our disposal is the truth. The truth is that we are all hypocrites. We all have our shortcomings. So when Jesus speaks about the time being fulfilled and the kingdom of God being at hand, it should strike a measure of fear into us when we remember that we are sinful people. That is one instinct that we cannot ignore. We cannot change the fact that we are hypocrites but we can change the manner in which we interact with one another. When we show our brothers and sisters their sin it should come from a place of empathy, sympathy, and compassion, not haughtiness and a puffed chest, for we are no better than them. When we think of the actions of others we should remember that which Jesus tells us here about the time being fulfilled and the kingdom of God being at hand. That is important because Jesus did not just come for a select group of people, but for all people. Jesus death was not just for a few, but for all. Forgiveness is a gift that exists for every man, woman and child, even the unborn. This is the truth that we have been given. When Jesus says, “I will make you fishers of men” he is telling us that through him, we will know the truth. This is not a truth that we are to keep to ourselves, for we are to use it to show people, to bring them into the fold, to ensnare them in the love of God. While it may be more fishing than catching most days, it is a noble task to share the word of God. It is a wonderful thing to show the love of Jesus to others. Now go, be fishers of men. Spread the truth of God’s love that he showed through his son our Lord, Jesus. Amen. May the peace of God which surpasses our understanding keep and guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.