

**Series: Words of Welcome – How to Be the Perfect Host**  
**Part V: Networking\***  
**C. Gray Norsworthy**  
**Johns Creek Presbyterian Church**  
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*One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret the people were crowding around him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. -- Luke 5:1-11, NIV*

*Social Network* was one of the hit movies in 2010. It told the story of the creation of Facebook. If you have seen the movie or read about it, you may remember that early on when it began to take off, it was called "The Facebook.com" but someone suggested dropping the article "the" and calling it simply "Facebook." There was actually a newspaper story in the *Wall Street Journal* this past week about this practice of dropping "the" or "a" or "an" before a product, and how that changes one's perception of the product. (September 12, 2011, "An Article of Faith: Place No Faith in Articles") So now we have simply "Kindle" or Facebook." And now "Facebook" is a verb. It is something we do to look up or network with somebody -- perhaps making them our "friend."

I began to explore "social networks" this week and discovered there is a great deal of research out there about social networks. A social network was defined in this way: "In its simplest form, a social network is a map of specified ties, such as friendship, between the nodes [individuals] being studied." ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_network](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network)) In other words, a social network is one way to talk about how people connect with each other. But I wonder, particularly as we have set aside time to talk about what it means to reach out to and welcome others in the name of Christ, what it means to be part of God's social network. And how do we go about "friending" someone in that network – making friends for God? I think our story today from Luke's gospel may give us some insight into a way of networking – as in working the nets -- that took place a long time ago before Facebook was ever a dream in the mind of some undergraduates at Harvard.

The story begins by the side of a great lake where large crowds have been following Jesus as he taught and healed. The crowds are very large. Jesus looks and sees two boats at the edge of the lake next to some fishermen. We don't know if he asked to borrow their boat or not, but he gets into one of the boats, goes a little distance from shore so that more people could see and hear him, and he sits down to teach like the Jewish rabbis did in that day.

And when Jesus is finished speaking, he tells Simon, whom we also know as Peter, to go out into the "deep water" to catch fish. Now it is hard to get the tone of Simon's answer, but my guess is that there was probably some attitude in it – maybe even sarcasm: "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. *But* because *you* say so, I will let down the nets." (Luke 5:5, NIV – italics mine) Normally you fished at night, which is why the fishermen were washing their nets during the day. No one fished during the day. But they head out and they catch so many fish that the nets begin to break. They have to call James and John on the shore to bring the other boat to hold all the fish, and even then the boats were close to sinking.

Simon's response to all of this is not what we might expect. I would have said something like, "That's amazing, Jesus – how did you do that? Thanks!" But Simon says, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" as he falls at Jesus' knees. It is an act of worship. Simon senses there is something very profound going on here. This is more than just someone who knows where the fish can be found – this may be someone divine. Jesus tells them not to be afraid. But then, after they have had this experience of fishing, Jesus uses this event to teach them saying: "From now on you will fish for people." (Luke 5:10, NIV) And these first disciples pull their boats up on the shore and leave everything to follow Jesus. Everything – family, jobs – everything! And as we know, they were in for something beyond what any of them could imagine.

But is there something in this story that we can learn about how to be a part of God's social network? In other words, can the practice of fishing for *fish* teach us something about how to be better fishers of *people*?

I grew up learning to fish from my Dad. My Dad was a pretty good fisherman and he taught me how to fish. We would get up some Saturdays before dawn, hop in our pink and white 1959 Dodge Coronet -- the kind with the fins in back. Mom had picked out the car because she liked the color pink and everyone in Atlanta knew it was the Norsworthys, because no one else had a pink and white Dodge. But when it got older it became Dad's car -- some of you men know how that goes. Those Saturdays we would drive up Roswell Road through Sandy Springs, Roswell, Crabapple, and Ballground to a little lake in Cherokee county. It was there that I learned how to fish.

And while we got up early on a Saturday, the preparation began the night before. Dad would lay out the spinning rods, fly rods, cane poles, tackle boxes, nets to hold the fish, a box to hold the crickets for bait, and he would charge up the electric motor that we would put on the back of the small fishing boat up at the lake. On the way up we would stop by a bait shop and buy worms (night crawlers) and crickets -- all of which taught me early on that *in order to catch fish, you had to be prepared*.

*When it comes to working God's social network and "catching" people for God, we too, need to be prepared.* Now that doesn't mean we have bait and fishing poles, but it does mean that we can do

the things that get us ready to be open to God using us to make friends for God. For example, we might begin each day with a prayer that God would make us open and tuned in to those around us who might need a word of grace or a simple gesture of kindness. And we can grow in our own Christian faith through Sunday School or small groups so that when we encounter someone who may have questions about this Christian faith, we might know what to share with them. Last week we had record numbers of folks overall attending Sunday School – that is great. It is another way of preparing ourselves by deepening our spiritual lives. In addition, when we come to church here on Sunday, we can take an attitude of welcoming everyone we see – whether we know them or not. To be good fishers of people, we need to begin by being prepared.

The second lesson we might glean from fishing for fish has to do with where the fish are – and where the people are. In our story, Jesus goes to the lake and while he is teaching, he finds Simon and the other fishermen. In a sense, Jesus enters into Simon’s social network. And when it is time for them to fish for fish, Jesus tells them to take the boat out into deep water – where Jesus knows the fish are.

When I was a boy growing up and learning how to fish from my Dad, we could have gotten up before dawn and tried to fish in our backyard, but it would have yielded zero fish because there wasn’t any water back there – or any fish. In other words, to fish you have to go where the fish are – which is why we drove to that lake before dawn. In the same way, *if we want to welcome others and include them in God’s social network, we need to go where they are.* We can’t just sit back and expect to do nothing, thinking that if they really want to find out about God, they can find us. Rarely might that happen. Most of the time, it will be as unlikely as a fish jumping into the boat. It happens every now and then, but not very often.

Over the years I have shared with folks the studies that show that 86% of those who join a church first come because they are invited by a friend or a family member. (Elmer Towns, *Evangelism: The How and Why*,” in *Church Growth: State of the Art*, 1986, 43-44) People come because someone invites them. We have to go to someone and invite them. Studies also show that most people, whether they come or not, will perceive the invitation in a positive way. In addition, studies also show that people come back to a church the second time because they experience it as warm and friendly. (Herb Miller workshop: “Building and Leading a Magnetic Church”) Now, that comes from people speaking to guests and connecting or networking with them. Most people can tell very quickly whether a church is friendly or not. Studies also show that many people decide whether or not to join a church within the first ten minutes. (“Five Significant Facts About First-time Guests”, by Rick Ezell) Think about what happens during that time – it is the journey from the parking lot, through the doors, maybe going by the nursery if you have young kids, and the start of the service – that is long before the sermon is ever preached. It is something of a gut reaction in which the person says, “This is the place to belong.”

Last week someone visited our church and sent an email to one of our staff members that went this way: “It was such a pleasure to meet you today and the congregation! [We] felt so much at home and were quite impressed with the Church. We look forward to returning on Sunday!” Did you catch that? They felt “at home” and that, in part, is because of how we choose to welcome others and go where folks are. It means getting out of our comfort zone and walking across the room and saying something like, “I’m not sure if we’ve met. My name is . . . what’s yours?” That’s it. Our name tags

make it even easier to start a conversation. People come here to JCPC looking to network – to connect with others and with God, and we can help make that happen.

Back when Dad and I would put the boat into the lake to fish, we had an electric motor in order to be quiet. There was one particular cove at the lake that Dad liked to fish. We would come up to it and turn off the boat motor. We would then ease up between the trees that were partially submerged in the brown water. Dad would see a spot next to a tree and whisper that he thought there might be a small mouth bass right over there. Then with a flick of his wrist, he would use his fly rod to try to put the fly in the perfect spot . . . and just wait. Every now and then he would say something like, “The wind from the south blows the bait in the fish’s mouth.” And I really had no idea what he meant by that. But it was all about approaching quietly so as not to scare the fish. Which I think is great advice not only in fishing for fish – but for those who, like the disciples, want to be fishers of people. Don’t scare the fish!

How often do we scare someone off from the Christian faith by being loud and noisy – not paying attention to what might be going on with the other person? We’ve all probably heard stories of the person who grabs someone by the collar and asks them, “Are you saved?” Most of the time, I don’t think those tactics work. If you have ever had that happen to you, you probably wanted to get away as fast as you could. Probably the most important thing we can do in welcoming another person on behalf of God is to listen. When folks are looking to connect – they probably don’t want a sales pitch. They want to know you’re interested in them as a person, and that takes listening. So we approach another person with respect. A smile and a warm handshake go a long way. Building that genuine trust first is key for most folks before we might ever begin to talk about things like faith and God. But don’t err on the other side by refusing to speak to anyone, all in the name of “respect.” Refusing to welcome someone is not being “respectful,” that’s simply not caring. But there are ways we can reach out to others that do not scare them off.

For anyone who has ever fished, you know one of the hard lessons of fishing – you don’t always catch lots of fish every time. I can remember coming home from some fishing trips without having caught anything. Other times the nets were full, but on occasion the fish weren’t biting. It’s just the way things are. In the same way, it is important to know that in spite of our best efforts to be welcoming, to be prepared, and to go where the fish are and not to scare the fish – sometimes it just doesn’t work. It may not be the right time. God may need to work in this person’s life for days, weeks, or even years before he or she responds. To use another metaphor from the Bible, we may simply be “sowing seeds” that will sprout up much later in life. God can still use us in ways we may never know.

In fact, I think that when we get to heaven, part of what we will spend all that time doing is talking with the folks who will come up to us and say, “You may not remember me, but what you said to me made a huge impact in my life, and because of you, I am here in heaven. Thank you, and let me tell you about it.” Won’t that be great! But it takes patience – so we just keep on keeping on and trust the outcome to God.

That reminds me of another fishing story -- a fable really, that made its way through Europe after the fall of France in World War II. According to this story, in July of 1940, when England faced the enemy alone, Hitler invited Churchill to Paris for a secret conference. Churchill arrived by plane and was

escorted to a French castle where Hitler and Mussolini awaited him at a tea table beside a famous pool in which there were carp. Hitler lost no time. "Here is what I've got to say to you, Churchill! England is finished. Sign this document admitting that England has lost the war, and all Europe will have peace tomorrow!" Churchill said quietly, "I regret that I cannot sign it. I don't agree that we have lost the war." Hitler pounded the table and said, "Ridiculous! Look at the evidence!" But as Churchill sipped his tea, he said, "In England we often settle a difference of opinion with a wager. Would you like to make one with me? The loser will agree that he has lost the war." Hitler asked suspiciously, "What's the bet?" Churchill pointed to the carp in the pool and said "Let's wager that the first one to catch one of those carp without using any fishing equipment will be declared the winner of the war." Hitler said, "It's a bet." At once he whipped out his revolver and emptied it at the nearest carp, but the water deflected the bullets and the carp swam undisturbed. Hitler then turned to Mussolini and told him to jump in the pool because he was such a great swimmer. So he jumped in the pool with all his clothes on, but try as much as he could, the carp just slipped through his grasp. At last, exhausted, he came out empty handed. Hitler turned to Churchill and sneered, "It's your turn. Let's see what you can do." Churchill calmly dipped his teaspoon in the pool and tossed the water over his shoulder. Then again. And again. Hitler watched open-mouthed and impatiently asked, "What on earth are you doing?" Churchill kept on dipping and replied, "It will take a long time, but we are going to win the war." (Colonel Remy)

Friends, it may take a long time for God to use what we do to reach out to others and bring them into God's social network, but know that our efforts will not be in vain. God is a patient, but persistent God. And God may be reaching out to you today. Or, God may be asking you to be persistent in working God's nets and "friending" others so that they can be what they were created for in the first place – a part of God's social network. Whichever is the case, I want to invite you to be a part of God's social network. I promise it will be the most important things you could ever do!

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

\*Some of the ideas in this sermon about fishing and evangelism were inspired by Dr. John Sloop's workshop entitled, "How to be Fishers of Men and Women for Christ" at The Massanetta Springs Evangelism Conference.