

The Dragnet

A sermon about why the Lord called fishermen to be His disciples.

A sermon by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, May 5, 2019

“The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind.” Matthew 13:47

Do you ever wonder why fish and fishing figure so prominently in the New Testament?

When the Lord called the disciples, a number of them were fishermen, and He said to them:

“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew 4:19

People are the fish. The disciples would be sent out to catch them and bring them to the Lord.

You may wonder why fish are good representations of people, and why fishing would be a good representation of such a core purpose of the church. In calling these men the Lord did not promise that they would help drive out the forces of evil or bring peace to the human race. As He states it here the mission is simply to catch them.

Do you want to be caught like a fish? Do you think of yourself as a fish to be caught? Do you see yourself as being in the business of catching other people as if they were fish?

Another question about the choice of fishermen to be disciples is that although fishing was important to the economy of Galilee, farming, herding and trade were far more common occupations nationally. These occupations are featured in a number of places in the Lord’s teaching, but none of the disciples are described as farmers, shepherds or merchants.

Israel was especially a land of trade, being

crisscrossed by important trade routes between Egypt, Greece and other places. The name “Canaan” means “land of trade,” and the Writings comment that this is because “trading” means to communicate the goods and truths of the church (*Arcana Coelestia* 4453). We might expect the disciples to have been merchants.

But instead most of them are fishermen, and there are good reasons for it.

Why fish?

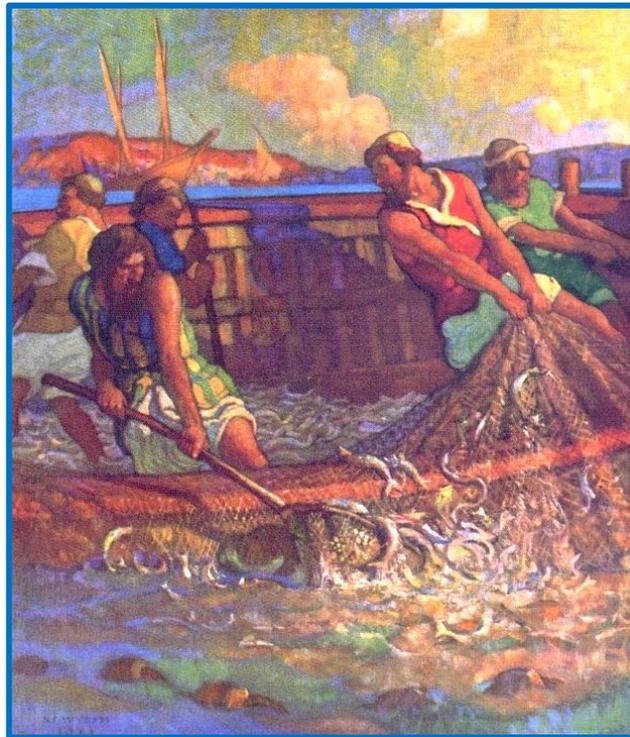
Fish stand for “natural people in respect to knowledges” (*Apocalypse Explained* 513). The imagery is neutral with respect to people’s spiritual lives, neither good nor bad but simply natural. The imagery is used to remind us that the delivery of the good

news needs to take into account the fact that we are natural people with natural interests. We are affected and attracted by things in the natural world, and that is the starting point.

The idea that we are all fish to be caught in the disciples’ nets, however, might not sit well with us. Who wants to be caught like fish? And the imagery of nets and hooks seems like something we would want to avoid.

This is just the point. Hooks and nets are designed so that the fish don’t realize that they are caught until it is too late.

Throughout the Word hooks, nets, traps and snares are used in different contexts to indicate things that may be good or bad. There are many warnings to avoid the nets and snares of the wicked, but at the



same time the apostles are sent out to cast their nets and draw people to the Lord.

The fact that we are all natural people makes us vulnerable to any kind of appeal based on natural appearances, and to all kinds natural motivations. These things are described as “nets” “snares” and “traps” which can make us victims of our own natural desires (*Arcana Coelestia* 9348).

Most people are aware of the dangers of bad habits, addictions, and the many enticements that exist in our world that would lure us into trouble. Whether they exist on the internet, in dysfunctional relationships, or in our own patterns of thinking, our entrapments in these nets can rob us of happiness and a useful life.

In Charles Dickens’ “*Christmas Carol*” he described these things as the invisible chains that we form link by link in our lifetimes, which only become visible after death, an idea that he may have taken from *Heaven and Hell*:

“A person’s ruling love is like a chain or rope tied around them, with which they can be pulled and which they cannot escape.”
Heaven and Hell 479

It works the other way too. Since we are natural people, spiritual things often hold little interest for us. So we are enticed into the early stages of true love by the natural beauty and pleasures associated with the opposite sex. We are eased into an interest in following the Lord through the pleasing stories of the Old and New Testaments. We are introduced into a love of useful service by the many natural rewards associated with achievement and employment. We don’t realize that by following these natural enticements we may end up shedding the love of self in favor of a love for others and love for the Lord.

Fishing, nets and hooks turn out to be the perfect imagery for what the disciples were sent out to do.

Nets for separating the good from the evil

Another way to think of fishing and nets is shown in the Parable of the Dragnet in Matthew:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire.” Matthew 13:47-50

The meaning is described in the *Apocalypse Explained*:

“In the parable of the dragnet the separation of the good and the evil is likened to “a net cast into the



sea bringing together every kind of fish,” for the reason that “fishes” signify natural people in respect to knowledges and cognitions. In “the consummation of the age,” or at the time of the Last Judgment, such are separated from one another. For there are good natural people and bad natural people; and the separation of these in the spiritual world has the appearance of a dragnet cast into the sea, bringing together the fish, and drawing them to the shore, and this appearance is also from correspondence. This is why the Lord likens the kingdom of the heavens

to “a net bringing together the fish.” That the separation of the good from the evil has this appearance it has been granted me to see.”
Apocalypse Explained 513

Here the net is used to gather everyone together, so that the good and evil can be separated. One way that this happens in the next life is described in our lesson from *Spiritual Experiences*:

“An evil spirit is sent into societies on mountains, crags, or hills, and rouses desires...Those who act in unity with him, turn their face in that direction, those who do not turn their face away. Then, all who turned their face to him are gathered into a group... (They) appear as if dragged in a net, and thus they are brought down to the places where they will be.” *Spiritual Experiences* 5222

Something similar to this is continually going on

with all of us. We are exposed to different kinds of ideas and desires, and the resulting churn of thoughts, attractions, choices and affiliations fuel constant changes in society and in our lives. It is as if we attach ourselves to small chords and threads, and then follow them as we live our lives.

Choose your nets wisely

All of us live within networks formed by our interests, associations and knowledge. They are formed and strengthened throughout our lives – for good or for ill.

Nets have both good and bad connotations for most people. No one wants to get caught in a net that will make them subject to forces beyond their control. At the same time people also see that finding ways to reach out and connect with others for good purposes is a good thing.

One of the primary reasons for New Church Education and the Academy of the New Church is to promote the bonds of friendship between people who will support each other in loving and believing what the Writings teach. People, like fish, are social beings, and as we grow up we will tend to believe what those around us believe. We form our identity and decide what we love and respect in tandem with our peers, and according to what is acceptable to them, or according to the culture that we have come to accept.

As we grow up we make our own choices, and intentionally ally ourselves with organizations and causes that we favor. The influence of our peer group, though, is strong and long lasting.

According to many reports, people today in our part of the world are reluctant to join organizations and affiliate themselves with such things as churches, political parties, and other traditional ways of connecting with people. Books like Robert Putnam's twenty-year-old "*Bowling Alone*"

describe people's growing social isolation, disillusionment with organizations, and distrust of leadership. People increasingly live alone, fail to marry, and feel uneasy about their identity.

Whatever the cause of this phenomenon may be one result is that more than ever people report feeling isolated and alone.

It is just this situation that the disciples' nets are designed to solve. Swedenborg also describes his mission as being like that of the disciples, a spiritual fisherman. A spiritual fisherman is one who

investigates and teaches natural truths, and afterwards spiritual truths rationally. These rational truths are like the nets that pull us together according to what we love.

We are not fish

But we are not fish, nor are we ever trapped into believing the truth. We are not caught in any nets. The more consistent imagery is that we are sheep who hear or do not hear our Master's voice. The Lord says:

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they

follow Me." John 10:27

We are sheep when we innocently accept the Lord's leading, recognize His voice, and willingly follow Him in our lives.

After the Lord's resurrection on Easter morning He gathered His disciples and sent them out to cast their nets all over the world. The nets are truths that lead to good, truths that connect people with each other and with the Lord.

It is important for every one of us that we recognize our need for connection with each other. It is good to join in, to cooperate with others, to help each other, to support causes.

Genuine truths, rationally understood, that are communicated with love, and that are carried into our lives, are the nets that gather and connect people into happy and useful communities – and lead us to eternal happiness in heaven.



Readings from the Word

Matthew 13:

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, ⁴⁸ which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age.

The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, ⁵⁰ and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

⁵¹ Jesus said to them, “Have you understood all these things?”

They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.”

⁵² Then He said to them, “Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure *things* new and old.”



Matthew 4:

And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ Then He said to them, “*Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.*” ²⁰ They immediately left their nets and followed Him.”

Spiritual Experiences 5222:

The Lord compares the Kingdom of God to yeast or leaven, to a person gathering tares or weeds, and also to a net. All of these are presented visually and seen in the other life. As regards the yeast, an evil spirit is sent into societies on mountains, crags, or hills, and rouses desires. As a result, the whole multitude as it were ferments, certain ones acting in unity with him, certain not, and certain ones disagreeing. Those who act in unity with him, turn their face in that direction, those who do not turn their face away. Then, all who turned their face to him are gathered into a group and thrown out of the mountain, or crags, into hell. This is the bundling of the weeds. The ones who are thrown down to that place appear as if dragged in a net, and thus they are brought down to the places where they will be.”

Interaction between the Soul and the Body 20:

I was once asked how from a philosopher I became a theologian; and I answered, “*In the same manner that fishermen were made disciples and apostles by the Lord; and that I also from early youth had been a spiritual fisherman.*” On hearing this the inquirer asked, “*What is a spiritual fisherman?*” I replied that a fisherman in the spiritual sense of the Word, signifies a man who investigates and teaches natural truths, and afterwards spiritual truths rationally. On hearing this my interrogator raised his voice and said, “*Now I can understand why the Lord called and chose fishermen to be His disciples, and therefore I do not wonder that He has also called and chosen you, since, as you have said, you were from early youth a fisherman in a spiritual sense, that is, an investigator of natural truths; that you are now an investigator of spiritual truths, is because these are founded on the former.*”