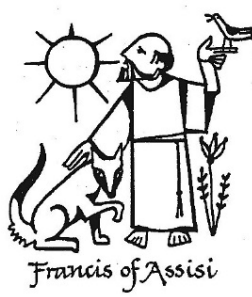


Dear friends in Christ



April 17, 2022, Easter Day

“Holy Mackerel”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Acts 9:1-6, 7-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14;
John 21:1-19

“Get that thing out of here. It smells to high heaven!” Or something to that effect, my mom was yelling. There I proudly stood at the kitchen door with a gunny sack of fish I had caught that day.

Growing up in Long Beach, I learned to love to fish. You could fish off the dock at the harbor. You could fish on the shore, casting as far as you could beyond the breaking waves. Or you could save your lawn-mowing money and go out on a charter with some twenty other people. That’s what my buddy Bill, his father and I had done. And we all caught some fish that day.

I had no idea what sort I had caught but my parents knew when the smell of them arrived five minutes before I did. When told they were mackerel and not suitable for eating, I protested, “But I caught them.” I assured my mom that a fishy smell wouldn’t bother me. “They’re mine!”

No matter how much she pressed her point that NOBODY BUT NOBODY eats mackerel, I refused to listen. The compromise we arrived at was that if I cleaned the fish and cooked it myself – after they ate dinner – I could fry it up.

I found out two things that day. One I already sort of knew. First, sometimes moms are right. Second, this fish really wasn’t good for eating unless you’re stuck on a desert island and hadn’t eaten in a week. I don’t remember if I tried to give some of it to Skippy. You’ve heard of Skippy. The dog that would eat almost anything except Dad’s smelly cheese.

The upshot was, after a few sample bites, the remains went down the garbage disposal and the other two fish went to the garbage. That fish was evil.

Right about now, you're probably wondering where this fishy story is going. Hang in with me. We're getting there.

The gospel of John tells of another fishing trip. It ended up being a lot more rewarding.

The disciples, dejected and discouraged after Jesus' crucifixion, went back to their former lives. Peter and several others set out in the evening in their small boat on the Sea of Tiberias.

They've been at it all night but had caught nary a minnow. The entire night and nada.

An inquisitive stranger on the shore asks them how's it going. When they report back their skimpy results, he suggests they lower the nets on the other side of the boat. As they struggle to pull in the bounty, they recognize that it is Jesus who is giving such wise counsel.

What we catch all depends on which side of the boat we're fishing on – the side of fear and greed, or the side of hope and God's abundance. Which side are you fishing on?

If you're fishing on the side with the power-hungry folks attempting to hoard up as much as possible, you just might find yourselves in the company of Marjorie Taylor Greene and her ilk. Or Elon Musk with his \$44 billion offer for Twitter. All you will catch there is sedition, greed, fake news and subpoenas. Yes, Marjorie Taylor Greene -- even within days of Biden's upcoming inaugural, she was urging that martial law be declared (or was it Marshall's Department Store Law?) and Trump retain the presidency. Treason, insurrection and sedition for sure! These folks are QAnon Looney Tunes Crazy. Forget Musk. This is our republic at stake!

You don't want to be fishing in those waters.

Cast your nets on the other side of the boat with those fishing for the preservation of our democratic society – a compact founded on Common Sense¹ and the rule of law. It was heartening this week to note that Rep. Liz Cheney received a "Profiles in Courage" award at the Lincoln Center ceremonies. It was heartening to witness Mitt Romney, the lone Republican who remained to join the other senators applauding the confirmation of Ketanji Brown Jackson to a seat on the Supreme Court. And don't forget Adam Kinzinger, the other Republican on the January 6th Committee who has stood firm against this attempted coup.

¹ See Thomas Paine. "Common Sense," his most influential tract written in 1776. Or James Madison, *The Federalist No. 10* on the danger of factions.

Yeah, I want to go fishing with them. And the good folks at the Lincoln Project and the Bulwark.

While, on probably most policy issues, I would have little in common with this group, yet when it comes to protecting our democratic heritage, we're exactly on the same page. We're fishing on the same side of the boat in godly waters.

It will take a while to settle back down to John McCain's call for "Regular Order," but if we fish on the side of expanding the vote, if we fish on the side of honest inquiry into what went wrong on January 6th and the events leading up to it, we'll get to "Regular Order" again. That's where we allow the processes of deliberation and compromise to work their way to good policy decisions.

Look at that boat trip in the Gospel of John. Peter is the instigator of this fishing excursion. Impetuous, impatient Peter. It is instructive to follow along with this hot-headed disciple through his career in the Jesus Movement.

Time and again, Peter gets it all wrong. He wants the easy way, the fun way, the spectacular way. He would like nothing better than for the whole band to march into Jerusalem and magically depose the religious and political oppressors. To bring, right then and there, the Age of Aquarius – harmony and understanding.

But this is not Jesus' way. He warns them that this is not how it's going to go down. He will not avoid the valley of the shadow of death, but must pass through it. What makes us think we're any better? It is in THAT journey, that we will encounter eternity. In the struggles and the heartbreak we will be sustained by the wounded Christ and his company.

Mr. "Smooth-the-Way" calls us to an easy religion that would avoid all unpleasantness, all hard work, all of life's difficulties – a religion that reinforces our prejudices and imperial nationalism. But Jesus lets his followers know, that's not how it's going to go down.

That's why the communion prayer says, **"Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal."** We are called to be counter-cultural. How often is the church entertainment, not challenge? How often could believers piously sit in a pew on Sunday morning and then join a mob of KKK nightriders, torches in hand, on Monday evening!? Or cheat their customers?

Peter doesn't get the new ethic of the Jesus movement, yet Jesus calls him Rock-man.² Through this imperfect flesh, God will lay the foundation for a new heaven and a new earth. Though Peter is to be the foundation of the church, he fails abysmally time and again to understand this movement. When Jesus tells

² William Temple, *Readings in John's Gospel, First and Second Series*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1939), 403. This is a dated commentary but the pastoral insights are cogent and relevant still today.

him that it will not be an ascension to fame and glory but that first “the Son of Man must suffer,” Peter rebukes him.

“He [Peter] will honor and follow his Lord; but that Lord must so behave as to deserve his honor! Deep in Peter’s loyalty is a vein of self-will...”³ How often our loyalty arises from sentimentality and egotism. Not thy way, but mine be done.

You notice, that the resurrected Jesus still bears his wounds – so will we, even as we’re raised up in our present moment as the Body of Christ, the Church.

Someone is reputed to have asked Karl Barth, why this Christian journey is so arduous if we are now a new creation in Christ. Barth replied, “that’s because we are still chained to the old man, [the old women]. We’re still dragging them around behind us.” This is going to take some effort on our part.

That’s why I want good strong hymns that are up to the challenge. No “Happy Jesus Music” for me. They are a prescription for seasickness. Give me any day another chorus of “A Mighty Fortress” or “How Firm a Foundation” over some wretched little ditty whose sappy tune has quickly faded before we’re out the church door. Just sayin.’

Our young people who have a good nose for religion that smells fishy, are leaving the church in droves. Especially so-called evangelical congregations that are indistinguishable from the Party of The Former Guy. Especially after January 6th.

Unfortunately, this boat we’re all fishing from is looking more and more like the Leakin’ Lena of the early TV show, “Time for Beany,” later the “Beany and Cecil Show.” How many of you remember Cecil the Seasick Sea Serpent? Yeah, you’re my age. Did you see it on a small, round, black-and-white TV, beginning in 1949 when only three channels were available in the L.A. market?

Well, our Ship of State with all its dysfunction, pay-to-play politics and profiteering, more each day reminds me of the Leakin’ Lena. With tax breaks for the rich and ultra-rich, tax havens for the asking, what can possibly go wrong? Just alone the 734 U.S. billionaires are at last count worth \$4.18 trillion. Just think of all the books you could buy with that. Or maybe Twitter. How about a space trip? You could probably buy Greenland if it was for sale.

I’ll tell what can go wrong if this is the side of the boat you’re fishing from. Right now, our nation is in the midst of a mental health crisis for our youth. The New York Times on the front page had a section on this silent health crisis.

When I was a teenager, the worst trouble my peers would probably end up in was drinking under age, pregnancy, smoking and shoplifting.

³ Ibid.

One mother, Linda, tells of catching a glimpse of her daughter “M’s” cell phone. She was horrified by what she saw: some of the pictures “showed her M’s ankles with blood on them from self-cutting. Another showed a cartoon character Genocide Jack – a brunette girl with a long red tongue who, in a video series, kills high school classmates with scissors.”⁴

In 2019 some 13 percent of adolescents reported having a major depressive episode, up 60 percent since 2007. Emergency room visits related to mental health issues for children and teens have risen for anxiety and mood disorders, suicide attempts and self-harm. COVID-19 has only intensified the distress our kids are under. And yet, clinics and services are horribly underfunded. All to give the U.S. more billionaires. On that side of the boat the catch smells to high heaven. On that side of the boat is only death, the result of begging our social safety net. Death for the most vulnerable. The weight of this dereliction threatens to capsize the basic decency and norms and that hold us together.

On the other side is life. On the other side is flourishing and hope. That’s the side from which Jesus instructs us to cast our nets. Sometimes it’s a lonely struggle with few rewards as society figures them.

Consider the prison chaplain Chris Hoke.⁵ This is his story.

Chris, a wet-behind-the-ears white college graduate, volunteered as a chaplain in the Skagit County Jail some seven years ago. There, among others, he met an inmate who went by the moniker Neaners. He was born José Israel Garcia, who at age ten, like most boys in the village, joined a Mexican gang. With a shaved head and tattooed arms and face, he’s not your picture of a Rotary Club member. Or, for that matter, a member in most any church.

Yet, heart reached out to heart, eventually leading Neaners to proclaim this young White guy the “pastor” of his entire network of homies.

“In a way, we adopted each other. He welcomed me, a white college graduate, into the hidden world of criminal street gangs – not into gang membership, but into the hidden pain and need of his community members. He invited both my prayers and my friendship, and over the years I ended up welcoming him, a tattooed and violent felon, into the family of God.”

“That means that he now has a long e-mail list of Christian friends from various denominations and traditions who write to him, pray for him like a nephew, post his photo on their fridge and sometimes put money on his books so the gang doesn’t have to.”

⁴ Matt Richtel, “‘It’s Life or Death’: U.S. Teenagers Face a Mental Health Crisis, *New York Times*, April 24, 2022.

⁵ Chris Hoke, “Jesus’ Barrio: Inmates as Apostles,” *Sojourners*, November 13, 2012.

Chris concludes: "When he gets out, he'll have work waiting for him at Tierra Nueva, a ministry in Washington's Skagit Valley. There is a bed reserved for him, and there are church folks and former gang members who are ready to help Neaners become a father to his two young daughters. And we are ready to act on his vision for a gang ministry."

"He calls his vision Hope for Homies. He wants to work with churches, ministries, families, farms and businesses to create an environment where tattooed gangbangers and the young women who live in the gangs' shadows do not have to live in dangerous circumstances but can instead plant vegetables and learn job skills."

Doesn't this remind you of the risk that Ananias took when he invited the fire-breathing Saul with murder in his eye into the fellowship of the Jesus Movement? Where would the church have been? Without this catch, I pause to think what the church would have lost had Saul not become Paul.

Ananias and Pastor Chris Hoke were fishing on the Jesus side of the boat. And magnificent, glorious was the catch. Definitely not without risk. But, as I say, we are the Church of second and third chances. And how many more? My proof reader suggests possibly 70 X 7. Well, however many it takes. Lower your nets on this side of the boat.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer, at the end of his massive theological tome on the historical Jesus, characterizes our summons to the Jesus Movement in a section my friend Jim Strathdee has set to music: "He Comes to Us."

"He comes to us as one unknown without a name, Without a name, without a name as of old by the lakeside he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us, he speaks to us the same word: Follow me, Follow me! And sets us to the task which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts and the sufferings. They shall pass through in his fellowship, As an ineffable mystery they shall learn in their own experience who He is."⁶

If I might have the audacity to take issue with the good doctor, as often as not he does come with a name. It might be Chris Hoke, Ananias, and, now, Neaners.

Amen.

⁶ Jim Strathdee, Albert Schweitzer, "He Comes to Us," There's Still Time, Desert Flower Music, 1977.

