

Net Full

Matthew 13:47-53

July 26, 2020

First Presbyterian, Luling

I am generally not a proponent of the “bigger is better” or “more is better” philosophy, in any area of my life. More decorations at my house are not better, because that just means more things to dust. Bigger car is not better because it just needs more gas. More food is not better because—well, because I have the privilege of never having gone hungry before—and because then I’d have to figure out what to do with the leftovers. I’ve known for a long time that I’m not called to be a pastor of a ginormous church—small churches suit me just fine. Bigger is fine for some people, but it’s not for me. Our family has learned, that for the most part, bigger towns and bigger schools aren’t our preference either. More things to do are only good up to a point, and then the schedule gets overwhelming. You get the idea.

To be clear, there are dangers at both ends of this spectrum. There’s certainly dangers to believing wholeheartedly that bigger is better—at the extreme, it ends up with just a few people having all the resources and not caring that other people don’t have enough to survive. And there’s dangers to a minimalist attitude, too, namely not having enough on hand in case of emergency or some other unfortunate circumstance.

I would have thought, probably based on nothing but my own preference and prejudice, now that I think about it, but I would have thought that Jesus was on board with my “less is more” attitude, that he would have been the last person to embrace a “more is better” philosophy.

But this parable is making me second guess my thinking on that. It follows a bunch of other parables, most of which we studied last fall—I had to look that up, because it seems like it was 5 years ago. Matthew clumps a bunch of parables together. He starts with the weeds and the wheat, in which the landowner instructs his workers to let the weeds and wheat grow until the wheat is ready to harvest, and then they can be separated. That’s a Matthew-only parable. Then there’s the mustard seed parable. And then the yeast mixed into the dough parable. Both of those are “little things can have big results” parables, so that’s a point in my favor of Jesus being a “less is more” kind of guy. Then Jesus interrupts himself to explain the weeds and the wheat parable, connecting it explicitly to the end of the age and judgment.

Then Jesus tells two more connected parables: the merchant who finds the pearl of great price, goes and sells all that he has, so he can buy it. And then the man who finds a treasure in a field, buries it, sells all that he has, so that he can purchase the field. Those are “tiny things are worth everything,” so there’s another point in my favor.

Then Jesus chimes in with our parable for today: the net full of fish. Again, it’s a Matthew-only parable, with an explicitly Matthew theme of the end of the age and judgment. These themes are ones that Matthew returns to over and over, way more often than the other gospel writers. Judgment at the end of time, when people are divided clearly into good and evil. The good ones are rewarded and the bad ones are punished. It’s meant to echo the parable of the weeds and the wheat, both because of similar themes and the way Matthew has put the parables together. It’s easy for our imaginations to get caught up in the horror of the

punishments and the joy of the rewards, but I want to take one step backward, to before the judgment part happens.

This net full of fish parable is only four verses. “The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.” The fish are people. We know that for two reasons—one is that the word translated “kind” here usually means “nation” or “tribe.” And the other is that at the end of the parable, it’s the fish that are sorted out into good (meaning good morally but also physically good) and bad (meaning bad morally, or rotten or stinky). So while we might like to think we’re the fishermen, gathering up all the fish, really we’re kind of helpless, swimming along doing our usual thing, when we get scooped up with all kinds of other fish and flotsam and jetsam. It may be clear to us, as fish, which ones of us should be keepers and which ones of us should be discarded, but that task does not belong to us.

And that sorting, the judgment, doesn’t happen till the net is full. And again, the fish don’t get to decide when the net is full. The fullness of the net is supposed to indicate the fullness of time, the end of time, when God decides that it is full and ready.

“They” the parable says, which is not very helpful, because who “they” are isn’t clear at all. “They” decide which ones to keep in a basket, and which ones to throw out. Then the parable proper ends, and turns to a kind of a combination of lesson and interpretation. “They” who do the sorting end up being angels, which I’m not sure if it’s the only place, but I know is an unusual feature—for angels to be the ones doing the judgment at the end of the age.

The fishermen, whoever they represent, scoop up as many fish as they can. The more the better. Even if it means that the catch is somewhat contaminated—that there is trash or debris or inedible fish, they get that net as full as possible. Bigger, fuller nets are what the kingdom of heaven is aiming for. So Jesus mixed in a bit of “more is better” along with my more favored “less is more.”

When it comes to sharing the good news, when it comes to loving our neighbors, when it comes to making sure everyone is included, then more definitely is better. And we’ll let God take care of the rest.