

I have a **great** fishing story. Part of what makes it great is that no fish were harmed in the events that transpired somewhere about 20 years ago. In fact, no fish **appeared** in my best fishing story.

Before I went to seminary, I was a full-time at-home dad. A quick summary – our son, Cole, was born in 1999, our daughter, Sydney, was born in 2001, and I was home with them until Syd started kindergarten in 2006. For the majority of those years – from 2002 to 2006 we lived in Harper’s Ferry, WV. Our address was Harper’s Ferry, but we lived in a wooded development just off the Shenandoah River. There were a lot of things to love about that house for us. It was a lot of fun for our two young kids to live in the woods, and a huge attraction to living there was that we were 1100 feet from the river. Within just a few minutes, we could walk down to the neighborhood’s riverfront property with lots of grass and access to 600 feet of the riverfront.

When we moved there, we imagined taking our canoe out on the water with the kids, which we did occasionally, and we were excited to have a place we could go easily to be at the water. I also figured, well, the kids and I would go fishing together. So, at some point – I don’t remember how long it was after we moved in, but it must have been a little while because Syd still remembers this story – we decided to get the kids some fishing poles and teach them how to fish.

I want to back up for a moment to say that I have never been a big fan of fishing. I had gone fishing every once in a while – off a pier at the beach, off a boat, in some local ponds – but it’s never been something I’ve been excited to do.

So here I am, with my two young kids, probably about 3½ and 5½, I bought a fishing rod for me, I think we bought Cole had a red fishing rod with a somewhat regular reel, and Syd had a yellow Tweety Bird toddler fishing rod. I checked with her this week, and she remembers it was a yellow Tweety Bird fishing rod.

We go down to the riverfront and I decide we’ll have an easier time dealing with the 3-4’ high bank so that our lines don’t get tangled in the rocks and weeds of the “beachy” area. I put some kind of bait on our hooks...I don’t remember what it was, but it very likely would have been worms...so they’d get the whole experience of *that*. And I begin to teach them how to cast their line into the water.

It was not one of my better teaching moments. I don’t remember if I tried to talk them through it. I don’t remember if I demonstrated it. I don’t remember what Cole did. But

what I will never forget is that Sydney brought her arm back, just like I had told her or shown her, brought her arm and rod forward...and threw her rod right off the bank into the river.

There we stood, watching Tweety Bird float away down the Shenandoah. I mentioned it was a 3-4' high bank, right? There was no reaching down to grab it back out of the water. The river wasn't **fast**, but the rod wasn't waiting around for us to figure something out. I quickly realized that there was no hope of getting that rod back.

To say Sydney was mad would be an understatement. At some point we bought her a new rod, we went back to the river to fish...on occasion. We fished from the beachy area and she knew to hold onto her rod when casting. But we never, **ever**, in four years of living just off the river, caught a single fish.

And I don't think I've gone fishing since. In fact, I'm not sure **anyone** in our family has been fishing since.

Jesus goes out on the boat with a bunch of tired fishermen. They had been fishing all night – without catching anything. For them, that could have been a devastating economic reality. For us, if we didn't catch fish, and we wanted fish, we went the grocery store and bought frozen haddock filets. For these 1st century fishermen, this was their livelihood. They needed the fish to directly or indirectly feed their families. This was their vocation. **Until it wasn't.**

Did you notice what happened to the fish? After this long night of failure, after an exhausting night of not catching fish, they go out with Jesus – not a fisherman. Into the deepwater – perhaps not where the fish usually are. In the morning – when they don't usually catch fish. And they have this miraculous catch. Their nets are breaking, their boats are overflowing and starting to sink. They haul this whole miraculous catch of fish back to shore...and leave it there.

Maybe there were buyers on hand to take care of the harvest. Maybe they had an arrangement in place that someone would take the fish to the market, but the way Luke tells the story...the fish don't matter anymore. The miraculous catch revealed to them that Jesus was someone special. But it wasn't about the fish. It wasn't about the catch. In fact, they left **everything** behind.

“They” is somewhat vague, but we can assume that it means at least Simon and James and John, the sons of Zebedee – the ones who were named in this story. In this epiphany moment, in this life-changing experience that really isn't about the fish, they make the choice to drop their nets and follow Jesus.

What do we have to drop to do the same thing? What is it that doesn't actually matter, but we put at the center of the story instead of putting Jesus at the center of the story? A lot of what we do together holds Jesus in the center. I'm not suggesting we don't do that. But it's really easy to get distracted from that center and worry about things that don't matter so much. When we get distracted, we might focus on how big the haul is rather than what we're doing with what we have. Because remember, the catch wasn't the point.

For generations, the church in America has been focused on a bigger haul – how do we get more people? How do we build our resources so we can do more? How do we do more and more and more? I've heard this exact story being used as motivation to get out there and catch more fish. I've probably preached that at some point. I'm sure you've heard that same message. And that analogy works...to a certain extent.

But the point of this story isn't about catching a lot of fish. Because the fish are left behind. The bigger point is the act of following. This is a call story not a fishing story. Jesus doesn't actually say "follow me," but claims these new disciples. He tells them not to be afraid – says that especially to Peter who is worried about being sinful. He shows them that he is something special and they drop everything and follow.

I think Sydney had it right when she threw that rod away. Being a disciple means following. Where are we going next? Amen.