

April 29, 2018

God Sightings: Miraculous Catch of Fish

How Successful are You?

John 21:1-11

Opening Words: When was the last time you saw God? There is no other way to explain it. It must be God. It happens all the time. It can happen in the normal routine of life, or in a random act of kindness. It happens in a miraculous or spectacular way. Sometimes, it happens with a new insight or perspective. We call those experiences "God Sightings." So, let me ask you the question again. When was the last time you experienced God? Our God Sightings are important because they remind us that God is active in our world.

The Gospel of John contains three God Sightings. Each one is miraculous in nature. In each case, the resurrected Jesus came and stood before believers, teaching them lessons which have lasted for the ages. We began looking at those resurrection appearances two weeks ago. On that day, we looked at the disciples' encounter with the resurrected Jesus on Easter evening. Last week, we looked at Thomas's encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Today, we look at the disciples' encounter with the resurrected Jesus which accompanies the miraculous catch of fish. Our Gospel reading for today is John 21:1-11. Let me call this message *How Successful are You?*

John 21:1-11 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

⁵ He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

⁶ He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.

⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn.

Francis Chan once said, "*Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at things in life that don't really matter.*" That quote is new to me. I find it to be correct. If you find some value in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twenty-first chapter of John. According to the text, the disciples are on the Sea of Tiberias. The locals called it the Sea of Galilee. Seven of the eleven remaining disciples are present. Judas Iscariot's vacancy had not yet been filled. According to verse four, it was early in the morning. The workday was over for the disciples. Ancient fishermen normally fished at night. It must have been a long night, because not a single fish had been caught. To rub salt in their wounds, someone calls out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" They respond with a single word answer, "No." Feeling like failures, they almost missed the significance of the moment. The one who had inquired about their labors was Jesus himself. He stood on the shore, unidentified by the disciples. The Master encourages them to try again. This time on the opposite side of the boat, the right side. Exasperated, yet showing restraint, the disciples cast their net one more time. They were glad they did, because they had the catch of their lives. Their net, which moments earlier had been empty, was filled with fish. It is only then that "the disciple whom Jesus loved", John, identifies Jesus. The story ends by telling us there were 153 fish in the net. Miraculously, the net never tore, and a fortune was made. On that day, at that moment, the disciples must have felt like a success. Money has a way of making us feel successful; money also has a way of making us feel like a failure. This is the question for today: *How successful are you?* If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

If you ask the internet highway the question, who are the most successful people in America, it will automatically take you to the richest people in America. According to NBC News, these are eight richest and, I guess, the most successful people in America:

- Michael Bloomberg (\$40 billion)
- Larry Ellison (\$43.6 billion)
- Mark Zuckerberg (\$44.6 billion)
- Jeff Bezos (\$45.2 billion)
- Carlos Slim Helu (\$50 billion)
- Warren Buffet (\$60.8 billion)
- Amancio Ortega (\$67 billion)
- Bill Gates (\$75 billion)

If you consider these people to be the most successful people in America, then you must consider the approximately 800,000 Americans who filed for bankruptcy protection last year the biggest failures. Do you know anyone who has filed for bankruptcy protection? Have you ever filed for bankruptcy protection? Many believe, that label of failure is unfair, because the number one reason people file for bankruptcy protection in America is due to medical expenses. So, let me ask you the question again, how successful are you? If you are still not sure how to answer, say, "**Amen!**" That is a complex question, because there is more to being successful than having money. If you don't believe me, just ask Bill Cosby.

At one point in his life, Bill Cosby had a net worth of approximately \$450 million. Through the eyes of the world, he was a success. You know his story. He has lived his life in front of a crowd. He started as a stand-up comedian in San Francisco in the early 1960's. Then, he landed a starring role on a television show called *I Spy*. I remember watching *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*. He knew success. He received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1977. Later, his sitcom, *The Cosby Show*, was a hit in the 1980's. At one time, he was the most trusted face in America. He was the spokesman for Jello, then he became the spokesman for the Ford Motor Company. By any worldly definition, Bill Cosby was a success. He even earned his Doctor of Education degree from the University of Massachusetts. Then, the stories started to come out. To date, more than fifty women have accused Cosby of either rape, drug-facilitated sexual assault, sexual battery, child sexual abuse, and/or sexual misconduct. Cosby has denied everything, but public opinion seems to be against him. He was found guilty on Thursday. Today, he gets to wear an electronic bracelet and is under house arrest. His story is hard to believe. At one time, Bill Cosby was a success! He had a net worth of \$450 million. Do you consider Bill Cosby a success today? There is more to success than money. If you will agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**" However, our Bible story is not about financial success. It is a story about spiritual success. How successful are you spiritually?

One of my favorite preachers in America is a man named Tom Tewell. He is ordained within the United Presbyterian Church. Several years ago, he was the Preacher of the Week at Lakeside. He influenced my preaching greatly. I was there when he told this story. I have never forgotten it. You may remember it too. I have told it to you several times. (It is hard to be original after all these years.) When Tom Tewell was graduating from Princeton Theological Seminary, he was being interviewed for ordination. He sat in an empty church in the middle of the week, being questioned by his superiors. As the day rolled on, he felt good about his answers. He handled all the details of Calvinistic theology. His interviewers seemed satisfied with his answers too, and announced they only had one more question for him. It came from the oldest man on the interview team. (I think he was sixty 😊.) It was the first, and only question, he asked the entire day. He looked at Tom Tewell and asked, "Tom, do you think you are making any progress in the Christian faith?" Tom said, he opened his mouth to respond, but not a single word came out. He didn't know how to answer the question. How do you answer the question, are you making any progress in the Christian faith? I have asked myself that question, are you making any progress in the Christian faith, countless times. It is a difficult question to answer, but this question is even harder:

How successful are you spiritually? In the Christian faith, success is not a monetary issue. Just think about it for a moment. The scriptures never tell us Jesus owned anything of earthly value, yet we consider him to be the greatest life that ever lived. Through the eyes of God, success is not achieved by money. Success is being like Jesus, who loved and forgave everyone. He had a perfect relationship with God. Through the eyes of God, we become more successful, the more we become like Jesus.

We consider the disciples to be spiritually successful because they became more like Jesus. If we want to be spiritually successful, then we must do what the disciples did. So, what did they do? What is it we must do to become spiritually successful? The disciples model for us how to become spiritually successful. So, what did the disciples do?

First, the disciples listened to Jesus. Look at the text with me. They fished all night, but they caught absolutely nothing. They must have been discouraged, but, in the end, they were successful because they listened to Jesus. This is the question you must answer:

When was the last time you positioned yourself to listen to Jesus? That is why the spiritual disciplines are so important. There are twelve: prayer, meditation, fasting, Bible study, simplicity, submission, solitude, and service. Each one of them, and a combination of them, puts you in the best possible position to listen to God and to listen to Jesus. When was the last time you positioned yourself to listen to Jesus? If you could spend more time practicing the spiritual disciplines, say, **"Amen!"**

Second, the disciples obeyed Jesus. Look at the text with me again. The disciples listened to Jesus, but they also obeyed Jesus. Verse six says, "He (Jesus) said, 'Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.' When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish." Here is the key: They didn't just listen to Jesus. They obeyed Jesus and reaped the benefits. The disciples obeyed Jesus.

Do you obey Jesus? How many people do you know who listen to Jesus, but they don't obey Jesus? Or, they only obey selectively. Do you know of anyone who knows what the faith teaches, but they don't follow the teachings? Let me give you a few examples. We know we are to love unconditionally, but we love selectively. We know we are not supposed to judge, but we judge regularly. We know we are supposed to give sacrificially, of our time, our talents and financial resources, but we give sparingly, out of our surplus. There is a world of difference between knowing and doing. Look at it this way. How much influence does Jesus have on your daily life? Do you obey Jesus? If you could be a little more obedient, say, **"Amen!"**

Third, the disciples never gave up. Look at the text with me one more time. Consider this with me: The disciples fished all night. They were tired. It would have been easy to call it a day, but Jesus tells them to try one more time. They do, and they hit the jackpot. The Christian faith is not a one-hundred-yard dash, it is a marathon. The disciples spent the rest of their lives serving Jesus. How many people do you know who have walked away from Jesus, because their life got hard? If you promise me you will never give up, say, **"Amen!"**

Just a few days ago, on April 19, 2018, Cuba received a new president. His name is

Miguel Diaz-Canel. He is 57 years old and replaces 86-year-old Raul Castro. It was an incredible moment in the history of the Western Hemisphere. For the first time since 1959, someone other than a Castro is leading Cuba. There is no other way to say it. Through worldly eyes, the Castro brothers, Fidel and Raul, were a success. Through the eyes of God, they were a massive failure. As Communists, they believed in absolutely nothing. However, this is the question you must answer: Through the eyes of God, are you a success? Francis Chan once said, *"Our greatest fear should not be of failure, but of succeeding at things in life that don't really matter."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**