

“Fishing” – The Rev. Jennifer Adams
January 23, 2011 – Epiphany 3A (Grace Annual Meeting)

One of the funniest youth group moments I’ve experienced happened on a canoe trip about eight years ago. We were on the Little Manistee River just and it was a bunch of teenagers from Grace, a couple of their parents, the youth leaders and I sometime in early Fall. Now about mid-way down the section of river we were traveling, there is a fish weir that is used to harvest eggs from Trout and Salmon and it’s placement requires that canoers get out of the water and portage their boats up and around it and then get back into the water about 20 yards down stream.

Now the portaging was no big deal, but the point at which we were to re-enter the river was the place where the fish were jumping. . . . all over. And there were more fish than there were us and while that’s probably always true, it’s not always as apparent as it was at that moment. And so it was a little intimidating to we who are not fish enthusiasts. They were in the water and out of the water because at any given moment there were several of them up in the air. And so there was a little hesitation on some of our parts to get back in the boats. Suddenly the challenge wasn’t only balancing a canoe or avoiding the occasional downed tree; suddenly there were fish everywhere and we had to deal with them too!

But Grace youth as you know, are brave souls, their parents and leaders too and so after tossing about a few “don’t worries” and “you’ll be fines” we all got back in our boats. But then just as the last canoe entered the River and we were ready to move on -- I heard yelling and actually there was some screaming too. A huge fish had jumped into one of the canoes. And given the scene those who weren’t screaming were laughing at the two very startled youth and one extremely

frightened fish. And what was supposed to be a quiet interaction with nature became a story to be told later in a sermon. Which brings us to today. (But just in case there are any lingering doubts, before I move on, I should clarify that there were no youth nor any fish harmed in this event. The fish ended up back in the River and none of the youth, or leaders, or parents, or clergy did – at that point anyway.)

So that's the image I want us to consider as we think about "fishing" this morning. And I want to hold up that image for us of an active, lively river teeming with life because when we think about discipleship using the fishing metaphor we tend to lean in the direction of the catch. What sort of bait should we use, where should we drop the lines, that sort of thing. And those sorts of topics tend to make Episcopalians nervous. We lose sight of the fish and slip into asking questions such as "shouldn't we just leave the fish alone?" and pretty soon we're debating the ethical and faithful value of the nets themselves. And those conversations are important, but what I want to emphasize this morning is that the River we are currently journeying down is full of fish. And the fish are hungry. And they are jumping. And while it doesn't always work this way, but we are in the wonderful position of having them land in our canoe on a regular basis. It's why we all are here, isn't it; at some point the boat that is Grace caught us.

And so while there are sermons to be preached on retention, and incorporating new fish into family, perhaps even teaching them to breathe in a new environment (although that might be taking the metaphor a little too far,) today is Annual Meeting Sunday and we need to focus in on the boat itself and its motion. What good is a journey down the River if you're leaking, or you're paddling in circles, or if you're so busy screaming about the presence of other fish that you miss the

miracle that the River itself is carrying us the whole way; while we are putting forth a wonderful effort on so very many fronts, it is actually the River that's doing the work of moving us; the River itself wants us to discover just what's around the next bend and the bend after that.

Our work is to make sure the boat itself remains in relatively good shape. Like the youth that day we step back occasionally to assess but then we need to work through the fears of the occasional tip, or the unpredictability of the fish, or the fear that comes from not being in total control – it really is the River that moves us. We also need to paddle some. To steer some. To avoid those nagging branches off on the side and the nearly invisible rocks lurking just beneath the surface – those places that cause us to go either a little right or a little left in order to avoid getting stuck for what can seem like forever. Our job is to make sure the is worthy of the beautiful and challenging trip we're on and to do whatever we can to help the fish-people come to love and care for all of those who are making the journey too.

As a parish we have some very obvious challenges in front of us, challenges that are outlined in the Annual Report and will be talked about at the meeting today; but overall we are in an incredibly wonderful place as a congregation. The River we're on is an amazing thing – its power can humble us; its grace can surprise us; its life gives us life. And the fish who call it home are active and hungry and there are a whole lot of'm out there who are looking for a place to land. We simply have to help them find our boat. May we be faithful fishers of people, caretakers of the boat we've been given, and mindful always that around the next bend and the next bend and all the bends after that, there is grace.

Amen.

