

Fish Camp

Reading from the New Testament: 1 Thessalonians 5:15-24

Reading from the Old Testament: Jonah 1:17 - 2:10

I can't say whether it was the arrival of Johnson and Wales University, the emergence of the heart-healthy diet, or the growing market share of sushi, but what was once a key player in the Charlotte food scene has faded from view — the fish camp. Upon my arrival in Charlotte a generation ago, I was not familiar with the term, but was quickly immersed in the culture of it. Whether at the invitation of a church member or as a meeting place with friends, seldom a fortnight would pass without sitting before a plate or a basket brimming with fried flounder, fried shrimp, fried clam strips, fried hush puppies, and French fries ... oh, and that illusory nod to your cardiologist, Cole slaw bathed in mayonnaise. Of course, it could not qualify as a fish camp unless the teenage waitstaff were not regularly dropping by your table holding a pitcher of sweet tea for refills and asking, "More pups and fries for anyone?"

A regular topic of conversation was a debate over which fish camp was to be preferred above the others. The Riverview Inn, Linebergers, and Twin Tops often competed for dominance. However, whether I was walking in hungry or exiting overstuffed and promising never to eat fried food again,

I never, ever saw a tent at the fish camp. At one, there was a small pond ringed by the rails of a miniature train, popular with toddlers, but still, no tents. So, why was it called a fish camp? I read that the term originated to identify shoreside spots known for good fishing; so good — that campgrounds sprang up, allowing fisherfolk 24/7 access to the water; so good — that some enterprising angler decided to open a restaurant with a fryer on the property. Eventually, the tents disappeared as the restaurants moved to where people actually lived. Otherwise, why would a fish camp in Charlotte be serving shrimp and flounder?

I am not a camper, but I have camped on a mountain, by a lake, at a farm, and by the seashore. I've even stayed in a cabin at an actual fish camp on the shore of Canada's Lake of the Woods. Yet, I have never thought to check Airbnb for vacancies in a fish. Yes, he said in a fish. Available; studio apartment in the Mediterranean ... not by ... not on ... but in the Mediterranean. No windows or AC, and there have been complaints about the smell, but come for the sensation of riding the currents while being half digested, but BYOF - Bring your own flashlight — because candles are not recommended.

This is not the escape experience Jonah had envisioned, camping out like Captain Nemo without the luxuries, but with plenty of slime. I get the compulsion to escape. We all do. Travel ads regularly use the word escape to lure us to those places where we can post selfies of our sand-covered toes looking out at the waves. The grind. The stress. The tense office culture. The demands of the AP classes. The toxic relationship. Who doesn't daydream of escape? From what do you dream of escaping? But will the envisioned escape live up to the billing of your daydream?

You see, there is one major glitch with most escape plans: That from which you are actually trying to escape, just so happens to be traveling with you ... and that, would be you. In many exotic resorts you find people roaming around in misery, not having realized that a significant factor in this misery that fueled this obsession with escape is the person staring back at them from the shell-framed mirror in their cabana. A suntan and a luau aren't going to fix that. There, in the stench of the fish belly, Jonah is forced to come to grips with the reality that he wasn't actually seeking to escape God, so much as he was wanting to escape his essential self.

God was calling Jonah toward his essential self, the whole person God created Jonah to be. The Psalmist says, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me ... and are acquainted with all my ways ... For it was you who formed my inward parts ... Your eyes beheld my unformed substance ... I come to the end — I am still with you.” Who more than God can nurture you and mold you into the essential you that you were created to be? The Apostle Paul says, *“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”*

Running away is no antidote to misery unless we are running toward that which God created us to be, that place where purpose, meaning, and joy can mingle, no matter the circumstances. Elsewhere, Paul says, *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”*

I know an attorney, or I should say I knew her as a middle schooler. Her father is an attorney and now a judge. Her uncle is an attorney and a

recent state supreme court justice. Her grandfather was an attorney and a federal judge. Her great-grandfather was an attorney and a US Senator. Yet, as a middle schooler, when asked the standard question of what she wanted to be when she grew up, her answer was abrupt, straight forward, and crystal clear. Emphatically, she would say, “Anything but an attorney.” Knowing the characters in her family bar association, I can promise you that she was never prodded or coerced into the legal profession. In fact, their reaction to her resolute conviction of “anything but an attorney,” was probably to chuckle at her fervent spirit of independence and say, “Go with God.”

Yet, just as the gift of music is passed from generation to generation, so too, in growing up around it, a regard for the law and a yen for justice seeped into her, and in running away from the family business, she couldn't manage to run away from herself. So, eventually her realization of this led her to a bar exam and a standing before the courts.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. It's that place Buechner calls the intersection between your greatest gifts and the world's great need. However, we are given that great gift from God, but

neglect any input from God on how we might best use it. We fail to pray the psalmist's essential prayer, *Teach me thy way, O Lord*. Instead, we abide one of those trite shiplap paintings in your neighbor's kitchen — *Forge your own path*. Yet, so often that path only takes us deeper into the dark waters of anxiety, emotional claustrophobia, distress, and depression.

Just ask Jonah. Have you noticed that up to this point in the story, Jonah is the only character not praying? The sailors were on their knees immediately, and even underwent a conversion of sorts as they transferred their prayers and offerings to the God of Israel.

Did you notice the contradiction back in chapter 1? As the storm raged, when the spooked sailors asked about Jonah's identity, Jonah answered them, "*I am a Hebrew ... I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.*" But Jonah is the only one not praying. Jonah is the one not asking the Lord for guidance. Jonah is the one rejecting the call of God. Jonah is the one giving everything he has to the effort of running as far away as he can from "*the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.*" It's clear Jonah's faith is not self-evident because the

sailors have to press him so hard about his identity. Jonah claims, *I worship the Lord*. Really? How? Because nobody else was seeing any evidence of it.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

And where does running away from his gift, his calling, his essential self take Jonah? Look at the imagery of the text. Thus far, there is a persistent theme of descent. Jonah goes down to Joppa; goes down into the boat; goes down into the hull; goes down into the sea; goes down to the depths. Here in chapter 2, Jonah finally prays and in this prayer he confesses where his escape plan had led him. *“You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?’ The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever...”*

Down. Down. Down. Sometimes, life feels as if you’re sinking into the depths with concrete boots and a lead belt. You can’t breathe. You can’t see. Murky would be a welcome upgrade. The pressure is feeling greater and greater. *The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were*

wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains. That's deep. Nobody who goes on a Mediterranean cruise is looking to hang around with SpongeBob, but that's where Jonah found himself singing the blues — Bom Bom Bom Bom ... The waters closed in over me ... Bom, Bom, Bom, Bom ... Weeds were wrapped around my head ... Bom Bom Bom Bom ... I sunk down to the Pit ... Bom Bom Bom Bom ... Oh, my life was ebbing away. Jonah's got the blues.

Yet finally, Jonah remembers, O yeah, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. I was so wrapped up in myself, I forgot about that. So maybe, this Creator of oceans, seas, rivers, and creeks; and this dank, stinky fish taxi I'm riding in; and this squishy kidney I'm pressed up against are not my ruination, but my salvation; not my bane but God's blessing.

Finally, it is Jonah who prays, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice ... As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple ... you brought up my life from the pit ... with the

voice of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the Lord!”

Sometimes, it is not until we're sitting in the muck of the messes we have made, that we realize the one we have sought to escape is actually the one staring back at us from the mirror as we're wiping the slime off our face in the belly of the fish; and the One we thought we were escaping is the only One left to protect us now.

You brought up my life from the pit. Sometimes, the belly of the fish provides the perfect acoustics for a song of praise, a place where the blues are transformed into hymns as we awaken to who we are and whose we are.

The noted author, Aldous Huxley mines the poetic from Jonah's odyssey:

Seated upon the convex mound
 Of one vast kidney Jonah prays
 And sings his canticles and hymns
 Making the hollow vault resound
 God's goodness and mysterious ways
 Till
 The great fish spouts music as he swims. Amen.