

Little Fish, Big Pond  
Sunday, September 25, 2011  
Pastor Timothy Hogan

When we lived in Bloomsburg our neighbors had a large pond in front of their house which they kept stocked with fish. When Max came to visit for the first time there we told him about the pond and we walked over to check out the fish, to see if we could spot any of them. We walked up on the dock and very intently looked down in to the water searching for fish. All of a sudden we saw this large cat fish, probably 18" or so long. And then as we looked we realized there were lots of fish very small fish actually, only a couple of inches long. But it was harder for us to spot them and we had to look hard to see them. Once we spotted them we spotted lots of them.

Growing up I often used to hear the phrase he wants to be a big fish in a little pond, referring to someone who was flagrant about something they were doing. Have you ever heard that statement analogy? In today's scripture from Luke we are hearing about the man who posed and prayed, oh how great an example I'm sure he thought he was praying so others could hear and see what he was doing. He wanted to be a big fish in a little pond. One who is recognized and known. The other man in today's story who prayed in the shadows and quietly talked to God instead was more like a small fish in a big pond, not one to be noticed and called out. Not seen as the center of attention in the Temple. Humble and quiet, not to call attention to himself. Which do you think we are called to be?

Little kids say the darnedest things don't they? Can you think of something your child or a child you may know has repeated that they heard someone say? Something that the person who said it never realized the child might pick it up? I remember growing up, I was in junior high school, that is what we called 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade then, and my best friend was black, we didn't think much about it I don't believe, however one day after school my sister came to pick me up and my youngest nephew, who was maybe at the time saw us walking out of school together and shouted out the car window, Timmy do you like (a derogative term

for my friend) my sister could not grab my nephew quick enough to pull him back in the car, it was embarrassing and my sister began to apologize, "I don't know where he heard that" I remember her saying. I did, I had heard her and my brother-in-law use that term, not flagrantly loud to make a point but in private conversation. You see when they were specific about their conversation to my nephew they would say African American, however when they didn't realize he or his brother were paying attention they would use the "N" word. Do you think kids pick up things when we think they are not listening or paying attention?

Do kids notice the big and the small fish? Could it be that they pay more attention to the small ones and learn lessons from them too or especially from them?

A few weeks ago I attended a seminar about early childhood development and what it meant to children who were able to attend preschool. Preschool has been proven to reduce the risk of problems in the future, problems of dropout rates, improve percentage of college attendance and reduce criminal behavior by 70%. Now, I can tell you I get the distinct opportunity to see first-hand how our children in day care and preschool thrive, whether it's learning a new letter, art projects or watching the life of a caterpillar transforming in to a butterfly. These are small things that mean so much to our children and statistics show they make a huge difference in their future.

What do you teach the children around you? It is wonderful to teach by example, however are we all living the example, or is the example just something we make a big deal about and we don't want them to pay attention to the way we live our everyday lives? Do what I say not what I do? Have you ever heard that?

Today we celebrate Children's Sabbath, a day set aside to celebrate children and for special attention to seeking justice for all children. This day is celebrated usually in the fall at churches of many faiths and beliefs. It is a day set aside to talk about things that impact children in the world we live in and how we can make a change, make the world a better place for children through legislation, in care for the poor, in feeding the hungry children, in creating a safe space for all

children. Sure we highlight this day as sort of a big fish if you like, however what happens tomorrow or when we walk out the door this morning and get on with our daily lives? I would instead say to you Children's Sabbath is a nudge to remind us to always be mindful of these little ones around us. Little ones who are impressionable, little ones who watch and repeat and learn from us. It's a day that calls us all to check our own belief and how we live out our belief, not just when all eyes are on us, but all the time. I have heard it said the true character of a person is who they are when they think no one is looking. Our actions teach others. One of my favorite quotes is from St. Francis of Assisi and it goes like this "preach the Gospel always, use words if necessary." How do you preach the Gospel when no one is looking? Do you live your life as if a child were there watching at all times?

A few week's back Rebecca asked the children during children's moments who here is absolutely perfect? One child raised her hand, her mother was so embarrassed. Talking about that moment later that week with one of her teachers she said I know where she got that. She said I tell all the children they are the most perfect one I know. You know like, Rebecca you are the most perfect Rebecca I know or Loella you are the most perfect Loella I know and the child realized she was perfect in others eyes. We are perfect in God's eyes, always loved always cared for, yet we make mistakes and sometimes bad decisions, yet we are still loved, and when others make mistakes or bad decisions and are in need of our forgiveness, what do we do, how do we handle it? Do we treat them as less than perfect? Do we accept them or judge them? Do our actions of how we handle forgiveness teach others about forgiveness?

Rev. Fred Craddock tells a story about preaching parables and says one Sunday when he was preaching as a visiting pastor and he spoke of the son who had returned home to be welcomed with open arms by his father and the other son finding disdain for his brother for receiving such treatment and anger for a father who lavished the son with such treatment. Rev Craddock said after the sermon that Sunday an attorney and his wife from the congregation took them out for lunch as they were sitting at the table the attorney said Rev. Craddock, I don't

know whether to tell you I didn't like your sermon or I didn't like the text, my wife tells me I should never question or disagree with the Bible but then it makes me disagree with you and your message. Fred Craddock, interested to hear this attorney's take on the text asked the attorney what he thought of it. He said the son who returned should have been put in jail for what he had done. Jewish law was very clear, he ran around with, ate with, drank with, worked with people he shouldn't have and he should have been arrested and served jail time for that. He should have been made an example of so others would know they could not do something like that. Instead because of the father's actions he came across light on sin with disregard for authority. He should have acted like a big fish in a little pond making a great statement about discipline and authority right?

Another story he tells of a woman who left her husband over an affair and the woman, after staying with her mother for six weeks ended up going back to her husband, she forgave him. Her mother said what are people going to think if they see you doing this? Are they going to think you are soft on sin, that you don't hold him accountable. No, hopefully they will understand that I forgave him, the wife replied. What humility that must have taken, not worrying what others think, not making a big deal of calling him out, yet instead quietly forgiving him and getting back together. Those aren't the stories the news reports on. Those aren't the big fish things are they? Do we really want our children to see the humility, quiet forgiveness the small fish in the big pond. If so our actions to to reflect them.

Rodney King, once he had recovered after the beatings and was able to come face to face with his attackers who had beaten him almost to death, walked up to them stuck out his hand and said I forgive you. A news reporter that was there that day reported that scene and event as this "It is obvious Rodney King has suffered brain damage." You see unless we make the story big who is going to notice it? How will our children learn? How will we preach the Gospel if we don't use big words in a showy manner.

One of our families here took their children to Bloomsburg yesterday to help muck out basements. They didn't make a big deal of it, they just went and worked. Oh, it wasn't for media attention, it wasn't for notoriety with their friends, it wasn't for anything other than to go and help, humbly and quietly. That is what I believe we are called to do. Teach our children by example, responding in quiet humility to the call for all of us to ministry.

Where do children learn? In today's text parents are bringing their children to see Jesus and the Disciples try to keep them away. There are more important people for Jesus to deal with, keep these children away. Right? No, Jesus responds, unless you believe with the belief of a child you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven. These little fish so to speak are very important to Jesus wouldn't you say. These least and lowly, these that had no say were welcomed and loved and these least became first.

There are many examples we could talk about when we talk about how our children learn, the faith of a child or children's place in the Kingdom of God. So do we act like the Pharisee in today's story or the sinner tax collector? Pounding our chest, making our presence known like a big fish in a little pond? Or do we act as the repent tax collector, asking for forgiveness, humbling himself content with being a small fish in a big pond. What examples do we set for the children around us?

Granted there are many places today's text and message could have gone, and many messages to address how children should be treated justly in our society. However if we start with our actions, small and quiet, living by example the message will be heard, yes by our children and not only our children but all those around us. For we are all children and called to believe as a child. Do You?

This week my former parish celebrated a great anniversary, for it was 10 years ago they began serving a Wednesday evening meal called Manna Café a way to feed families who received most of their meals through homeless shelters. A few people got together and began to cook meals for families in need on Wednesday evenings. These Wednesday evening meals were special, you see when families

receive meals from shelters many times they are served on disposable plates with disposable utensils and most times the meals are sandwiches, things that can be fixed in mass and easily stored. However, on Wednesday nights, this church serves a hot meal on real plates with real cups, utensils, place mats and napkins and families come and sit together and share a meal. Many of them started coming with small children 10 years ago and this week some of those children who were first helped; helped serve the meal to others. This meal started as a way to offer others a meal with respect and dignity, without much fanfare, just a small way to help in the community. There's still not much fanfare surrounding the meal, however now over 100,000 meals have been served and souls have been fed.

There are ways for you to help and many of you do, however I ask you to remember it is not just a one time thing, it is your actions each and every day. For St. Francis I believe understood Jesus' call to us preach the Gospel always use words (and I would add) only when necessary. No matter if you are the big fish in the little pond or the little fish in a very big sea your actions and deeds matter. Our children, our future depend on it. Amen.