

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The theme is now set more firmly... How we go forward, making the Gospel stories into our own stories, and sharing them. So, here is the Holy Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ, according to Father Jim, based upon Luke's story for today.

When I was a young, during the summer when I was 18 year old, it was the first time that I went to work for someone else, someone outside of the family. A job for summer employment on Black Lake in St. Lawrence County.

Black Lake is relatively narrow, but miles long. As it is sizeable, it is now well known for a total outdoor recreational experience...boating, water skiing, personal water craft, swimming. But the real seminal focus of recreational enjoyment of Black Lake was, and will always be, fishing. Fishing is first on Black Lake...and fishing for all species of fresh water fish was popular as the lake was large enough to support any interest.

Betty was an elderly, bed-ridden widow who owned a tourism complex at the heart of Black Lake. It consisted of a small marina for boats, a campground, a corner store with the only grocery around for miles, all clustered together up at the flashing traffic light. Then some six single-family cabins that were scattered along the lake shore, up and down the road. But the nerve center of the operation was a bait and tackle shop, with a set of gas pumps outside, along with 3 separate livestock watering tubs converted over for live minnow bait in three different sizes: tiny suckers for the pan fish, mid-sized shiny silver minnows for bass, and finally big, 6 inch or longer sucker bait fish for muskies and northern pike in the St. Lawrence, or Black Lake's world famous walleye pike.

I had virtually no fishing experience, but got hired anyway...and I grew to love the job because of its variety. Betty needed a kid to do the grunt work for the entire complex. Once a week, I would mow all the grass in the camping area and around the cabins up and down the lake. Twice a week, I'd stock the grocery shelves from the inventory that was on the second floor of the corner store. But most of the time, I'd work the bait and tackle shop...pumping gas; selling tackle and lures; selling bait; and often sitting in the back room counting out and packing thousands upon thousand of nightcrawlers that were imported from Canada and had to be packed into containers for the refrigerator in the store..but that wasn't so bad as I'd listen to the radio broadcasts of the Senate Watergate hearings. Very interesting.

Anyway, I started out with little self-confidence but learned fast...and I learned one thing quicker than the others, and that is this:

Being on the service end of retail can be very tough. If you are a sales clerk, or a food server in a diner, you are often treated as garbage...or less than garbage..by the customer who somehow often takes the initiative of lording control. Ask anyone who works in sales, and he or she will tell you that, unfortunately, customers often treat them as slaves.

But, in my experience at “Shady Shores” on Black Lake, I never...never...once experience that phenomenon. “Why”, I wondered. I think it was because the expectation of the customer, the customer’s mind-set was different. On every weekend, a new group of fishermen would arrive. Relaxed. Starting out on his precious summer vacation from work for a week, maybe two. Excited and really, really....REALLY...looking forward to a solid period of doing nothing, but relaxing and fishing.

He would pull in with his boat on the trailer, and virtually leap into the bait shop. Bait bucket in one hand, and wallet in the other, and it got to the point where I could predict the very first thing he would say. “What are they biting on?”

Are you kidding me? I could not fish a lick...then or now. I could not...and today cannot... fish to save my mortal soul. I had absolutely NO idea what the fish would bite on...but...I could share the news of what I had heard from the group of guys who spent the last week. Honestly, I could have pointed to the dustiest Mepps Minnow, or Silver Spoon lure on the wall in the store, and they were ready to wipe out the inventory. But, of course, I did not do that...but rather I enjoyed their sense of freedom and enthusiasm, and offered the best advice that I could based on the chatter of the prior week.

I was there for two summers, and in the second summer, there was a fishing crisis. Because even though Black Lake was and is known for its variety in fishing, the king of all were the walleye pike. The old-timers and natives talked with reverence about the walleye...saying that, in the old days, they were so plentiful that when they spawned on the Hammond end of the lake, they would literally bubble out of the water in a turbulent ball of rolling fish! The walleye! The equivalent of the Holy Grail for Black Lake fishing. Creme de la creme.

And yet, for weeks and weeks during that second summer, the walleye disappeared. Did not matter where you fished, or when, or what you fished with. This was back before all the fancy radar type stuff fishermen have today, so it was a real challenge...and, for a guy looking to strike during his short summer vacation from work...it was very, very frustrating.

Now, Bob enters the story. Being bed ridden, Betty could not take care of business, so for many years, it was run by Bob, a middle-aged bachelor, World War II veteran who suffered loss of part of a hand. Bob was, despite his disability, a real accomplished handyman who knew the business cold and who could repair anything. But Bob worked almost around the clock...up at 4, doing the main work and maintenance, and he worked hard all day, every day...often ending the drudgery and physical exhaustion of the day with a bottle, until he started again the next morning.

Bob had a boat of his own, and allegedly knew all about the lake...where to go and what to cast, but he never went out to enjoy it. He never could afford to take the time because the business needed his attention.

Then, finally, one day during this summer of walleye disappearance, he announced that he was going to take the day off and go out fishing.

Like Joe Namath at Super Bowl III, he guaranteed...GUARANTEED...that he would come back

with buckets of walleye...in just an hour or two. Others in the store openly called him out...hooted and hollered. And he left the store...gone, I assumed, to his boat, which was stored I knew not where.

I will never forget that night...an overloaded dinner plate of perfect, little, filleted walleye steak cubes, about two inches in size, covered with Bob's secret beer batter recipe and deep fried. The flavor, and so tender. You did not need teeth...you could gum these things down. What a feast!

That is my story, a long one...and what is the point? Where is the connection to the Gospel today? Well, obviously, there is the instant parallel of the facts: that one person knew where the fish were, while the others had no clue...that is true. But, while I have no illusions that rough, crusty Bob Moat was the virtual reincarnation of the living God in Jesus Christ, there are some similarities.

....my version of this gospel story illustrates that God can, and does, work through unsuspecting persons. Nobody back then thought much of Jesus at first. Remember, this is Joseph and Mary's son..so what? As rough and tumble as Bob was, he was a hard working, dedicated man with focus on his purpose...as we could realize that almost all people are, if we would just take the time beyond our initial urges to judge them and instead appreciate them for their greater meaning within God's creation.

....my version mentioned the particular passion of the visiting fishermen, the customers who came to the bait shop...their eagerness for good news that they could use themselves. Sure, this example is about fishing...but, of course, the point is that there are people, out there, who have a particular passion, an eagerness for good news that they can use themselves for a far, deeper purpose than catching walleye. And, like me, you do not know how to actually do it...that is a mystery left for God. All we need to do is share it in a way that appeals to them, to their hearts and passions.

....my version demonstrates, in real time today, the particular phenomenon of one-on-one engagement. It was one-on-one over the cash register then...but I am talking about the one-on-one with you now. In this 21st century technological world of Twittering, and "apps", and the newest I-toy from Apple, we still hunger for the interpersonal means of relating and communicating. The body language, the voice inflections when we tell our stories, the eye contact...all the things that make more "real" the sharing of those Gospel stories that we find continued, and expanded within our own stories.

This is a sermon without a clear and tidy way to wrap up...because it is intended to continue with each of us. There are no words of wisdom to go out the door with...except for this: May you live and find your story to share, as Peter did by taking the risk of following the direction of Jesus and rowing into deeper water. With whom will you dare share your faith in the coming days?

May God give us courage to fish where the fish are....in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.