

He-Man, Fish Hooks, and Progressive Evangelism

Mark 1:14-20

Wake Forest Baptist Church

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I was fortunate over the holidays to have my mother come and visit so that she could join us for worship on Christmas morning. It was a beautiful weekend, perfect for tromping through the Arts District, downtown, and West End looking in shops and galleries and eating great food. We poked around boutiques and consignment stores when we stumbled upon a great antique shop in the West End. I'd passed it several times before, but it was always closed. On this particular Friday, though, we were in luck. The walls were packed with antique trinkets, furniture, and vintage goods. It was like a dusty heaven, filled with odds and ends that made for great discussion; I'm sure it was a place that would have made Don very happy. As I perused the Depression glass and antique clocks, I rounded a corner and found it: the Holy Grail of antiquing. Or at least *my* Holy Grail of antiquing. An entire section of vintage lunch boxes.

Anyone who enters my kitchen is keenly aware that the pop art décor of Andy Warhol bedecks my walls, oven mitts, and hand towels, but the pop art is overshadowed by my collection of vintage metal lunch boxes. The Muppets, Snoopy, Andy Griffith, G I Joe, Wizard of Oz, and Rosy the Riveter all stand watch over my pop art kitchen. And in this West End antique shop I could hardly contain myself. These lunch boxes were totally authentic, not some mere replica reproduced at a chain store. Bionic Woman, Charlie Brown, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang stood proud with the rusty edges to prove their vintage integrity. And each lunch box bore the price of their authenticity, ranging from \$50-\$100. Too cheap to spend that much money on a lunch box—even if it is vintage—I peeked around to see if I could score a cheaper one, or at least one without a price so that I could begin the haggling process.

It was at that moment that I spotted it, shining in rusted metal glory, bright blue with a small children's "Happy Birthday" sticker still plastered to the side: He-Man, Masters of the Universe. I looked in the corner and saw the date: 1983. It was authentic. A vintage He-Man lunch box. He-Man defined my generation. Countless Generation X-ers still summon the power of Gray Skull to this day. Now, I acknowledge that many of you may find my collection of vintage lunch boxes a bit odd, perhaps childish even. And there is no doubt that my excitement over He-Man does, indeed, date me. Many in the congregation may want to roll their eyes at their young preacher, whose generation was defined by a cheesy cartoon. And many others of you may be thinking, "Man, she's old."

Nevertheless, adding to my layers of utter coolness, I delighted in this little vintage gem and decided to pick it up to see if I could find a price tag and begin negotiations for purchase. Rosy the Riveter and Kermit the Frog would be thrilled to have a He-Man in their ranks. As I picked up the lunchbox, I heard a slight rattling sound. My heart skipped a beat. Could I get any more lucky on this day before Christmas Eve?! Not only had I found a vintage He-Man lunchbox, but it likely had a thermos inside. I quickly unlatched its metal lid so that I could behold the splendor of the He-Man thermos, but before my eyes could glimpse its glory, another

sense took over. My *nose* was greeted with one of the worst smells I have ever encountered. As I refrained from gagging, I looked down and saw an air-tight, condensed zip lock bag filled with non-other than a 1983 vintage sandwich. It was...disgusting. I quickly slammed the lid shut and whipped the hand-sanitizer out of my purse. After covering my hands with the sanitizing liquid ooze, I got an idea.

Strategically holding my new-found He-Man lunch box between the tips of two fingers I marched to the front of the store to find the owner sitting behind the cash register. "How much is this vintage 1983 He-Man lunch box?" I asked him nerdily, dangling the blue rusted metal between my fingers. "\$45" he responded after thinking a moment. "If I told you there was a vintage 1983 sandwich inside, would you give it to me for \$10?" I asked. A look of shock and disgust washed over his face. He apologized for not cleaning out his merchandise and let me leave with it for a cool \$10. I promptly walked outside, opened the lunch box quickly over a trashcan, let the 29 year old sandwich fall out and ran in the opposite direction to avoid the stench. When I arrived home I cleaned it with antibacterial soap and it is now proudly on display with the rest of the vintage lunchboxes in my kitchen. He-Man, the Master of the Universe, prevails again.

"The time is fulfilled, and the reign of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. *Follow me and I will make you fish for people.*" And now you're probably waiting for the metaphorical hook, that thing that links my story of the He-Man lunch box to Jesus' admonition about repentance and becoming fishers of people. Before we get to the metaphorical hook, I want to talk for a moment about the literal hook, the fishing hook, if you will.

This story of Jesus calling Simon and Andrew is familiar to most of us. The phrase "fishers of people," or more traditionally rendered in improper Greek as "fishers of men" is almost as popular as the standard John 3:16 plastered across bumper stickers, t-shirts, billboards, pizza boxes, and Tebow's under-eye wear. It's the quintessential call to evangelism. Jesus calls the first disciples to be fishers of people, hooking people into the Christian faith.

I'm not much on fishing. Being an ardent vegetarian, I have no cause to fish myself and all this business of worms and fish hooks strikes me as kinda gross and a bit violent. If we fulfill Jesus' metaphor of being fishers of people, it seems that we would bait them with something they love (the worm) and then hook them with something that kills (the hook). I like Jesus a lot, mind you, but I'm not a big fan of this metaphor.

The contemporary church doesn't help too much in this regard. Now, stick with me on this one. I know that we progressives aren't the best at evangelism, at hooking people, but I'm convinced that's part of our problem. It seems that many churches today go to great lengths to find the right bait in order to get the metaphorical hook. A disgusting worm isn't going to hook anyone into coming to church, so many post-modern churches try anything and everything as bait.

Churches try rock music or tricky lighting or big screen projections of cool images that keep your 5 second attention span while the preacher is preaching or while you're singing that bait-and-switch rock music. They put a coffee shop in the narthex. They get rid of organs or any

symbols that represent the faith they're trying so hard to conceal. Then the church dangles the bait—the rock music or the fancy lighting—in front of the people in attempt to hook them. Often times, they do. People are hooked and they begin attending church, drawn in by the flashy bait.

But what happens when you get to the core of what the church has to offer? What happens when the new visitor searches for the meaning in the bait that has hooked them? In many contemporary churches, that bait hooks them for the kill and individuals are hooked into a theological and political system that oppresses and marginalizes. This may sound like an extreme exaggeration, but think about the power of the church. Women are lured in with flashy bait only to discover that the particular church that hooked them doesn't allow women to teach or lead or preach. Scientists, or LGBT persons, or maybe even liberals are lured by the bait, only to realize that they're hooked into a system that wants to silence their voices, squelch their differences, change who they are, and force their uniqueness into a cycle of sameness.

If said church were an antique store, the bait would be that beloved He-Man lunch box. The bait lured me in, wanting, knowing that I must have what I saw. Once I was hooked and looked inside, all I found was a 29 year old sandwich. No liberation. No hope. Nothing that set me free. Just a horrible smell and fear of bacteria.

But what if we have been missing something critical in this passage? What if Jesus never intended fishing to become our main metaphor for evangelism? What if Jesus was only inviting Simon and Andrew to be "fishers of people" because that's who they were: fishermen? Think about it. If Simon and Andrew had been physicians, maybe Jesus would have invited them to follow and learn how to be "healers of people's souls?" Or if they had been mechanics, maybe Jesus would have invited them to follow and learn how to "repair broken lives?" Perhaps Jesus invites Peter and Andrew to join in God's work in a way that fit for them. Perhaps Jesus invites us to follow in a way that fits for us, too. Perhaps Jesus invites us to evangelize in a way that fits who we are.

No flashy lights. No bait-and-switch. And furthermore, no rotten, vintage sandwiches inside. Hear me out. We progressive Christians, some of us even self-identified "crazy liberals," usually balk at this seemingly conservative idea of evangelism. It's too coercive. It's dated. Leave that evangelism business to the so-called evangelicals with their flashy lights and rock and roll and coffee shops in the narthex. We're just fine, here in our chapel, smug in our progressive faith that welcomes everyone.

But you see, there's no need for bait. There's no need for a hook. When you share with people the central message of what our faith offers, there's no need to trick anyone. Everyone gets a fabulous vintage He-Man lunchbox and no one gets stuck with the nasty 29 year old sandwich. You see, we can't just sit smugly in our chapel and hold onto all the freedom and justice and peace and liberation our faith provides us. We can't keep it inside. We can't keep it to ourselves. It's too good not to share. We don't have to stick with the old metaphor and take our faith fishing for people. We can just share it. Spread it. Tell about it.

Perhaps the reason the church has been in decline for the past 40 years has nothing to do with the bait. It's not because we need an electric guitar or a coffee shop, though there is nothing

inherently wrong with either of those things. It has nothing to do with the bait. In fact, forget the bait all together. Forget the hook; all it does is hurt. Stick with the message of Jesus. And the message is that all are welcome. No exceptions. All are loved. No exceptions. The message is that this can be a healing place for hurt, a welcoming place for strangers, an accepting place for the outcast. The message is justice. The message is peace. The message is compassion. The message is equality. The message is never-ending-always-present-life-altering love.

Even He-Man, the Master of the Universe, has nothing on that. So, let's follow Jesus. Fishing for people may not be the best metaphor, but it's not just for conservative evangelicals. It's for us, too. Kooky academics, and questioning scientists, and fabulous gay people, and weird artists, and even progressive liberals. It's for us, WFBC. We're called to "fish for people." We're called to share. Don't worry. There's enough love to go around. So, leave the flashy bait at home and follow Jesus to share love, peace, justice, and hope with a world who desperately needs it. Amen.