

Thought For The Week

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Just Fish:

On the evening of September 13, 2026, the congregation heard Tom read John 21:1–14 before John preached a sermon titled “Just Fish.” The passage is familiar to many churchgoers, yet it ends with a detail easy to treat as decoration: after a night of empty nets, the risen Jesus told the disciples to cast on the right side of the boat. They obeyed, and Simon Peter hauled the net to shore. It held one hundred fifty-three large fish. The net did not tear. Jesus already had a charcoal fire waiting, with fish and bread on it, and He invited them to breakfast. John began with that number and refused to treat it as incidental.

He asked the room how many they caught. One hundred fifty-three. Someone might wonder whether the figure was 144 or some other round number, and whether the exact count matters. John answered that it matters because it is in Scripture and because it is specific. God would not allow even a jot or tittle to fall away. If the text gives 153, the number is not filler. The question then becomes how people remember small, stubborn details—phrases, images, and figures that lodge in the mind and carry more than they first appear to hold.

John laid groundwork from his own work. He is an accountant. He likes numbers. He tells people he adds and subtracts for a living, a skill learned in second grade that still pays the bills. In 1998 and 1999 he spent six months in a classroom preparing for the CPA exam, a process he called brutal. That season of study depended on memory tools, especially mnemonics and acronyms. The early church, he said, did something similar with a single Greek word: **ichthys**, fish—the thing one tries to catch on a hook with a worm. Greek-speaking Christians identified themselves with that word and with the simple outline still seen on bumper stickers, the so-called Jesus fish. John had wondered where the symbol came from. The answer belongs to the same family of devices that help a candidate pass an exam.

A mnemonic gives arbitrary information structure or meaning. The brain keeps patterns, stories, and images more readily than isolated facts. Jonah is a compact example. The name itself calls up a set of claims: a man cannot run from God; God is present everywhere; God can keep a man alive in the belly of a great fish for three days and three nights; Jonah went to Nineveh convinced the errand would fail, yet the city repented and God relented. The whole cluster travels with one short name. Hymns work the same way. After enough Sundays the words come without effort, even while the mind is already on laundry and the week ahead. Children are not ordered to memorize twenty-six letters in the abstract. They are taught to sing the alphabet. Rhythm and sound do the work that raw demand cannot. Mnemonics exist for that purpose. They help a congregation keep a number such as 153 and ask what the number is trying to show.

John added the usual classroom examples. “My very educated mother just served us nine pizzas” orders the planets. “Every good boy does fine” places E, G, B, D, and F on the lines of the treble clef. An acronym tightens the same habit by taking first letters and making one pronounceable word. FISH in English is four letters; the Greek word uses five. HOMES recalls the Great Lakes: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior. SCUBA stands for Self-Contained Underwater Breathing

Apparatus. The tricks are small. They work because they compress what would otherwise stay scattered.

Then he turned to the symbol on the screen. Inside the outline of the fish stand five Greek letters that spell **ichthys**. Each letter begins a word. Iota stands for **Iêsous**, Jesus. Chi stands for **Christos**, Christ. Theta stands for **Theou**, of God. Upsilon stands for **Huios**, Son. Sigma stands for **Sôtêr**, Savior. One modest drawing therefore carries the confession Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. That is the Jesus fish. With the acrostic in view, John returned to the 153 fish in the net and set a second text beside the first.

He read Luke 5:1–11. The crowd pressed upon Jesus to hear the word of God. He stood by the lake of Gennesaret, saw two boats, and got into Simon's. After teaching from the boat He told Simon to put out into the deep and let down the nets. Simon answered that they had worked all night and taken nothing, yet at the Lord's word he would try. The catch was so great the net began to break. Partners came from the other boat. Both vessels started to sink. Peter fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Jesus told him not to be afraid: from now on he would catch men. They brought the boats to land, left everything, and followed Him.

The two stories share a cast and a pattern. Peter, James, and John are present. They fish all night and catch nothing. Jesus tells them to try again. Obedience brings an overwhelming haul. The differences, John insisted, are not minor. These are two events, years apart. Luke 5 belongs to the beginning of the ministry, when Jesus is still calling men who will become apostles. John 21 belongs to the days after the resurrection. Luke speaks only of "many" fish and of nets that break. John gives a counted total and a net that holds. Scripture often describes the people of the world as fish. A net thrown across the whole human field gathers more than it can keep. Not everyone is willing. The gear fails.

John read the failure as image as well as history. The breaking net stands for the unfinished message of Christ. The unnumbered fish stand for the world, many of them unsuited for the kingdom. He turned to Matthew 4:18–20, where Jesus sees Peter and Andrew casting a net, tells them He will make them fishers of men, and watches them leave their nets at once. For a long time John had heard only the drama of abandonment: they left the nets. He later noticed the pronoun. They left **their** nets—not the net Christ would later use to gather and to divide sheep from goats. After the resurrection the same men are still fishermen, but they work with a different gear. The net that does not tear in John 21 represents the completed message, the same confession packed into the five letters of the fish: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. The 153 fish represent those who belong to Christ.

Why 153? Commentaries multiply. John said he could spend another six months on the question and still not exhaust it. He offered two starting points. Jerome, the fourth-century translator of the Vulgate, faced the same verse and cited Oppian, a second-century Greco-Roman writer whose five-book poem on fishing, the **Halieutica**, claimed there were exactly 153 known species of fish in the world. If that catalog is in view, the catch on the beach is a picture of every kind, every people, represented—those who are willing. John then treated the number as a mathematician would. One hundred fifty-three is a triangular number: $1 + 2 + 3 + \dots + 17 = 153$. Scripture elsewhere gives similarly exact, non-round totals that happen to be triangular. Acts 27:37 records 276 souls on the ship that wrecked with Paul; 1 through 23 sum to 276. Revelation 13:18 gives 666; 1 through 36 sum to 666. John would not pretend he had finished the pattern. He would say only that the Word is specific down to the last counted fish and the last counted passenger, and that God has not been

careless with details.

He closed by reading Matthew 25:31–33. When the Son of Man comes in glory with the holy angels, He will sit on His throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him, an image John set beside the net. The King will separate them as a shepherd divides sheep from goats, sheep on the right, goats on the left. John observed that the language still lives in ordinary speech. Some people call themselves those on the right and mean by it a desire to preserve a nation, keep its laws, and guard godly freedom. Others call themselves leftists and, in John's hearing, argue for concentrated power, the dismantling of law, and, in recent American argument, a posture that slides toward anarchy and atheism. He was not offering a party platform. He was noticing that the old sorting still has a public vocabulary. The net a person wants, he said, is the one thrown on the right side of the boat. That is the net in which one wants to be caught.

The sermon ended where many evening sermons end, with an open door rather than a completed system. If anyone in the room found himself swimming somewhere other than under the instruction and protection of the Lord Jesus Christ, or had any other need, he should say so. The invitation was consistent with the rest of the hour. John had not treated 153 as a puzzle to be solved and then shelved. He had treated it as one more instance of a God who counts, names, and keeps. The disciples fished all night and had nothing. At a word from the risen Christ they cast on the right side and could not haul the net for the weight of what it held. The fire was already burning. Breakfast was already there. The Lord who asked whether they had any fish already knew the answer and already intended to feed them.

What remains for a reader who was not in the room is the same pair of tasks the sermon set before the congregation. First, refuse to sand the edges off the text. The number is 153, not "a lot." The net does not tear. The catch is brought to a meal the Lord Himself serves. Second, let the small devices do their work. A fish outline on a car, five Greek letters, a triangular sum, a childhood song—these are not substitutes for faith. They are the ordinary ways memory is trained so that a confession can be carried when the mind is tired. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. The early church put that sentence inside a fish. John put the same sentence beside a counted catch and an unbroken net. The world is full of fish. Not every net holds. The net that holds is the finished word of the One who stood on the beach at daybreak and called tired men children, then told them where to throw.

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Just Fish

John 21:1–14 and Luke 5:1–11

The risen Jesus stands on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. Seven disciples have fished all night and caught nothing. At His word they cast on the right side of the boat and haul in 153 large fish. The net does not tear. A charcoal fire, fish, and bread are already waiting. “Come and have breakfast.” This is the third post-resurrection appearance to the disciples.

Scripture does not waste details. The number 153 is named because it matters. Early Christians already used the Greek word for fish—**ichthys**—as an acrostic: Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior. The simple outline of a fish became a compact creed, which is why the “Jesus fish” still appears today. It is confession, not decoration.

Luke 5 records an earlier, similar scene at the beginning of the ministry. After a fruitless night Jesus tells Simon to put out into the deep. The catch is so great the nets begin to break and both boats start to sink. Peter falls at Jesus’ knees as a sinful man. Jesus answers, “From now on you will catch men.” They leave everything and follow Him.

The two events share the same men, the same lake, a wasted night, and sudden abundance at Jesus’ word. The differences are the point. Luke 5 is the call before the cross; the number is only “a great many” and the nets break. John 21 is after the resurrection; the number is exact and the net holds. Fish often stand for people. The breaking net pictures an unfinished proclamation. The intact net and counted catch picture the completed gospel: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. Those who belong to Him are known.

Commentators have noted that 153 was once thought to be the number of known fish species, so the catch represents every kind of person the gospel can reach. It is also a triangular number (the sum of 1 through 17). Whatever extra layers one accepts, the text insists on a real, limited, countable catch the net could hold.

Matthew 25 supplies the last image: the Son of Man separates the nations as a shepherd divides sheep from goats—sheep on the right. The net you want is the one cast on the right side of the boat. That net does not tear. Breakfast is already prepared. Come.

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Just Fish

John 21:1–14 and Luke 5:1–11

The risen Jesus appears on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. Seven disciples have fished all night and caught nothing. At His word they cast on the right side of the boat and haul in 153 large fish. The net does not tear. He already has a charcoal fire, fish, and bread waiting. “Come and have breakfast.” This is the third time He is manifested to the disciples after the resurrection.

The number is specific. Scripture does not waste details. A jot or tittle will not fall away, and here the text names 153.

Memory, Mnemonics, and the Fish

People remember patterns, stories, and images more easily than raw facts. Mnemonics and acronyms give structure to what would otherwise be arbitrary. Children learn the alphabet by singing it. “My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas” once ordered the planets. “Every Good Boy Does Fine” names the lines of the treble clef. HOMES recalls the Great Lakes. SCUBA unpacks a long technical phrase.

Early Christians used the same kind of device. The Greek word for fish is **ichthys** (ἰχθύς). Those five letters form an acrostic:

- **I** — Ἰησοῦς (Iēsous) — Jesus
- **X** — Χριστός (Christos) — Christ
- **Θ** — Θεοῦ (Theou) — of God
- **Υ** — Υἱός (Huios) — Son
- **Σ** — Σωτήρ (Sōtēr) — Savior

Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior. One compact confession packed into a single word and a simple outline of a fish. That is why the “Jesus fish” still appears on bumpers and jewelry. It is not decoration. It is a creed.

Jonah works the same way. The name and the story carry a cluster of truths: you cannot run from God; God is everywhere; He can keep a man alive three days in a great fish; even Nineveh can repent. Songs do it too. Hymn words come unbidden because rhythm and repetition have already done the work.

Two Catches, Two Moments

Luke 5:1–11 is a different event at the beginning of the ministry. The crowd presses to hear the word. Jesus teaches from Simon’s boat, then tells him to put out into the deep. They have toiled all night and caught nothing. At His word they let down the nets. The catch is so great the nets begin to break. Both boats start to sink. Peter falls at Jesus’ knees: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” Jesus answers, “Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.” They leave everything and follow Him.

The two scenes share the same men, the same lake, a fruitless night, and a sudden abundance at Jesus' word. The differences matter.

- Luke 5 is the call, before the cross.
- John 21 is after the resurrection.
- In Luke the number is only “a great many” and the nets break.
- In John the number is exact—153—and the net holds.

Fish in Scripture often stand for people. Jesus called fishermen to become fishers of men (Matthew 4:18–20). They left **their** nets. Later they would use a different kind of net.

The breaking net in Luke pictures an unfinished proclamation and a world that will not all come in. The intact net and the counted catch in John picture the completed gospel. The message is now whole: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. Those who belong to Him are known. The net is sufficient.

Why 153?

Commentators have offered many suggestions. Jerome, translator of the Vulgate, cited the second-century poet Oppian and the tradition that there were 153 known species of fish. In that reading the catch represents every kind of person the gospel can reach—noble and ignoble, rich and poor, every nation willing to be drawn from the sea of this world.

153 is also a triangular number: the sum of the integers from 1 through 17. Other specific counts in Scripture are likewise triangular. Acts 27:37 records 276 souls on the ship that wrecked (the 23rd triangular number). Revelation 13:18 gives 666 (the 36th). Scripture sometimes uses exact numbers rather than round ones. The preacher did not claim to have exhausted the meaning; he simply noted that God is precise down to the last fish.

Augustine and others linked 17 to the Ten Commandments plus the sevenfold Spirit, law fulfilled by grace. Whatever additional layers one accepts, the text itself insists on a real, countable, limited catch that the net could hold.

The Right Side of the Boat

Matthew 25:31–33 supplies the final image. When the Son of Man comes in glory, all the nations are gathered before Him. He separates them as a shepherd divides sheep from goats—sheep on the right, goats on the left.

The net you want is the one cast on the right side of the boat. That is the net that does not tear. That is the company of those who belong to Christ.

If you find yourself swimming somewhere else—outside His word, His protection, His finished work—the invitation is the same one Jesus gave on the beach: come. Breakfast is already prepared.