

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 2025
SERMON: FISHING vs GRACE
SCRIPTURE: JOHN 12:1-8
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JOHN 12:1-8 (NIV)

12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. **2** Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. **3** Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4 But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, **5** "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." **6** He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

7 "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. **8** You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

Sermon: Fishing vs Grace

We've all heard the old adage, "If you give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day; if you teach a man to fish, he'll eat for a lifetime." Statistically, it's not an entirely true statement. The most effective housing strategy nationwide for homeless populations is known as "Housing First," which is essentially the opposite of this "fishing" cliché.

In the Housing First program, participants are measured on what's called the VI-SPDAT, which is an acronym for *Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool*. (If you're reading instead of listening, that is pronounced vee-eye-sped-AT). This is a universalized intake test that most homeless services organizations use across the country to determine imminent death risk of people coming off the streets into shelters. The VI-SPDAT includes questions about the amount of time the subject has been raped, stabbed, or otherwise victim to a capital-level offense while living on the streets; questions about how many times the subject has been hospitalized against their will for

mental health concerns, how many meals they've eaten from a public garbage can this week, how much of their cash flow comes from prostitution or illicit substance exchange.

You know, all the normal questions that you tend to want to explain to a stranger when you're already at your lowest.

The higher the score on the VI-SPDAT, the more services become available to the subject. Folks who score at least a "10" on the VI-SPDAT scale become eligible for this revolutionary "Housing First" program that contrasts the fishing adage.

As you can imagine, people who qualify for housing first usually aren't "normal" people who just fell on hard times, they're usually what we colloquially refer to as "chronics": the gentleman you see standing in the middle of the road, naked and covered in feces, yelling at cars; the rail thin woman sleeping on the hot pavement next to the rubbish bin and you're not quite sure if she's alive or dead; the person yelling at their own reflection in the glass display of a Waikiki tourist shop. These are the folks that qualify for Housing First.

In the program, participants aren't required to *do* anything to automatically receive a furnished apartment and intensive case manager that are entirely paid for by the program, which is usually administered by the state government through non profits like IHS. If they have income like disability or social security, they're required to apply 1/3 of their income to the cost of the housing. Otherwise, they're not required to get sober to qualify, they're not required to stop prostituting to qualify, they're not required to get a job, or take classes, or anything that would essentially "teach them how to fish." They're just ...given the house with hopes that they'll naturally start changing their behavior by proxy of having four stable walls to sleep between.

It sounds like a recipe for disaster, giving someone who barely knows how to function all the responsibilities that come with a house, like maintaining its cleanliness or not burning it down. Yet, amazingly, we find that the program works. Nationwide, 75-90% of Housing First participants retain their housing, stabilize, and become a semblance or better of functional people in average society within the first two years of the program. In Hawaii, that statistic is higher, with 86-92% of participants maintaining these measurements of stability.

So why does Housing First work? Why do people who have been abandoned by society, pushed to the margins, and treated as problems to be solved suddenly thrive when given this opportunity? The answer is *grace*. It is not because we have given them fish, or because we have taught them to fish. It is because we have done something

entirely different: we have given them grace—the kind of grace that Jesus gave so many people in His ministry.

In John 12:1-8, we see a moment that challenges our assumptions about giving, harkening back to our “fishing” dilemma. Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume, an act of extravagant love. Judas Iscariot, hiding behind the guise of concern for the poor, protests: “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?” Judas’ objection sounds practical, even responsible. On the surface, it’s an argument that makes sense—surely resources should be used efficiently, with measurable impact. But Jesus rebukes him, saying, “You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

At first glance, Jesus’ words might seem to devalue the importance of helping the poor, but that’s not what He’s saying. Jesus constantly ministered to the poor—not just by giving them things, but by giving them Himself. He wasn’t dismissing the need to care for the poor; He was shifting the focus to something greater: the need for His presence, His grace, His power to transform lives.

Jesus was not against giving to the poor. In fact, His entire ministry was deeply committed to the poor and marginalized. But more often than not, what He gave them was not simply material aid. What He gave them was something far more transformative: grace. He saw them for who they truly were. He saw the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the lepers, the blind, the sinners—not as problems to be fixed but as people worthy of love, dignity, and a new life. Judas sees a missed opportunity to “fix” a problem; Jesus sees the surrender of a life poured out in devotion. And that’s where grace changes everything. The most important thing we can give—whether to the poor, to ourselves, or to anyone—is not just a solution, but an encounter with the transforming presence of Christ.

This success happens not because they’ve been given a fish, nor because they’ve been taught to fish, but because they’ve been given grace. Housing First functions on the same principle Jesus lived by: people are transformed when they are given a chance to stop merely surviving and start truly living. The woman who poured perfume on Jesus’ feet had found that grace. He had given her more than charity—He had given her a new life, and in gratitude, she gave everything back to Him. This is what Housing First does: it sees people as more than their problems and offers them a chance at dignity, at community, at transformation.

We are often so focused on “fixing” people, on making sure they work for what they get, on ensuring they are worthy of help, that we forget that Jesus very rarely operated that way. When He healed, He didn’t demand proof of repentance first. When He forgave,

He didn't require a demonstration of worthiness. He simply gave grace, and that grace changed lives.

In the same way, Housing First acknowledges that many chronically homeless individuals have been given countless "fish" and countless fishing lessons. None of it worked. They've been through shelters, programs, jails, hospitals—all of which had rules, requirements, conditions for help. But what they lacked was the opportunity to be seen, to be treated as fully human, to be given a new path forward without strings attached.

Housing First works not because it "teaches a man to fish," but because it recognizes that the people who qualify—those who have been pushed to the margins, treated as statistics, categorized as problems—need something more than just another lesson or another resource. What they need is grace: the grace to be seen, to be given dignity, to be offered a new life when the world has told them they don't deserve one. This is what Housing First does. It does not say, "Let us fix you so that you can earn a home." It does not say, "Once you prove that you deserve a chance, then we will help you." It simply says, "Here is your home. You are worthy of dignity."

When we receive that kind of grace, it changes us. Like the chronically homeless finding stability, like Mary responding with her whole self, like the sinners, tax collectors, and outcasts who were transformed by Jesus' love—grace leads us not just to be "helped," but to be made new.

When I worked at IHS, I hosted a weekly meeting of Housing First participants. These were people who had lived on the streets for years, often in the darkest of circumstances. They had been dismissed, ignored, pushed aside as lost causes. And yet, within months or even days of entering the program, they became by far the most articulate, creative, and thoughtful group I worked with. They wanted to build community gardens, teach surf lessons to keiki, host Bible studies for those still lost in the darkness. They had become the leaders of their community—not in spite of their pasts, but because they had been given grace to build a new future.

This is why Housing First works. It is not about fish. It is not about fishing lessons. It is about grace. Because grace is what truly transforms. When people are given a chance to lay their burdens down, to be seen as more than their struggles, to be handed back their own dignity—then, and only then, do they thrive.

And isn't that the same for us?

We are all, in some way, like our chronically homeless friends. We spend so much time trying to fix ourselves, trying to prove that we are worthy, trying to make it on our own.

But Jesus tells us something different. He tells us to lay our burdens at His feet. He tells us to stop striving for worthiness because His grace is enough. He invites us to see His beauty and to recognize that we can hand everything over to Him, and He will take care of it.

Because at the end of the day, what we all need—what the chronically homeless need, what the middle-class professional needs, what the struggling parent needs—is not more fish. It's not more fishing lessons. It's the overwhelming, transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

And that grace is the foundation of Housing First. That grace is what makes it work. And that grace is the only thing that can truly change a life, for good.

Jesus tells Judas in John 12 that there is something more valuable than just giving to the poor—there is the act of worship, of surrender, of handing everything over to God's transformative grace. And when we realize that, we see that our own efforts, our own solutions, our own fishing lessons pale in comparison to the power of His love. The greatest thing we can do is not just give people fish, nor even teach them to fish, but to lead them to the One who calms the storm, fills the nets, and offers them new life.

May we be messengers of that grace to ourselves and to others. Amen.