

Hespeler, 10 February, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 138:1-8, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 5:1-11

If there is one thing that these fishers knew, it was that you have got to wash your nets. It doesn't matter how tired you are, how hard you have been working, your shift isn't over until those nets are completely clean. A net is designed to fall swiftly through the water and to fall invisibly over the fish so that they are not frightened away. And after you have been fishing for a few hours (even if you haven't caught a thing, as they hadn't) the net will have scraped the bottom countless times and picked up enough sand and seaweed and shells and bits of dead things that it no longer glides invisibly to the bottom.

Also, they knew from long experience, that a dirty net will not only stink up the whole boat and anyplace you dock it, the filth and gunk will also make the ropes rot and then, before long, you have a tear and a much bigger repair job in front of you. No, they knew that they had to keep their heads down and get the job done. Sure their fingernails hurt from picking the seaweed out of the knots. Yes, they could hardly keep their eyes open, but they had no choice.

When they heard the noise of a large crowd just a little bit up the shoreline – something that just never gathered around these parts – they barely even looked up from their work. But, of course, when somebody began to call out to them, they had to take note. They recognized who it was, of course. It was the man who had been gathering crowds and performing miracles and wonders all over Galilee in recent weeks. They had heard the stories and descriptions more than a few times. But when the man approached, Simon only looked up from his work for a few moments. The man apparently wanted to borrow one of their boats – just for a little while. He wanted Simon to take him out just a little bit from the shore so that he could address the crowd and they could all hear him. Simon shrugged, grunted and quickly did as he had been asked before wading back to shore to crouch again to his work.

And thus we find ourselves in the rather absurd picture that is painted for us in the opening scene of our gospel reading this morning. Jesus of Nazareth, who we know as the Christ and the Son of the living God, is

standing in the bow of a boat and speaking words that I think any one of us would give just about anything to be able to hear firsthand. These are words of life and hope, the very words that will launch a movement that will transform the entire world. Perhaps he is



saying things and telling parables that were not ever recorded and passed down (after all, none of his disciples are listening) and so they are words that have been lost to all history. This is a momentous event. And where are Simon Peter, James and John – the three people who we all know will form the innermost nucleus of this thing that will come to be called the Christian church? They are a little bit down the shore, not really listening; washing their nets.

“Yes, Scott, that is what they are doing,” you will say to me, “but didn’t you just explain to us how important it is to keep your nets clean? Good net hygiene is really important, and you simply cannot stay in business as a fisher without it. You just have to take care of your equipment. They were doing a good thing.” Ah yes, they *were* doing a good thing. But were they doing the *best* thing?

I don’t ask that question this morning for the sake of Simon Peter, James and John alone. This story isn’t about them, not really. The symbolism of this story in the Gospel of Luke is quite clear; they are meant to represent the church. And, in many ways, they are an excellent representation of what we often see in the church. I believe that we do spend a lot of time and energy in the church today – and I’m talking about all the churches here, not just this one – we spend a lot of time cleaning and maintaining our nets.

In the church we are called to be fishers of people. That is the original call that Jesus gives to his disciples in this passage and it is still his call to the church today. But I often get the impression that we put more effort into cleaning our nets – into maintaining our buildings, our programs and our administration. Oh, we are good at holding meetings and forming committees to keep things in place. But I sometimes wonder if while we are so busy cleaning our nets, we might just be missing the very important things that Jesus is saying to the world just a little bit up the beach...

“Hey, how’s it going Simon.” The big fisherman looked up to see a figure looking down upon him – the westering sun behind his head. Simon had been staring so closely at the knots of his net that it took a while for his tired eyes to focus and see that it was the preacher from Nazareth speaking to him again. He looked around to notice that the impromptu lecture by the lake was over and that the crowd had started to move on. Simon assumed that the man had just come back to offer his thanks for the use of the boat so he just muttered a quick “you’re welcome,” and turned immediately back to the piece of seaweed that he just couldn’t get out.

But the man didn’t take the hint. “Hey,” he said, “what do you say we put out into the deeps and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon couldn’t help but roll his eyes. Great, another landlubber who thinks he knows more about fishing than the professionals. He’s going to want to go out and cast the nets a few times and get them all dirty while we catch nothing and then we’ll have to clean them all over again before we can go home. **“Master,”**

he said, **“we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”** But then he caught the strange look in the man’s eye. He clearly didn’t fully understand what this fellow had in mind, but he was filled with a strange desire to find out. **“Yet if you say so,”** Simon said, **“I will let down the nets.”**

But once again, this isn’t just a story about a little fishing expedition that happened with a few men and Jesus one day a long time ago. This is a story about the church. The main characters are the people who will form the core of the early church. The activity of fishing is a common metaphor for the chief work of the church in sharing the gospel. And Jesus even specifically invites Simon to cast his net into “the deep” (that is what the original Greek text literally says) and the deep is a mythological term for the primordial chaos that God is constantly trying to save this world from. This is intended to be a story about our work as the church.

What Jesus is saying to us in the story is, don’t you think it’s time that you got around to doing the work that I called you to do? And what is our response? **“Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing.”** Haven’t you heard, Jesus? We’ve been going about the work of the church for a very long time. We have been here on Queen Street down through the generations. And we have preached the word of God and we have shared God’s love in practical ways, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and sending missionaries out into the world. We have worked hard, Lord, and now we’re tired. In fact, our old fishing methods don’t seem to work so well anymore. It feels like we’ve been working hard all night long with no results. Can’t you just let us wash up our nets and go home? Yes, there’s a pretty good picture of how we often feel in the church in this story.

But there’s something else going on here – something that I think we really need to pay attention to. What have Peter, James and John been doing all of this time? They have been cleaning and maintaining their nets. They have been taking care of the tools that fishermen use. Jesus wants them to use their nets; they are really only interested in maintaining them. In fact, they recognize that what Jesus is asking them to do represents a risk to their beautiful nets – and so it proves. Do you think that it is just a coincidence that by the end of this story their precious nets are all ripped and torn and their beautiful boats are swamped and just about ready to sink? It is no coincidence; it is kind of the point.

In the church, we not only spend an inordinate amount of time cleaning and maintaining our nets; we also spend a whole lot of time worrying about them getting dirty or damaged. “Yes, Scott,” you will say to me, “but didn’t you just explain to us how important it was to keep your nets clean? Good net hygiene is really important and you simply cannot stay in business as a fisher without it. You just have to take care of your equipment.” Yes, that is true, but I think that Jesus would say that if maintaining your nets has

become more important than fishing for people, you have a problem. I think he would say, **“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch,”** even if your nets might tear and get dirty again.”

You know that an enormous amount of ministry to our community happens in and through this building. The hungry are fed and given food to take home to their families. Literally hundreds of pounds of clothing are brought in, sorted and then given out to people who need them. The distressed are counselled. Children are taught about the love of Jesus and given tools for growing in Christ. All of it – all of it creates mess and clutter. All of it, sooner or later, will lead to something being broken or chipped or stained. And every so often somebody will say to me (or maybe to you), don’t you think it is terrible that there is so much ministry going on here that our nets are beginning to break and our boat is beginning to swamp? Well, they don’t put it exactly like that. They say, “isn’t it terrible that this church isn’t always tidy and clean?” But it actually means the same thing. And I get that keeping your nets clean is really important, but Jesus didn’t say, “Simon, let’s keep those nets squeaky clean.” Jesus said, **“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”**

By all means, let us take care of our nets. We have inherited them from the people who have gone before us and they are a wonderful gift. But we’ve received them for a reason, and that reason is not merely so that they might be clean and tidy. We have been given them so that they might be risked in the deep water of this world. We have been given them so that they might be used to pull people out of those deeps and so that they might have the chance to truly experience the love of Christ in word and in deed. We have been given them to fish for people. Simon, get up off of your knees, stop worrying so much about your nets and let’s go!