



“Casting out the Nets”

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson this afternoon comes from Luke chapter five, the first 11 verses. It is the call of the first disciples. Up until this point, Jesus has been moving through his brief ministry, teaching and healing on his own, though he was beginning to attract a large crowd of onlookers. "Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

I wonder if it was a hot day when Simon Peter- that is the Peter we would grow to know quite well in this gospel- Peter before he was a disciple- working guy Peter- was putting up his nets for the day with his fellow fishermen. It is easy to imagine. Peter is at the docks, the sun rising in the sky after a night of fruitless work so that it's rays beam right in his eyes, making him squint. Heat starting to set in and the dew on the bank drying up. Back and shoulders aching from the repetitive motion of throwing out the net, hands worn from dragging it up time and again, exhausted- because you know it was one of those days- where the smell of fish is thick in the air, but the hulls of the ships stand empty and the docks are dry. It is one of those days that are just unproductive enough to put some extra pressure on the next to supply the demand. This would be a day that was hardly worth the salt now sinking into the tightly twisted ropes in the net- that, no matter how clean you got it, would soon dry and cut into the twine like tiny shards of glass- so you actually lost some ground today. Once again, casting out the nets and coming up empty.

It may have been with vague interest that Peter noted the crowd coming. Perhaps his heart beat a little faster when he saw Jesus, who had actually just recently healed his sick mother in law. This poor guy can't get away from the crowds. Use my boat? He asks. Might as well- apparently not using it for anything else. I wonder what Jesus' words would have sounded like to him- a strange discourse on the kingdom of God or something like that. What on earth does he mean? And then, "When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." I think Peter's response to Jesus is pretty tame here, actually. If I had just powered down my computer after hours of staring at a blank screen where a sermon should be sitting and someone said to me, 'come on and fire it back up again- give it another go, do you have any ideas now?' I would probably tell them to go fish. But Peter's response is very cool here- if not a bit resigned, "Master we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." What an interesting model of obedience here- 'Jesus, just so that you know, I've tried all this before- believe me, I know my craft and we've worked

darn hard yet, if you say so, I will let down the nets'. It is a real simple act of faith- though he wouldn't probably have called it such at the time. These nets are big, the night has been long, I'm hungry and hot, and we've fished these waters for hours, everything is cleaned up, but if you say so, Jesus, I will let down the nets. I just want you to know that I'm prepared to come up empty again, but hey, what have we got to lose, right?

It is not lost on us, particularly as a Wednesday worshipping crowd, that this sentiment of Simon Peter's happens as a matter of course in his work day. It must have been a lake he had been on a hundred times before. A fisherman in a fishing town. Letting down his nets in familiar water, but having an off day. What if this story suggests something of our own lives- of the way we have been fishing without any luck? Putting in the nets and coming up empty?¹ At some point, as it did for Peter, it can become a matter of unfortunate expectation. In his weekly web offering the Tuesday Tip, Dr. Alan Zimmerman touches on this notion of the day to day drawing up empty in the workplace by poking fun at the contrast of what things should be like, and what their reality really is. He jokes, "You'll seldom, if ever, hear employees say such things as: 'I love my boss so much I'd gladly work for him for free.'" "I'm going to run down to the cafeteria and ask the cook for one of his recipes." "To me, 'The customer is always right' is not just a saying; it's a way of life." "Boy, I wish I could make coffee as good as that vending machine on the third floor." "I wish they'd find more for me to do. I'm starting to get bored around here." "The boss wanted to give me a raise but I said, 'Let's wait until I really deserve it.'" "Don't you just love Monday mornings?" "I don't want the promotion if it's going to make my coworkers envious." and, finally, "I don't want this ever to happen again, that you take up an office collection and forget to ask me to contribute."²

We laugh about it because it is true- sadly true- that we come to expect so little from our work. We so often put in our nets and expect to come up empty. And not just in our work, but in our lives as well. "Master we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." What do a spirit, a stomach, and a net have in common? They can all feel pretty empty at times. We can all feel pretty empty in these times. When the repetitive motions of our lives aren't pulling in what they really ought. When the day to day isn't reaping the reward as we'd hoped. When the routines of our relationships somehow don't bring in the response they used to from a loved one. When we have mastered our craft, but grow weary of the motions. We've all cast a few nets in our time, haven't we? And seen them come up, to our disappointment, empty.

Even our society casts it's net over familiar waters, expecting to pull in a bounty as a culture and a country, but the headlines and harsh realities suggest that it too pulls in something far short not only of it's goal, but of what it needs to survive. Just when I think we've pulled in all the lessons from the civil rights movement, I hear stories from the frontline of the relief efforts in Mississippi of hatred and violence among races and realize that that which we seek alludes us still today and yet we've become resigned and weary of casting out the net, of seeking a still

¹ Rev. Dr. John Killinger treats this beautifully in his sermon on change titled, "*Learning to Fish in a New Place*," broadcast on PBS channel 11 in Chicago in 1992. Transcripts available.

²Dr. Alan Zimmerman, *Tuesday Tip #272*. Available online.

better way. I was feeling pretty good that women had made progress as equals in our society when, just before joining you for worship last week, my computer speakers picked up the stray cb radio frequency of a worker in one of the construction sites around the church and I found myself suddenly overhearing a conversation about sexual slavery alive and well and right here in North Carolina and yet we have already hung up our nets because we believe we've pulled in all there is to be caught in these waters this day. Even if it is nothing. And as the list goes on and on I realize that this story of Peter's night of fruitless fishing speaks to us on so many levels because in so many ways we find ourselves laboring so hard, casting out our nets and hauling them in time and again, and Jesus, we've fished these waters before and we're coming up empty here. How is it going to be any different with you in our boat?

But it is different. And somehow, in some way, Peter knows it. "When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink." It seems almost absurd- the effects of that same act of lowering the net in the same place - only this time, with Christ in the boat and at his cue. Christ, calling in a time of abundance and blessing that extends far beyond the pregnant nets now creaking under the weight of their load, Christ intersecting in the routine of Peter's day and ushering in the kind of fulfillment of an expectation that cannot be brought about with skill, but only with an awareness of the one who he would now call Lord, and an obedience to his calling. Let down your nets for a catch- even if you've done it a million times before, only this time, do it with your attention on me, follow my lead, do not doubt, do not fear, and watch what happens. And it transformed his life. And instead of cashing in his bounty, Peter, with James and John cashed in their lives to follow this man who was bringing in the fish. Because he saw that life could be very different with him. Peter experienced Christ so dramatically transforming the potential of an act as simple as casting out his net that he was gripped by his own sinfulness and saw that in no way was he counted worthy of the blessing that Jesus had given him to bring in and he fell on his knees, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

The commentaries speak at length about the blessing of the fish, but say little about the strength of the disciple then and now who obeys Christ's call to allow for the fact that the ordinary can be transformed, to put in the net once again even when no hope for blessing is in sight, to cast the net wide once again though we've covered this tired ground before, though muscles ache and hands are sore. Though hearts are heavy and we don't see how casting out our nets one more time can supply all that we will need for the day, let alone a lifetime and beyond. But the call to Peter and to us is to revisit those places that we once thought were empty, and watch for the way Christ, in the way only Christ can do, suddenly makes them teeming with life. But only if we will cast out our nets again and again, even when we feel we're the ones being hung out to dry, to cast them out by his command yet again. And just wait and see what we'll pull up. For God's kingdom is reaching into our lives and this world each and every moment. A vocation gone stale can be bustling with life. The routine of a relationship can make all things new. The shame of society can be brought into the light. For there is transformation just below

the surface of all that we see in Christ Jesus, if we can seek the wisdom and find the strength to just pull it in. And for all that is offered all that is asked in return is that we not be afraid, but stand and follow him. Amen.