

NETTING A DREAM

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Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

“Simon answered, ‘Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.’”
Luke 5:5

“He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy’s parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry either the coiled lines or the gaff and harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert.”

Those lines are from Ernest Hemingway’s famous novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago, the old man in the story — the one whose sail hung limp, like a “flag of permanent defeat” — goes on to catch a single, enormous fish, a marlin. But it’s too large to haul into his small boat. He does the only thing he can: he

lashes it to the side of the boat and begins the long journey home. On the way, sharks swim up and tear off huge chunks of the precious fish. He tries to scare them off by hitting them with his oar, but there are too many of them.

By the time he arrives at the harbor, there's little left of his triumph. Dropping the skeleton on the shore, he enters his hut and collapses in exhaustion. His neighbors see it, and realize what a feat Santiago has accomplished. He has their respect: but they ache with him on account of his failure.

A Loser's Lament: and a Winner's Astonishment

Simon, no doubt, is thinking of failure, that morning by the lakeshore. He and his companions have just finished an exhausting night of fishing. Again and again they hauled in their heavy nets. Each time, they picked through the netting hopefully, but found not a single fish worth keeping. They've known bad days in the past, but few as bad as this one.

The only positive feature about this day is the scene unfolding a short distance away. Jesus of Nazareth is standing by the lakeshore. Simon has the utmost respect for this man, who's recently healed his mother-in-law. Simon's a bit concerned that the eager crowd, pressing in from three sides, is threatening to back Jesus right into the water.

Just then Jesus looks over to him. Their eyes meet in recognition.

Interrupting his teaching, Jesus walks the short distance over to the stretch of sand where Simon's boat is beached.

He climbs in, and asks Simon to push off into the lake. "Why not?" thinks the fisherman. "The net-mending can wait." He scoops up his nets, drops them into the boat, and along with his mates pushes off. They drop the anchor-stone just a few feet from shore. The crowd closes in, standing at the water's edge. The rabbi resumes his teaching, from the traditional sitting position.

When he's finished, Jesus turns to Simon and says this: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."

To a seasoned mariner like Simon, this sounds like foolishness. It's far too late in the day for good fishing: and this has already proven to be a *terrible* day for fishing. "Master," he objects, "we have worked all night long but have caught nothing."

But then the reckless "Why not?" rises to the top of Simon's mind: "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." He beckons to James and John, and together they sail the two boats away from shore, out toward the middle of the lake.

Very likely they have a two-boat fishing system. It's not a matter of just throwing out a net and pulling it back, like casting a fishing line and reeling it in.

They link up their nets, using their two boats, to create a large, circular impoundment area. If they're lucky, as they tighten the circle, they'll see the school of silvery fish roil the surface of the water.

But this — this is different from anything they've ever catch is enormous. Too big for one boat, and even for the two boats together. So many flopping, silvery fish that the boats are riding low in the water. In all his years on the lake, Simon has never seen anything like this.

“Who is this man?” he asks himself. “And who am I, to deserve such a mighty sign?”

A cascade of memories rolls over him in an instant. Simon remembers who he is. Regret is piled upon regret. He kneels in the bilgewater, bowing his head to the teacher's knees: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”

The rabbi only smiles. His voice is gentle: “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” It's not so much an invitation, as a statement of fact.

Days later, some relatives of Simon, and of his partners James and John, show up to claim the two fishing boats: and the precious nets. Their owners will no longer be needing them.

Jesus Doesn't Take Volunteers

There was a miracle on the lake that day: a miraculous catch of fish. Even more miraculous is Jesus' other catch: three Galilean fishermen, who leave their nets and follow him.

Who would have thought it? Simon, James and John — three ordinary men. They're not the sort of people you'd think would drop everything and set off on a spiritual quest. But they do. They do it not because of anything extraordinary in themselves, but because of the extraordinary Lord who's come into their lives.

This story of Jesus' calling of his first disciples has several things to teach us about our own spiritual lives. The first is that *Jesus doesn't take volunteers*.

That may sound astonishing to anyone who's been around church for a while, and has heard those perpetual calls for volunteers — as we ourselves have just finished doing, lining up those folks to host our Interfaith Hospitality Network guests. But think about it: do you ever read of Jesus saying, in the scriptures, “We need a few volunteers...?”

He certainly doesn't make any appeal like that in today's passage. Instead of asking for volunteers, Jesus simply climbs into Simon's boat. Luke does tell us he “asks” Simon to take him out into the lake: but the fact that he's already sitting in the boat shows he's got a pretty clear idea of what Simon's answer's going to be.

The same is true with his calling of the fishermen to be disciples. Notice Jesus doesn't make a general announcement, "I'm looking for some volunteers to join my team." He doesn't even have a snappy slogan, like the Marine Corps' "We're looking for a few good men." No, Jesus just turns to Simon and says, "...from now on you will be catching people."

Sometimes, we in the church depend a little too much on volunteers. When something needs doing, we make a general announcement — then hope against hope someone comes forward. Very often, those who do come forward are "the usual suspects" — those who typically volunteer for everything.

Yet if — as we do believe — Christian service is a matter of God's call, not the goodness of our hearts, then maybe we ought to stop talking about volunteers altogether. Maybe we should talk, instead, of God's call. Maybe we ought to say, "We have a need for some teachers in the Sunday school, or for some more members of the choir, or someone to help serve the SHIPS' Galley meals — and we're trusting God's calling the right person to do that, at this very moment. Maybe the right person is *you*."

The church is not a voluntary organization. Now, in some respects it may resemble the various service clubs that are out there in the community, but in reality it's very different. Those who follow Jesus Christ as members of the church

do not volunteer: they're called. Jesus doesn't want volunteers: what he wants are disciples.

Jesus Is Looking For Failures

And where does he find those disciples? From the ranks of those who have failed, in one way or another. That's the second message this text has for us today.

Of course this runs against the logic of every other organization you can think of. Take the Army, for instance. The Army has recruiting offices all over this great land, and staffs them with specially-trained warrant officers who are taught what to look for in potential soldiers. Once there was a time when the Army took just about any able-bodied individual — even those who had dropped out of high school — but those days are long gone. All that high-tech equipment requires men and women of a certain level of ability to operate it. The Army has standards, and they're getting higher all the time.

Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is not especially interested in credentials or experience. Look at what he does with Simon: he takes this failed fisherman, who hasn't been able to bring in a single fish all night, and shows him where to cast his net to bring in a massive catch. This miracle so spooks Simon that he falls on his knees right there in the boat.

Jesus, thankfully, ignores that request. He stays. And more than that, he tells Simon that henceforth he's going to be catching people.

There's a cartoon that was published in the the *New Yorker* some years back. You know that classic children's story, *The Little Engine That Could?* (It's the story of a little steam locomotive that has to climb a massive hill, and manages to do so by repeating over and over to itself, "I think I can, I think I can" — you know the story). Well, this cartoon was captioned, "The Little Engine That Coulda Woulda Shoulda." Rather than looking determined and resolute, this little engine is looking sad and forlorn. It's saying to itself, "I knew I could, so why didn't I?"

In looking for disciples, Jesus doesn't seek out the expert, the self-sufficient, the skilled practitioner. Rather, he calls those who have failed. That failure (as defined by the world's standards) he transforms into success (by heaven's standards). In the words of the Medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich: "If there be anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe from falling, I know nothing of it — for it was not shown me. But this was shown — that in falling and rising again we are always kept in the same precious love."¹

¹*Revelations of Divine Love.*

Jesus Is Looking for Us...To Take a Risk

The final thing we can say about Jesus' teaching in this passage has to do with how to take the next step in our journey of faith. In a word, he invites us to risk, taking one step at a time.

This is something Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who resisted Hitler and gave his life for it, knew well. Bonhoeffer writes, reflecting on this very story of Jesus' calling of the first disciples: "Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if [people] imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics...Although Peter cannot achieve his own conversion, he can leave his nets."²

Whenever we hear that quiet, insistent inner voice — that whisper — suggesting that maybe we are the one to respond to God's call and meet a particular need, the hardest part of the whole process is taking that first step. How easy and even pleasant it is to contemplate how wonderful it is that God is speaking to us! How attractive it is to call ourselves Christians on account of things we believe — while, all the while, those beliefs of ours bear little relation to how

²*The Cost of Discipleship* (Simon & Schuster, 1995) 63,65.

we're actually living! We may resolve, again and again, to take that step and do something for God — but somehow never quite get around to it.

Some of you met my friend Bill Carter, who brought his jazz band, Presbybop, to play at my installation service last spring. Bill's both a pastor and a jazz musician. He was interviewed once for an article about jazz in the church. He shared an insight he's learned from his music, about this whole subject of taking risks in the Christian life:

“The act of playing jazz, like daily life, is an informed risk. Improvisation happens through nimble fingers, serious training in music theory and form, and a willingness to jump into uncharted territory. It takes disciplined, technical preparation to play this music, and it also requires the freedom to take enormous risks. You work hard to lift the music from the page and release it into the air. Yet there is always a safety net of grace. If a musician hits a sour note or flubs a rhythm, it cannot be replayed, only forgiven. There will be another opportunity to play better notes on another day. These basic characteristics of jazz make it particularly congenial to the life of Christian faith.”³

A jazz musician would never perform a single number, were it not for the willingness to risk that first note. When Jesus speaks kindly to Simon there in his fishing boat and tells him, “From now on you will be catching people,” Simon could well have procrastinated away any response on his part. But he doesn't do

³*Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 1998.

that. There's something about that bond, that connection, he feels with this man he will soon call "Master" that allows him to take that risk.

Maybe that will prove true for you, as well. Remember: Jesus isn't looking for volunteers, for people who have certain skills and are proud to offer them. He's looking for failures: for those who aren't at all sure they have what he's looking for, but who are — for some inexplicable reason — willing to trust him enough to take a risk and see if he will indeed supply what they need.

Maybe Jesus is calling to you today. And maybe today is the time when you will get up and follow!

Charge and Benediction

**May blessings abundant surround you this day.
May your nets be filled to overflowing.
May your life reflect such gratitude, such joy,
that, as you go forth into the world,
your light will shine on everyone you meet.
May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you now and always!**

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