

John 21:1-14

“I’m going fishing,” said Peter. And why not? It made perfect sense. It was after Easter. The disciples were told to wait for Jesus in Galilee. But did they have to wait by sitting and doing nothing? Fishing was their livelihood. They may as well make some money while waiting. So they all piled into a boat and shoved off. They were out on the water all night, but they didn’t catch even one fish. They weren’t using poles, hooks, and worms. They were dragging their net through the water. If there were fish in those waters, their net would have caught them. But nothing was caught; not one solitary fish.

Now it was early dawn. They were tired, likely exhausted. A voice from the shore calls out: *“Do you have any fish?”* Argh! If these had not been God-fearing men, the curse words might have flowed from their mouths at this point. Instead, they were forced to admit their utter defeat: *“No!”* they called back, certainly with disgust and frustration.

Friends, you and I have fished in those same waters, haven’t we? We’ve put everything into a marriage to make it wonderful, but in the end our net came back empty. We’ve invested blood, sweat, and time into a job, but the company downsized and our net came back empty. We’ve fished all night in those very same waters - building relationships with family members only to be hurt, putting our money into “safe” investments only to learn they weren’t as safe as we were told, putting our time and energy into building up the congregation only to see the numbers and giving drop.

Those disciples have nothing on us. We rally together with the words, *“Let’s go fishing!”* But when the call comes from the shore, *“Do you have any fish?”* we, too, are forced to admit defeat. Our net, time and again, comes back empty.

It’s good for us to take note here who it is that calls from the shore. It’s Jesus, the Risen Lord. The disciples did not recognize Him. This was God’s doing. In their defeat, frustration, anger, helplessness, and whatever else was there with them in the boat, their eyes were closed to the fact that it was the Lord Himself who was calling out to them.

Their eyes were closed, but not their ears. *“Cast the net on the right side of the boat,”* called Jesus, *“and you will find some (fish).”* Now had they known that it was Jesus, they certainly would have done as He told them. But they didn’t know. They were kept from recognizing Him. And so we see their faith taking over. For had they really thought through that call from the shore, they would have utterly rejected the idea as pure nonsense. They had been fishing in those waters all night with nothing to show for it. How foolish to suggest that tossing out their net now on the right side of the boat would yield success! They’d been there and done that hour after hour until their bodies ached. Had they stopped to consider the words spoken from the shore, they surely would have laughed them off and gone back home with their empty net.

But the call of the Risen Lord addressed their faith. He gave them both command and promise. *“Cast the net...and you will find.”* They acted in faithful obedience because that’s what faith does. It responds to the call of Jesus. It hears and obeys, even when that which is called out seems utterly foolish.

And so God makes certain that our nets, time and again, come back empty. He has purpose in this. He is wanting to defeat us; to bring us to the point of utter helplessness so that our faith will respond to the call of the Risen Christ. It’s His Christians whom He wants to struggle in this life. If you and I were catching fish right and left with no trouble at all, we would pay no attention to the voice calling from the shore. We would not listen to the Risen Christ nor would we have need of Him.

And so God must defeat us again and again. A wonderful marriage cannot come too easy. Raising children is difficult. Paying the bills is sometimes impossible. Trying to fill up the church pews and offering plates is completely frustrating and hopeless. We throw out our nets into these waters, but God makes sure that our nets come back empty, because faith does not listen to the Risen Lord until every other part of us has been utterly defeated.

This is where the disciples were at. Their bodies had no strength remaining in them, and they knew there were no fish in those waters. So now it was time for their faith to take over. But faith cannot act on its own. Jesus called out first with command and promise. And in response, these exhausted men did as He said, and they caught so many fish that they could not bring them into the boat.

If God has brought you to the point of defeat so that your net is coming back empty, it's time to listen to the voice calling from the shore. That voice belongs to your Risen Lord. He gives you both command and promise: "*Cast your net,*" He commands, "*on the right side of the boat...and you will,*" He promises, "*find some fish.*" The right side...where is that? we wonder. Haven't we been fishing correctly? What does He mean - the right side of the boat?

The right side is where Jesus directs your life. The right side is where He has attached His promises. To fish on the right side of the boat is to live your life in Word, Sacrament, and prayer.

But we've been fishing in these waters!(we say); we do all of these things! Faith doesn't "do" the Word of God. It doesn't "do" the Sacrament. Faith cannot do without God's Word. It lives by that Word. It feeds upon Christ's body and blood. And it finds itself in prayer often.

God does not make empty promises. There isn't a marriage here, a relationship here, that cannot be strengthened, benefited, saved by the letting down of our nets in Word and prayer together. There isn't a financial crisis, a health problem, a job issue, a concern of any kind that God will not lead us through as we let down our nets into Word, and Sacrament, and prayer. That congregational meeting next Sunday? We would have no need for it if we, as a congregation, pastor and members together, let out our nets into God's Word on a regular basis, into His Sacrament faithfully, and into prayer often. We would not be able to haul our net into the boat, it would be so full of fish.

God's promises stand sure and steadfast, but they are not given just anywhere and everywhere. Had the disciples let out their net on the left side of the boat, it would have come back empty. The promise of fish was attached to where Jesus placed it - the right side of the boat.

Our nets will continue to come back to us empty until we learn to trust the call and invitation of the Risen Christ. God's true blessings for your life, marriage, and family are given through the Word only. Our congregation will not grow in strength or in numbers unless we cast our nets on the right side into God's Word together.

Faith acts on what God commands and promises. The problem is not with God, but with us. He is calling, but we're not listening. That's why our Lord, three days before He rose, walked the road to the cross. Because, though none of us were listening, His Father in heaven was. And so He called out to Him: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" This is why the Risen Christ called from the shore to His disciples. This is why they hauled in so many fish. And this is why Jesus calls to you today out of love. Because your Father in heaven listened to the voice of His Son from the cross. Every one of you is forgiven. Every sin in your life is fully pardoned for Jesus' sake. Whether you have been faithful, or faithless, God forgives you because He listened to Jesus on your behalf.

And now every blessing that flows from the cross is given by your Risen Lord on the right side of the boat. The world will never know these blessings. But for you, Jesus has every blessing to give.

And so, from time to time, because we so quickly and so easily, turn away from Word, Sacrament, and prayer, our Lord calls from the shore, "*Do you have any fish?*" Ah, yes! Our nets have indeed been coming back empty. But then He always follows with the kind call and invitation, "*Cast your net on the right side and you will find some fish.*" And because we are His disciples, we will listen and act in faithful obedience, and our nets will come back to us full. Amen.