

Can you hear the mutterings of the tired fisherman? “What did he say? Go out again when we have worked all night but caught nothing! Why? Why would we go out again?” Remember, these fellows are not sport fishing. This is how they made their living, fed their families, paid their taxes. It was their business to know the mood, the temper, the possibilities and even the dangers of the large body of water they fished. They were professionals, but their nets were empty. They had worked hard, and still their boats were empty. In spite of a lifetime spent working on the water, they went ashore that day empty netted.

Life is like that sometimes, isn't it? A good education and an excellent work ethic do not guarantee a successful venture. We expect the foolish, the lazy, the incompetent to fail; it is almost a foregone conclusion. But we have seen the wise, the strong, the sincere, the well prepared and well intentioned end up with little or nothing to show for their dedicated efforts. Life is like that sometimes, and it is almost cruel to suggest their failure as fishermen is a result of incompetence or a lack of effort or bad equipment. For all of us who are “fishing on the moving waters of life”, there are times of disappointment, defeat, failure and this despite our best efforts. Life is unpredictable. There is an unknown quality, a mysterious variable that eludes our grasp. We have worked all night but caught nothing! Words we have muttered aloud, or shouted out ourselves.

Like the fishermen that day long ago, we see the empty boat as a sign of failure, and there is some truth in that. We live in a world that measures success or the lack of success by the amount of fish in the boat, money in the bank, people in the pews. A successful fisherman could feed his family, sustain the household, and be a helpful friend to neighbors in need. An empty net defeats a hope of living well. When Jesus instructs the empty-netted fishermen to go out again, he isn't denying their real world, real time experiences and concerns for family, friends and neighbors. Nor do I think he reprimands them for not working hard enough, which is what I would expect because I was raised in Western PA where I was taught hard work is all that it takes. Do it again. Do it harder if you can't do it better.

I have been a Presbyterian from the cradle, and I expect I will be a Presbyterian when I die. There are others here this morning who can say the same. We have been working for the Lord through the years, through the decades, and maybe this morning the boat, the church, feels a little empty, as if our well intentioned and carefully executed efforts have failed to produce our desired result, even with that Protestant Work Ethic voice whispering “Do it again, but harder this time with more intensity, more desire.” I am in a bit of a quandary this morning, because I do believe in working hard for the Lord, in taking the more challenging road of Christian discipleship in an age of easy answers and quick fixes. There is value still in a life devoted to Jesus.. So how does all of that more traditional, typical Christian Presbyterian behavior match up with the Gospel this morning? The obvious answer is to put out again into the deep and get to work on the other side of the boat . . . as if fish know port from starboard.

Jesus said, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch” That was simple enough for Simon Peter, James and John to do. It was their old and familiar way to fish. Jesus offered nothing new in the way they should fish - no fancy technique for casting the nets; no new state

of the art fish finder equipment. I learned a lesson on the limits of shiny new equipment when I was playing a lot of ping pong in college. I had purchased a new, expensive paddle - Swedish style 5 ply 2 mm inverted pimple paddle. If you play ping pong, you know what this is. Now I had a friend, Eric, who just shook his head in dismay when I was showing off my new paddle. "David, he said, "it may be a \$25.00 paddle, but it is only a \$2.00 hand." Eric's point - new equipment is no shortcut for practice, for learning the skill of a backhand slam, or the strategy of serving. Eric's insight applies to our life as a church. Of course, the church needs to use new technologies when appropriate, and use them in ways that catch the attention of the worldly and prompt their response in faith. But, there is no shortcut for the practice of our faith through regular worship, learning how to pray, acknowledging our sin and accepting God's forgiveness, teaching and preaching the Gospel of grace - of God's timeless love - for this generation.

We all know the temptation. Sometimes church life is difficult. The routine of worship can appear dull. The predictable celebrations of the holidays can be monotonous. We may feel a futility and a tiredness, and our church work may have taken a good deal out of us. There may be days when we wonder if this church has any value in the community, if our witness would be stronger if we were a younger congregation, a wealthier congregation. The world says, "You have lost our attention. You are no longer attractive. We aren't entertained. Move aside and let others please us. Make room for something better, more modern, more contemporary." We are tempted to believe the world's message and drop out.

Do we need to place more trust in the possibility that God's timeless love is found in the day to day routines of church life? In the ordinary devotion of our individual Christian lives? Those fishermen long ago did as they had done before, time after time, day after day, in the same boat, with the same nets, using their same skills and techniques, and this time they succeeded beyond their expectations. The arena of their success was the site of their previous disappointment. The only new quality to their success was their willingness to trust Jesus. That is all, and in the wonderful, amazing, strange mystery that is life with Jesus, it was enough.

In the weeks ahead of us, I will ask you what you believe your church needs to grow your faith - not only to maintain your Christian witness but to increase your footprint in West Akron. There is a wide range of possible replies, isn't there, based upon our Presbyterian tradition and practice: more skill in Bible study, more diligence in prayer, more patience in God's providence, more generous giving. All are good, and this morning's Gospel lesson offers this - hearts attuned to the voice of the Lord speaking to us in the ordinary, mundane, sometimes frustrating days of our lives. Ours will be the work to do, but the miracle belongs to Jesus. And friends, the world needs the miracle of a believing, trusting, working church. Amen.