

“Empty Nets”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Luke 5:1-11*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Over the years here in Auburn, I have developed a sacred ritual after shoveling snow, in honor of this special time in communion with nature. I walk through the front door of our home, my coat covered in glistening snow, and... collapse onto the floor, and lie there, prostrate on the ground, often for many minutes, occasionally making sounds that resemble a dying animal. I used to think—back when I still believed in love—that my wife Jenna would come help me, maybe say some nice words to me, but no, she just leaves me there. Every time. Emerson, on the other hand, loves to help. Except Emerson’s version of helping involves him laughing hysterically, as I open my eyes to see 40 pounds of child leaping onto my body, over and over again, thus completing my ritual of gratitude for Central New York winters.

There’s a video I relate to called “The Five Stages of Shoveling Snow.” It begins with a man putting on his winter clothes, effusive and smiling, as he says, “I’m excited. Go outside, get a little fresh air, maybe say hi to the neighbors, get a little exercise.” This is Stage One: Pre-Shovel Optimism. He goes outside and comments on how beautiful the day is and how it’s just a part of living in the Midwest that you have to shovel your driveway.

Soon, however, he is coughing and choking, his nose is running, the wind is making his eyes water. This is Stage Two: Face Leaking Fluids.

Next, he’s unzipping his coat and ripping clothes off, as he says, “Oh my God, I put too many layers on.” This is Stage Three: Full Body Sweat.

Before you know it, he’s barely even lifting the shovel; he’s trying to use his feet somehow to help lift the shovel full of snow, and he’s complaining about his back. This is Stage Four: Slipping a Disc in Your Back. He groans, “I’m not going to be able to walk tomorrow.”

At last, he shouts at the heavens, “Why do I live here?” This is Stage Five: Complete and Utter Defeat. At this point, he has collapsed into the snow, is lying there, motionless, as he says, “Hopefully someone finds me here. I’m just going to lay here for a little bit. Oh my face hurts just from the air... It’s never going to be warm again. I’ll never see summer. This is where I die.” The video ends with the man crawling on all fours, trying to get back to the house, as he says, “Well, I think that’s enough shoveling for one day. I basically got it,” as the camera pans over many feet of snow still un-shoveled.

Shoveling snow: it does something to your spirit. “Crushes it” is probably the phrase I’m looking for. It’s much like what I imagine the fishermen in today’s story were feeling.

Picture it with me: two little boats, bobbing on the dark waters, waves lapping the sides, lit only by the moon. Men stand in the boats, their shoulders hunched, pain rocketing through their backs, as they fling wide their nets once again into the water. They wait, hope burning a hole through them. At last, they drag the nets back into the boat, wet and dripping, but empty. It's been like that all night long: not a single fish caught. With every empty net, fear creeps further onto their faces—this isn't just their business; this is what they and their children will eat that day. No fish means empty bellies. They try different parts of the lake. They use every skill and instinct they have. And still, the nets are empty.

At last, they pull their boats ashore and begin the laborious task of cleaning their nets, hunger and failure sitting in their bellies like stones.

I think we all, at various times in our lives, have found ourselves also on that dark lake, casting our nets, only to find them empty. The world told us that if you just work hard, do the right things, be a good person, then good things will happen. But that's not always true, is it? Sometimes you do everything right, and the nets still come back empty.

A Scout can spend all day cleaning up litter along miles of road, only to find more the next day. You try to make the world a better place, try to be a faithful Christian and grow the church, make a family and find friends, learn and work, and sometimes, it just doesn't seem to make a difference. The lake is too vast. The fish too few.

It's precisely at this moment—when we've beached our boats and prepared to give up—that Jesus enters our story in Luke. He says something completely counter-intuitive. He says, *Get back out there. Lower your nets again.* The fishermen are thinking: this is pointless; we've been at this all night. What's one more try going to do?

I mean, isn't that the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Except, Albert Einstein (the supposed author of that quote) never said that. And that whole "doing things over and over again," that's sort of the foundation of science and experimentation, of music and rhythm, of social progress and revolution, of humanity. We achieve, because we persist. We keep trying. We keep going back out there, and picking up that litter. We keep loving, even when it's not returned. We keep speaking for equality and justice, even when it seems like no one's listening. We keep showing up here on Sunday mornings, even when most of the world seems to have forgotten God. And because we persist, we know something that a world of resignation and desperation has forgotten: hope.

It was hope that drove the likes of Galileo and Gandhi and Michelangelo, of every great mind and person we've ever admired, of every Scout and Christian—that if we are true enough, brave enough, kind enough, curious enough, what we do will matter.

Lower your nets, says Jesus. Lower them again and again and again, and never stop. When cruel cynicism is the world's sanity, insane is the only way to be.

Believe. Have hope. Ride the waves of that lake till kingdom come, if you must. But do not come ashore. Do not surrender.

As Luke tells it, the fishermen—though skeptical—cast their nets again, and lo and behold, their nets come up full, bursting with fish. Jesus doesn't say when that will happen. It may be tomorrow, or next year; it may not even be in this lifetime. It may be generations to come, like Moses who never stepped foot in the Promised Land.

Jesus tells them: "Do not be afraid."

He says, "From now on you will be catching people." One person loved is all the result we need. Who knows what could grow from that? Who knows how much of the world could be fed on that?

We never know when our nets will rise full. We never know when or how our actions will have an impact. But Jesus' assurance is that, as long as we keep dipping our nets, as long as we keep ministering in his name, our work will matter. It will change lives. It will communicate love. It will rescue the lost. It will speak the truth.

Everything we do—from worship to soup kitchens to justice advocacy to writing cards to helping our children to our daily interactions and exchanges of kindness to Scouting—makes a difference, even if we don't always see it, if it takes years for the difference to grow and become visible. Every day, the net is becoming fuller.

There is an adaptation of sayings from the Jewish Talmud, which goes like this: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Jesus never minimizes the pain of the empty net. He, who bore the cross, whose disciples betrayed him, whose people misunderstood him, whose ministry seemed to accomplish so little in his brief life, he should surely know. But he promises us that we will not cast our nets alone. He climbs into our little, shaky boat, and casts his nets beside us. God is with us in the boat. God is in the kindness that we do, the courage and the truth-seeking and the reverence. If we had but eyes to see, we would realize that the nets are full before they even hit the water; they are full of God.

We are the throwers, the fishers of God, tossing love and life into the world. And though we may not always see it, or know it, God's right there tossing it back to us, making us team with wriggling fish and Spirit enough to feed everyone. **Amen.**