

United Church in the Valley: March 31, 2019
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Making Space for the Struggle
"...of New Directions"

Note: Part III of this series, *Making Space for the Struggle "...of Living with Less,"* was a sermon shared by a congregation member.

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 43:18-21:

"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.
 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
 I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.
 The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls,
 because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people,
 my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise....."

John 21:1-14:

Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the sea of Galilee. It happened in this way:
 Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, the sons of Zebedee and two other disciples were together.
 "I'm going fishing," Simon Peter told them, and they said "We'll go with you."
 So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore,
 but the disciples did not realize that it was the risen Christ.
 He called out to them, "Friends, have you caught any fish?"
 "No," they answered.
 Jesus said, "Throw your net on the *other* side of the boat, and you will find some."

When they did, the disciples were unable to haul the net into the boat,
 because of the large number of fish.

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"
 Immediately, Simon Peter wrapped his outer garment around him, and jumped into the water.
 The other disciples followed in the boat,
 towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore.

When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals on the beach,
 complete with some fish and some bread.
 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."
 Simon Peter climbed aboard and helped to haul the net ashore.
 It was full of large fish, 153 in all, but even then, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."

None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" for they knew it was the Lord.
 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

Sermon:

Until the day that Jesus came along
Peter, Andrew, James and John
were fishermen.

They fished along the Sea of Galilee,
it was the only way they knew to be,
for you see, it was their family trade
the way they'd *always* made their living
a familiar routine of constantly filling
their nets and their days.
Fishing was all that they knew how to do,
it was what they had grown up with too,
they comfortably followed in the footsteps
of those that came before,
until the day that Jesus
would call them from the shore.

In Chapter 4
of the Gospel of Matthew it says
that *“As Jesus was walking beside the
Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers,
Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew.
They were casting a net into the lake,
for they were fishermen.
“Come, follow me!” Jesus called out,
“and I will make you fishers of people!
In other words,
“I will show you how to catch something more.
Let me show you a new way to be.”*

*At once, the brothers named Peter and Andrew
left their nets and followed Jesus.*

*Going on from there, Jesus saw two other brothers,
James, and his brother John.
They were in a boat with their father Zebedee,
about to cast their nets also.
Jesus called them,
and immediately, they left the boat,
and their nets, and their father,
and immediately followed Jesus.*

Until the day that Jesus came along
Peter, Andrew, James and John
were fishermen—
who then decided to follow Jesus.

And Jesus, well,
he took them on a wild ride,
by his side, this pair of brothers,
along with many others,
would be stretched far outside their comfort zones,
they would be challenged
to look beyond their boundaries,
and think outside the box
to dare to reconceive
what they'd always done
and to perceive and believe in new possibilities
for the present and for the future.

After Jesus called them by their name,
their way of life could not remain the same.
From the side of the shore
Jesus promised something more,
“there’s something *great* in store,” he said,
“and whatever you think you’re leaving behind—
your fishing nets,
the former way of life you have in mind—
I assure you, what you’ll find instead,
will be worth it.”
So they followed.
They courageously responded
wherever Jesus led.
But three years later, everything changed.

As a church, we’re coming up on Holy Week,
the time when we remember
the reasons and the way that Jesus was killed,
in just a few weeks,
we’ll commemorate the death of Jesus on the cross—
and there, in the midst of that loss
that time of change and confusion,
this is how the disciples respond:
Peter said, “I’m going fishing.”
And his friends replied, “We’ll go too.”

In the face of loss,
of change and confusion,
Peter returns to what he knows.
He flees to the familiar,
complacently finds refuge in comfortable routines.
When he says,
“I’m going fishing,”
we know *exactly* what he means.

For when we are also faced with loss,
 with change and confusion,
 something unfamiliar, frightening, unknown,
 our first response—let’s admit it—
 is to often *also* retreat to safety,
 to seek security in the stuff we understand,
 surround ourselves with the known and recognizable,
 old habits, tradition, custom, routine.

Peter says, “I’m going fishing,”
 and his friends—and fellow, former fishermen say,
 “We’ll go with you too.”
 Because that’s what we do when someone says,
 “We’ve always done it this way,”
 or “Let’s return to how things were,”
 or “Why on earth would we do something different,”
 it’s easy to agree and go along
 to shrug our shoulders apathetically and say okay,
 I guess let’s stick with what we know,
 let’s go
 fishing.

So Peter and the fellow disciples
 head out in their boat.
 All day and all night,
 they do what they’ve *always* done,
 but no life emerges.
 Emptiness abounds.
 “*That night, they caught nothing.*”

I wonder:
 did they ever stop to ask
 why their nets were empty?
 Did they take the time to intentionally look for life,
 investing their energy and focus in the best possible places?
 Or were they just on autopilot,
 mindlessly doing what they’d done in the past,
 passively sitting in the back seat of the boat,
 hoping success would simply just...happen?
 Or perhaps this was the way they’d fished for many years,
 but never paused to consider that the waters might change,
 that the fish might move?
 Maybe the disciples chose the easy way to fish—
 the way the boat was built,
 the way it was designed,
 and to try another technique would have been
 intensive and intrusive.

Or maybe Peter and Andrew's father,
 or Zebedee, the dad of James and John,
 had taught them to fish this way,
 and *their* fathers, long before that,
 creating an almost-untouchable tradition—
 a tradition
 in which new directions were difficult to imagine.

We don't know
 why *their* nets are empty.
 But as their nets are drawn,
 and as the night gives way to dawn,
 it's an evocative, even-haunting image:
 the old ways just won't cut it.
 They can't go back to what they've always known
 and done.
 The way they *used* to be
 no longer has the same potential—
 It's left them feeling empty:
 empty-handed,
 empty-hearted,
 empty, even lost.

But the story isn't over.
 For in the light of this new day,
 the risen, resurrected Jesus the Christ,
 appears on the shore,
 and calls out once more:
 "*Cast your nets on the other side,*" says Jesus,
 "*and there, you will find fish.*"
 Now, the disciples—well, they have a choice,
 they can listen to the voice of Jesus,
 calling them to trust and to try something new,
 or, they can continue to do
 what leaves them empty.

But casting their nets on the other side
 will take a lot of effort and initiative.
 It will involve moving around and shaking things up,
 a little bit of rocking the boat,
 it means untangling their nets,
 planning a new approach,
 getting everyone on board,
 all hands on deck.

Even more, some versions of this reading say that Jesus calls them to
 "Cast [their] nets on the *right* side of the boat"—

and in ancient times,
 the right side of the boat was believed to be the lucky side.
 The side of deeper waters,
 waters with a little more uncertainty,
 but a lot more potential.
 To cast one's net on the right side, not the left,
 meant to take a chance.
 To take a risk, maybe get messy.
 To boldly, bravely commit
 to a course of action that might not work.

Which, of course, begs the question:
 will the disciples give this a try?
 Will they trust in this cry of Jesus from the shore?
 Will they work together to accomplish something more?

They do.

*“When they cast their nets
 on the other—on the right—side of the boat,
 the disciples were unable to haul the net back in
 because of the large number of fish.
 It was full of fish, 153 fish in all,
 but even then, unbelievably, the net was not torn.”*

In the light of early morn,
 a new day dawning,
 Jesus reminds the disciples
 that they can't go back
 to the way things were before.
 They can't continue
 or complacently retreat to their routine.
 But if they dare
 to try,
 to trust,
 to work together,
 to cast their nets
 on another side—
abundant new life
 is what they will discover
 in the process.
 It's as if Jesus is saying once again,
*“I assure you,
 no matter what you might have to leave behind,
 what you'll find instead,
 will be worth it—
 Come, follow me.”*

Friends, I think that *we* can follow also.
In this current time of loss, of change and challenge,
of confusion,
as a congregation, as a church,
as we meet
later this morning
to discuss the annual budget,
as we analyze the numbers,
as we look towards the future,
we can *also* trust the voice of Jesus from the shore,
we can *also* cast our nets once more,
we can work together,
knowing that whatever is in store
even if it's not exactly what we had before,
it will be worth it, that's for sure.
For in the words of Isaiah,
*"Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, [God] is doing a new thing!
Now it springs up,
do you not perceive it?"*

Friends, let's *believe it*.
And faithfully respond.

Thanks be to God.
