

## “Let Down Your Nets”

Rev. David Gregory

February 6, 2022

5th Sunday after Epiphany



*The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*  
James Tissot

### Readings

Luke 5:1-6

from the New Revised Standard Version

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.

David Whyte

in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

The template of natural exchange is the breath, the autonomic giving and receiving that forms the basis and the measure of life itself. We are rested when we are a living exchange between what lies inside and what lies outside. We are rested when we let things alone and let ourselves alone, to do what we do best, breathe as the body intended us to breathe, to walk as we were meant to walk, to live with the rhythm of a house and a home. To rest is not self-indulgent, to rest is to prepare to give the best of ourselves, and to perhaps, most importantly, arrive at a place where we are able to understand what we have already been given.

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Every week as I prepare a Sunday message to share with you, I try a little exercise. It goes something like this: say something helpful, meaningful, even profound, and do it without making any reference to the pandemic. This has proven to be a rather meaningless exercise, I’m afraid. Something inside of me keeps wanting to find a different frame of reference. I have some sort of itch to change the context just for once, and perhaps channel a little bit of Scarlett O’Hara who famously said, “I’ll think about that tomorrow. Tomorrow is another day.” But tomorrow always reminds us of yesterday, with all of the maps, the statistics, the latest news from the CDC, the work of science, and the precarious social and political climate that keeps playing volleyball with all of it.

The best minds I know of are saying that COVID is probably here to stay, and that we will have to make any number of accommodations, individually, collectively, and culturally, or else just live as urban hermits for the rest of our lives. We're all doing the best we can to navigate for ourselves, to make the daily decisions that we can feel good about, making choices that embody love of the Divine, love of others, and love of self. Somewhere in the midst of it all, we have to find a way to let go and find joy, to find some rest from the constant heightened state of alert, to breathe in such a way that allows our sympathetic nervous system to relax. This is a "Let go and let God" kind of moment.

For me, letting go involves allowing the presence of daily rituals that I formerly mostly only aspired to. I used to say, "I should really meditate more. I should get more exercise and give attention to eating healthy food and staying hydrated. I really ought to get more rest, slow down, enjoy nature." All of those "shoulds" and "oughts" weren't really effective in changing my behavior. There's something to be said for the narrowing of our available choices. Call it the Trader Joe's model for a simpler and happier life.

So there is this very familiar story from an early episode in Luke's gospel, where we are introduced to some of the people who become central characters in the story of Jesus and the history of what later came to be known as the church. It begins with Jesus looking for a way to talk to the crowds gathered along the seashore. Enter some fishing boats that enabled him to get out onto the water where the sound carries in a much better way. The story ends with Peter, James, and John leaving their boats and following this teacher who says he will teach them to fish for people instead of for fish.

As many times as I have read, studied, and preached on this passage, something came to me this time that hadn't really registered before. Embedded in the middle of the story is something that made me stop and consider, to contemplate, and maybe to breathe for a bit. When Jesus finished his talk, he suggested to Simon (who was later called Peter) that he go out into the deeper water and let down his nets. Simon was tired, hungry, and probably a bit frustrated by now, and though he was intrigued by the young rabbi, he may have felt that Jesus didn't really know what it was like to be a fisherman. He said, "Look, we've been out here all night trying and working, trying and failing. We've been unable to catch anything." But Jesus was insistent. "Let down your nets," he said. All right. Whatever. It's useless but let's get this over with (Peter may have said or thought).

Of course the story is the story, and it's often viewed as a miracle, and there certainly is a miraculous quality to what happened. There were so many fish in the net that they couldn't pull the net in, so they had to call for reinforcements. Once they started hauling the nets into the boats, they were so heavy that the boats began sinking. In other words, something major was happening, and it got the attention of these men. It caused them to see with different eyes, and to listen with different ears—which I've come to see as the real miracle here. And it is a miracle that feels very familiar right now, in this world that I have come to see with different eyes and listen to with different ears.

In our four years with you in this place, exactly half of that time has been spent in pursuit of the vision that was outlined in the work you did during the interim before our arrival. There was a roadmap and some resources to get us there, and though we didn't always agree on the destination, we generally wanted to renew the church, and to see it grow and prosper. There was hard work going on, and a lot of time and energy being expended. We were in the midst of a huge

effort when everything changed. It is impossible to pretend that it hasn't. And for the last two years we've been spending more time and more of our dwindling energetic resources moving toward a destination that we are far less sure of, and probably in less agreement about. We're out in the deep water, and our nets are empty; we're tired and hungry, and to be honest, a bit frustrated. It would be nice to have a miracle, but I have a question about the nature of the miracle that's called for.

We might want to see the miraculous turnaround that every 21<sup>st</sup> century church is longing for, i.e., something to point to outside of ourselves, something to toil and labor for, something to point to and be proud of; something that we did by the sweat of our brow, beating the odds and ushering in a new era of growth and prosperity. *But what if the miracle has come in the form of a pandemic?* I know that this is a provocative statement, but hear me out. What if the real miracle is the change that's happened within us, causing us to see ourselves, our world, and our church with new eyes, to listen to each other with new ears, and to follow a path of co-creation that isn't at all what we were striving for, but is nonetheless producing something among us that is infused with Holy Spirit in ways that we've never experienced before? Again, this might be our "Let go and let God" moment, an opportunity to let down our nets without expectation or striving, to relinquish control to something higher, something bigger than our best-laid plans.

There are many times in life when we find ourselves trying so hard to succeed that we cannot allow it to happen. This is where David Whyte encourages us to "let things alone, to let ourselves alone, and simply breathe as the body intended us to breathe." Sometimes we have to stop trying so hard before we can see what's already there in front of us.