

I

A friend of mine died this week after a long battle with cancer. And I don't know about you, but for me, grief makes me so very tired.

I don't want you to worry too much about me, now. I'm taking good care of myself, I've got a great support network of family and friends and colleagues. But grief makes me so very tired in every way.

II

And my sense is that I'm not the only one feeling fatigued this morning. I think that by and large, we are a people that are exhausted.

The pandemic continues to impact every single one of us in both profound and subtle ways, and although the vaccine continues to roll out and there are glimmers of hope that things will get better soon, for the immediate future, the outlook remains grim.

Just within the last three weeks, our nation has witnessed an insurrection, and impeachment, and an inauguration. That's enough news to fill a whole year by itself, but we've lived through it all just this month, and there's still yet another entire week to go in January.

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that all of us are grieving someone or something we have loved and lost these days, and that as a people, we are so very tired.

III

It just so happens that our Scripture for this morning centers on a man who also was bone tired. Some people called him Simon, some people called him Peter, and some people called him Simon Peter. Simon Peter lived in the first century in a little fishing village along the northern shore of a big freshwater lake which the locals called Lake Gennesaret, but which other people called the Sea of Galilee.

Simon Peter was a fisherman by trade, as were many of his friends and neighbors. Simon owned his own boat, but it wasn't a tricked out fishing boat like we might see on Lake Oconee or a big commercial fishing vessel like we'd see down at Savannah or St. Simons. It was just a simple wooden boat, probably less than 20 feet in length from stem to stern.

Every angler knows that the reason that they call it "fishing" and not "catching" is that sometimes, you can spend a lot of time fishing without catching anything. And that's what happened to Simon on this particular day. He and his partners had spent all night fishing, but they'd caught nothing.

But as every good angler knows, you take care of your equipment, because your equipment takes care of you. And so even though they'd fished all night, there was still work to do. There were still nets to wash and gear to square away and a boat to secure before they could go home and call it a day. And so that's what Simon and his partners were doing there by the

lakeshore –after fishing all night and catching nothing, they were cleaning the nets, when along came this rabbi, and behind him came this enormous crowd.

So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Luke 5:1-11.

1 Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, 2 he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 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. 4 When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." 6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." 11 When they had brought their

boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

“We have worked all night long but we have caught nothing.”

That’s what Simon said out loud. But I imagine in his head, he might have been thinking, “Excuse me, but just who do you think you are? I’ve been busting my tail all night long, I’m tired, I’m dirty, I’m hungry, and I’m ready to go in, and you’re holding me up. I was kind enough to let you use my boat, even though you didn’t ask permission, but I’ve had just about enough. Why don’t you stick to teaching and let the professionals stick to fishing?”

But maybe there was something in the look on the rabbi’s face, maybe there was a twinkle in his eyes, that made Simon bite his tongue. And instead, he looked at Jesus and said, “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.

And so just one more time, Simon cast that net, even though up to that point he had caught nothing. Just one more time, he pulled it taut, even though every time before had ended in failure. Just one more time, he began to tug.

And suddenly, the rope snapped in his hands. And with all the remaining strength he could muster, Simon held on for dear life. The boat listed dangerously to one side, and Simon shouted for help from his partners, James and John. They rowed their boat

out and began to help, but there were so many fish that both boats, which moments before had been completely empty, were suddenly in very real danger of sinking from the combined weight of all those fish.

And then, amid all the racket, amid all the shouting, amid the sound of all those fish flopping wildly on the decks, Simon Peter dropped to his knees, and he said to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,” for Simon Peter and James and John were amazed, dumbstruck, confounded at all of the fish that they had taken.

But Jesus did not go away. He said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on, you will be catching people.”

And when they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

IV

Maybe you’re feeling like Simon this morning. Maybe you’ve been working so hard, giving it everything you’ve got, doing everything you know how to do. Maybe you’re feeling tired, hungry, anxious, maybe even a little cranky. Maybe you’re feeling like all you want to do is call it a day, pack up, and go home.

So if you’re ready to just head to the house, I don’t blame you, and you’re in good company, including none other than Simon Peter himself.

But along comes this rabbi. And without asking, he climbs into your boat

like he owns it. And then he invites you to put out into the deep water, and let your nets down for a catch.

And you say, “Master, I’m so tired. Master, I have fished all night and caught nothing. Master, I just want to call it a day.”

And he listens patiently to you while you explain to him about all your limitations and issues and hang-ups. But he doesn’t say anything, and just keeps looking at you with that twinkle in his eyes, waiting for you to say,

Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.

Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.

Sometimes, my friend, the greatest act of faith is making that one more cast, when you didn’t think you had one more in you. Sometimes, the greatest act of faith is doing the one thing you really don’t want to do. Sometimes, the greatest act of faith isn’t necessarily healing the sick or curing the lame or bringing sight to the blind. Sometimes, the greatest act of faith is just finding the strength to cast that net one more time.

It strikes me that when Jesus was ready to call his first disciples, he didn’t head for the Temple in Jerusalem and look for the brightest theology students. Nor did he hang around the local synagogue waiting for Simon to show up on the Sabbath day. No, Jesus showed up at Simon’s workplace on a workday,

and he invited him to come with him to catch people.

And so the rabbi is coming to your boat this morning, my friend. Jesus isn't looking for brilliant theology students. He's looking for fishing partners. My friend, he's looking for you.

V

But what does it really look like, this fishing for people? I don't know about you, but I'm a little uncomfortable with the idea of using bait and hooking people and dragging them out of the water against their will. Maybe there's another metaphor that's a little more helpful for us.

Yesterday, we held a memorial service for a woman in our congregation who spent much of her adult life as a teacher. And as I thought about Jill and the impact she had on so many people in her young life, I was reminded of a story that was told about another teacher who died of cancer at a young age.

This woman taught third grade, but she made enormous efforts to get to know the kindergartners and first and second graders in her school. She took pains to learn their names and to learn their likes and dislikes, to get to know them as individuals. And her school principal once asked her why she spent so much time on getting to know these kids who weren't even her responsibility, and the teacher responded that she was making deposits.

When she took that time with those kids who weren't her responsibility, it wasn't an immediate return on her investment. In fact, you might say that her nets were coming up empty cast after cast. But she kept at it. She kept making those deposits in those kids. She kept casting, even when she was tired and ready to go home.

Maybe fishing for people is like that. Maybe it's making deposits in people, in relationships, even when there's no obvious immediate return on our investment.

Maybe fishing for people is like delivering Meals on Wheels on Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Year's Day so that the regular route drivers can enjoy a holiday with their families. It has no obvious benefit to us, but we do it because we're followers of Christ who are making deposits in people.

Maybe fishing for people is like writing those letters and making those phone calls to our elected representatives, even when it feels like a waste of time and ink. We do it because we're followers of Christ who are making deposits in people.

Maybe fishing for people is like investing our time and energy in people who aren't even our responsibility, who have no money or power to help us along, but we do it anyway, because we're followers of Christ who are making deposits in people.

Maybe fishing for people is like praying for that person in our life who makes us the most crazy - the one who stands center stage and advocates at the top of his or her lungs that which we would spend our lifetime railing against. Maybe it's praying not that they would fall down on their face, but that God would grant them everything we want in our own lives - peace, and security, and prosperity, and a sense of goodwill toward our fellow human beings. We do it not because we want to, but because we're followers of Christ who are making deposits in people.

Sometimes, fishing involves a lot of empty nets. Sometimes, fishing involves lots of days when there's no obvious or immediate return on our investments of time and energy.

But we keep casting those lines. We keep cleaning that gear. We keep maintaining that boat.

Don't be afraid, says the rabbi. I know you're limited. I know you're tired. I know you're broken. I know all your hang-ups. I know you sometimes feel like an utter failure.

But I'm sitting here in your boat. I'm sitting here in your office. I'm sitting here in your classroom. I'm sitting here in your house. And I'm asking you to put into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.

Master, we say, we're so tired. We have fished all night and caught nothing.

Yet if you say so, we will let down our nets.

Yet if you say so, we will dig deep and make one more cast.

Yet if you say so, we will drop everything and follow you.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.