

Empty

Scripture text: Luke 5:1-11

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Center Church on the Green, January 24, 2021



I grew up by a large freshwater lake. Perhaps you've heard of it: Lake Champlain. Some say it's the sixth largest freshwater lake in North America, so it just missed being one of our continent's five "Great Lakes." It catches water from Lake George and many rivers along its 107 miles until it flows out into the Richelieu River just north of our border with Canada. You never get to a place on Lake Champlain where you cannot see both the east and west shores, but in some spots a boat floats on water that is over 400 feet deep.

If you live in the Champlain Valley it's hard to ignore Lake Champlain. My mother certainly did not. One of her favorite things to do with us when I was a kid was to take us out fishing. In summer we'd go out in the family boat. In winter she would drive her Jeep Wagoneer onto the ice and we'd cut access holes through two feet of thick, solid water.

Winter or summer, the big attraction was yellow perch. A number 2 hook on a simple fishing stick, a fat earthworm, and a five gallon bucket were all one needed to have a great day of fishing. Really warm clothing helped in the wintertime.

Our catch was beyond plentiful. On a good day each of us would fill a bucket with perch. We'd bring them home, spend the late afternoon preparing and cooking them, and day's end would find us enjoying a bountiful meal. There was perch a-plenty, with more to spare.

In the years since I've lived away from the lake, the stories of abundant perch have dwindled along with the actual stock. Some claim that commercial boats came into the lake and swept up great schools of them in nets without any concern for renewing their population. A scourge of lamprey eels made their way into the lake through the Hudson Barge Canal from the south and preyed on the perch. The waters warmed and the perch population has suffered.

What I remember from my childhood has dwindled. The perch practically leaping from the clear waters of Lake Champlain 50 years ago are now scarce.

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Or maybe part of this troubling thought is a little faulty. Childhood memories assume some universal facts because of the way in which as children we perceive our world. Maybe my mother was really good at finding fishing spots—if you knew her, you wouldn't be surprised. Maybe there weren't that many perch to

begin with. Maybe we had at least a small effect on the population with all those buckets of fish we hauled off ourselves.

My perception of what was true many years ago can be shaped by what I did not know as much as by what I did know. And it's that quality of our human nature—the possibility that factors of which we are unaware led to a reality that seemed rosier than what it was—that quality comes to mind when I have conversations with you about this fellowship.

Those of you who have been part of Center Church for a long time know what I'm talking about. "The church used to be full." "People wanted to come here for the sanctuary" or "the beautiful music" or "the traditional worship service."

And I'm sure those things are true. And it is hard to look around our circle today and wonder, well, where did everybody go? Did they all get scooped up by other churches? Did we start doing something that weakened our attraction to others?

Where did our abundance of people go?

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Yes, that's a hard question to ask. And some of the answers involve factors that have been in motion for a long time. New Haven's culture was already changing during that era of abundant church membership. And outside of New Haven our United

Church of Christ congregations have paid a double price with the rise of cult-like evangelical churches who have condemned our inclusiveness while themselves undermining trust in our larger society through dishonest and greedy behavior.

There are reasons for where we are today that have nothing to do with us. But, in responding to the lack of people abundance around us, we might be tempted to cling to a couple of unrealistic ideas.

One of those ideas is to say “Let’s just find the right leader, the right minister, and then what we used to have will come back and it will be like it was 25 years ago.” But pinning our hopes on installing just the right person in this pulpit means we take no responsibility for doing any of the work ourselves.

Or, we could say “We can just go along the way we are and people will just naturally come to us.” But I think we already know how unlikely that is.

And, we need to reject both of those ideas in the light of today’s scripture story.

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This is the first of the real Simon Peter stories in Luke’s account. He was introduced briefly in the previous chapter asking for Jesus to heal his mother-in-law. What a good husband, a good

son-in-law! But now Jesus has a challenge for Simon Peter and his fellow disciples. It's a challenge of empty nets.

The story is one of an object lesson. Jesus is done telling, and the crowd's eyes still look empty. So, it's time to show. And show, Jesus does, telling Simon to lead his crew out and drop their nets in after a night of futile trawling.

Of course we have to wonder if Simon thought he'd won the lottery when the nets come up full. First his mother-in-law, now this! It's too much for him, and Simon begins to wonder if there were some factors he maybe hadn't known about his life before Jesus came along.

It's enough for Simon to say, "Leave me to myself." And, I think he really hopes Jesus will do that.

But it's the next words out of Jesus' mouth that change everything. "There is nothing to fear." Be not afraid! And then this: "From now on you will be fishing for people."

Those are simple words of profound challenge. Jesus tells Simon, I told you to let your empty nets down into the water, but you were the ones who actually had to do that. Even though you were convinced there were no fish there, you had to overcome your limited knowledge, and your weariness, and your fear, to stretch out your nets.

Jesus tells Simon, this is only the beginning. But you have to be the ones to let go of the nets and the boats, to let go of what is meager but secure, to come with me and bring the hungry and the thirsting and the sad and the exiled into range of this good news.

Let your nets out, Peter. Haul them up. Then, come with me.

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So I wonder, how do you hear this challenge of Jesus to let out your nets, and then follow him?

There's a couple of ways that that could go. You could be saying, Is that guy delusional? That was 2 thousand years ago! Church in 2 thousand 21 is nothing like that. It won't work.

You might even be feeling a bit resentful and saying to yourself, Well, that's the minister's job to bring people in! I come to worship to get away from my regular life for an hour, and he or she should be bringing me companions for that getaway.

Yeah, it's a challenge. But Jesus squarely lays the responsibility to cast the empty nets on his followers. Without them, how could the life-giving word he is offering them possibly be true? How can anyone be expected to believe it?

As long as we believe the empty nets are somebody else's problem, well, they're just going to stay empty. If we accept Jesus' challenge to follow him and bring his word out where it needs to be

heard, we can expect an abundance that we can't even imagine right now.

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With all the stories we've heard in this year of Luke, there's been a lot of scarcity: little place to live, little to live on, a lack of integrity, a lack of love, and no suitable place for God's love to be born into the world when Jesus came to be among us.

But this story is different: it is a challenge, a challenge we've heard by the lakeshore. It's a challenge we dare not refuse. Our fellowship is challenged to accept Jesus' offer of abundance and new life, to cast our nets wide. It's a challenge that will be with us however we choose to grapple with it, and whatever the future may bring.

I invite you to accept Jesus' challenge to reach out, to share with a neighbor or a family member the Good News of reconciliation to one another to God. I invite you to accept Jesus' promise that letting down our nets invitationally will lead us to haul up nets so full that their sheer holiness will be overwhelming. Amen.