February 7, 2010

“THE WEARY DISCIPLE”


This probably wasn’t the first time they’d fished all night and come up with nothing. Simon, son of Jonah, and his partners James and John, the sons of Zebedee, had been in the fishing business for awhile. And after you’ve been in the business a few years – the fishing business, any business for that matter – you’ve just about seen it all.

A couple of weeks ago I had a conversation with my friend Bill Booker, who is president of the Roller Funeral Homes. We began comparing funeral stories, talked about the kind of people we’ve encountered over the years and the experiences we’ve had. When you deal with folk in times of their deepest loss, you see them as they really are. Bill views it from one side, of course, and I experience it from another. But one thing we agreed upon: we’ve both just about seen it all.

So had Simon Peter and his business partners James and John. If you’re in the fishing business, you’ve got to figure that every once in awhile you’re going to come up empty. It probably wasn’t the first time they had fished all night and come up with nothing. It just goes with the territory.

And that’s what had happened on that fateful morning when Jesus of Nazareth showed up and stepped in Simon’s boat. They had come up empty... had been fishing all night long and hadn’t caught a blessed thing, except for maybe
some seaweed and plankton. No market for that, that’s for sure. The only thing left for them to do was to wash their nets and go home for a well-deserved rest. Maybe the fishing would be better tomorrow.

Still, empty nets can be discouraging, can’t they? We ought to know, you and I. We’ve been together almost fourteen years and it seems the only thing we have to show for all our fishing is empty pews and empty nets.

I simply assumed that, since our worship last Sunday was canceled due to inclement weather, I would preach the sermon I had already prepared. No sense wasting a good’ sermon, right? Well, no sense wasting a sermon, anyway. But in our Monday afternoon staff meeting and worship planning, as we talked about what we were going to do, I felt the need to preach this sermon today. It is the one I had scheduled for today, based on the lectionary text. Besides that, next Sunday is Valentines Day. My sermon scheduled for last Sunday was on love, so why not carry over that sermon to next week? It won’t fit the lectionary, but it certainly will the secular calendar.

And the subject matter for today seems timely... fishing all night, empty nets, weary disciples. Why is this story from Luke’s gospel so timely? Well, to be honest, I’m tired. And my guess is you’re tired too. It’s not just because we’ve been hosting homeless families this week through the Interfaith Hospitality Network, though ask anybody who’s involved in that and they will tell you how it can wear you out, physically and emotionally. No, there are other things that contribute to our collective fatigue around here. I’ll give you some examples...

The Finance Committee met this morning in a called meeting to discuss ways to possibly reduce our budget expenditures – again – in order to try and meet our expenses. There was a lot of discussion, but as usual the reality became apparent. There isn’t much wiggle room in our budget for cuts. We’ve already slashed just about everything we can.

Every once in awhile I hear some people say they’re tired of hearing us talk about the budget all the time, and how we don’t have any money. After all, we do have an endowment, right? Well, yes we do, but the realists around here will tell you that if we don’t change some things the endowment is going to be depleted sometime in the next few years.
We’ve moved away from a strict committee structure when it comes to governing how our church does things, and are trying to put a ministry team concept in place. I’ve also heard some folk say that it’s an exercise in futility, like putting a new patch of cloth on an old garment, new wine into old wineskins. (I guess if you’re going to talk about the church you might as well use biblical imagery.) We’ll be using the same people for leadership and doing the same thing and only wear everybody out in the process. That’s what some folks are saying. These same people express the opinion that they don’t think it will work any better than what we’ve already been doing.

We all know that the only solution to our problems is getting new folk to come and join our ranks. But that’s not happening and it isn’t likely to happen, certainly not the way it needs to happen if we’re going to turn this ship around. At least, that’s what some people think. I’ve heard that conversation a bunch of times too.

People who talk like that are discouraged, and more often than not, discouragement comes from fatigue... or fear. Read the letters to the editor of our daily paper, especially the harsh and angry ones, and you can bet the people who penned those letters are discouraged and afraid.

It’s easy to see that people like that, and maybe even some in our church who talk more about what our problems are than seem to be willing to work toward positive solutions, are simply exhausted from the effort. We’re all tired. You’ve told me you’re tired and I know I am. It’s hard to follow Jesus when you’re weary. It’s hard to do anything in times like that, but especially it is hard to follow Jesus.

But I want you to notice that Jesus doesn’t come to Simon Peter and James and John after they’ve had a successful day fishing and had a good night’s sleep. He comes to them when they’re bone tired and discouraged from a night of hard work that yields absolutely nothing.

“Put out into the deep water,” Jesus says to Simon, “and let down your nets for a catch.” In other words, Jesus tells them to go back to work.

And Simon doesn’t want to do it. Anybody here who can blame him? Jesus is a carpenter by trade and a wonderful teacher. Why, Simon could listen to him
talk all day and all night, especially as he tells his stories and parables. He didn’t mind at all letting Jesus use his boat for a pulpit. Even after a long night of fishing Jesus had no trouble keeping Simon’s attention. But who told Jesus he knew anything about catching fish?

“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

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

You know what that means, don’t you? The waters have been empty all night, and haven’t yielded any fish. If they come up empty again, which seems to be quite likely, these fishermen will have to wash their nets again. It is not an easy thing to do.

They don’t mind so much having to clean their nets when they’ve got a boatload of fish flapping on the dock, if they’ve got something to show for their effort. They can forget their fatigue when it means they’ll be heading to market with a good catch. A good catch would hold them for several days, plenty of time to catch up on their rest. But when the nets come up empty it’s a different story. It will take hours to clean their nets, and they’re tired. The chances are, going back out into the water will just yield another empty harvest. It is not what Simon wants to do.

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

Haven’t you ever felt that way? I know I have. I know I do, right now. We’ve worked for a number of years together and have caught nothing. Or so it seems.

Maybe I’m reading too much into this encounter between the Carpenter and the fisherman, but notice that when Jesus tells Simon to go fishing again he wants him to do it in the deep water. Maybe it was their practice only to cast their nets a few yards from shore, and Jesus knows that’s not where the fish happen to be. It is the deep water that will yield them a good catch.

Could it be that you and I spend too much time trawling the shallow waters of life? You come to church and this is what you expect: an hour spent in these
pews. The music is about the same, the sermons don’t seem to vary that much, the order of worship on any given Sunday is pretty much the way it was the week before, the faces of the people don’t change – not all that much, anyway. So from Sunday to Sunday, it’s what? It’s the same old thing. But frankly, that’s all right with you. You’ve gotten used to the predictable and the routine, especially when it comes to church.

As long as you’re not asked to do much beyond the worship experience, you’re okay with that. Church shouldn’t be too demanding anyway. Life itself is difficult enough. Just getting by is a challenge, what with the economy and all. The church ought to make you feel good, not guilty. The church needs to provide a balm and a blessing, not a backache.

But here we are... weary from the effort and needing something new and good and exciting to happen around here. What does Jesus say to his weary disciples at a time like this? “Take it easy for awhile, rest up, get your legs back under you?” No! “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” It doesn’t matter that you’ve just finished cleaning your nets. It’s time to go fishing again.

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

Simon, the same old same old isn’t getting the job done. And it’s not because what you’ve been doing is necessarily wrong, it is because God works best through those who are willing to move out of their comfort zone and do what is required to get the job done... even when they’re weary.

Evidently, Simon got the message, because the very next thing he said to Jesus was, “Yet if you say so...” “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” And we know what happened, don’t we? Not only would Simon and Company have to clean the nets again, they would be required to mend them because the catch was so bountiful the nets began to tear from the weight of all the fish. And it happened because of two things. One, Jesus said for them to fish in deep waters, and two, Simon was willing to do what his Master told him.

Did I say two things? Actually, there’s at least a third element to this story. Once they got all those fish back to shore, Simon got down on his knees and said
to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” He knew he didn’t have enough faith to be a follower of Jesus, didn’t even deserve to occupy the same space as the Nazarene. Jesus would be a lot more effective, and would be much better off, if he chose someone else as a disciple. “Go away from me, Lord...” “Go away from me...”

And Jesus said to him, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” Do you remember earlier that I said discouragement more often than not comes from fatigue or fear? Simon is both: he’s weary and he’s afraid. It is a tough, tough combination. But Jesus has the antidote. “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.”

Simon Peter just thought he had seen it all. He would come to experience a number of moments where his faith was tested and his resolve challenged. On occasion, he would be confronted by Jesus himself, especially when he had become so full of himself he thought he knew more than Jesus did. Or how about that night when Jesus was on trial at the home of the high priest and the maiden girl confronts Simon, telling everyone within shouting distance that he was with Jesus? She could tell from his accent that he was a Galilean. In response, the very same man who had boldly cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant in a vain effort to protect his master commenced to sweat in fear because of the accusation of a servant girl. After that night of fruitless fishing, Simon Peter would find himself going from one crucial moment to another. In fact, it would define the remainder of his life.

I didn’t know until this week that the word crucial (you know what it means, don’t you?) comes from the Latin, the very same word from which we get the word cross.¹

We stand at a crucial moment in the life of this church – a cross moment, if you will. If it finds us weary, doing the same old same old, then there is no doubt we need to take our nets to deeper waters. We’re sitting in the boat with Jesus and he is telling us we should not be afraid, that he will walk beside us and show us how to catch people for the kingdom.

If you believe that, as weary as you may be, you will find that promise to be much better than a good night’s rest. So let’s get to work, shall we?
Show us deeper waters, O Lord, and then give us the courage to go fishing for people who need to hear your word of grace. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Notes

1 George Mason, “If You Say So,” Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, February 4, 2007.