

AFTER WE WASH THE NETS

Simon and Andrew were fishermen. Now, probably when I tell you that the picture you get in your mind is of someone who is poor. But in our terms, it's probably best to consider them as what we would call working class. They were skilled laborers- much the same as a master electrician or a master plumber in our society- though perhaps not quite as well off.

When our story begins, they have just returned from a long night of fishing where they have caught nothing. I wonder if you can recall days like that, when all of your hard work seems to have been for naught? You put in everything that you have and you came up with nothing.

There was a specific regimen that fishermen went through in those days when they had finished fishing. When they came in from their fishing at night, they would first spread out their nets on the shore and they would wash them in a trench filled with water. Fishing nets, like all other things exposed to natural bodies of water, will attract barnacles, algae, and other marine growths. So, this was done every day to get the marine growths off them. Washing them prolongs their useful life. After washing the nets, the fishermen would lay them out on a hot rock to dry, and when they dried, they would take a needle and thread and repair any rips or tears in the net. Finally, the nets would be lovingly folded and put away for the next night's work.

After a long night of fishing where they had caught nothing, what questions might have been going through their minds? "Was it all worth it? Where do we go from here? What do we do next? After we wash the nets, what next?"

We are now in the third millennium of the Christian Era- just barely. Christianity is the largest religion the world has ever seen. As we begin this millennium, what is the state of the church?

Some would say that it is good. Africa is undergoing- and has been undergoing for some time- an incredible conversion. Some 80% of people in Africa are Christians. Christianity is also growing in Asia. Yet, in those countries where Christianity has been established for centuries, we are having problems. In Britain fewer than 6% of people attend church regularly. It's about 15% in the US. By the year 2050, if present trends continue, there will be more Muslims in the US than protestants- there are already more Muslims than Presbyterians. The Catholic Church shows signs that it may split sometime in the future into as many as five different churches worldwide. None of that may come to pass, but it just may.

This is where we are. We've fished all night and caught nothing. After we wash the nets, where will we go?

As Simon and Andrew finish their fishing and begin their cleanup procedure, Jesus comes to them, walking on the seashore, just as they are washing their nets. Jesus gets into Simon's boat and asks him to put out a little bit from the shore so that he can teach. There is

nothing remarkable about this. Jesus was already known to Simon and Andrew. In the previous chapter of Luke Jesus had already healed Simon's mother-in-law of a high fever. In gratitude they were likely to have done anything for Jesus. So, Simon doesn't argue, when Jesus gets in the boat and says, "Put out a little bit," Simon does.

When Jesus had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and let down your nets for the catch." Simon answered him and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but at your bidding I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, their nets enclosed a great quantity of fish, so much so that they began to break and they signaled to their partners in the other boat, for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats so that they began to sink.

It may surprise many of you to know that the Protestant Reformation was a long time in coming. For nearly two hundred years Catholic theologians had been calling for a change. Even Catholics will admit today that some change was needed. Corruption was rampant in the church at that time. Yet, when the Reformation occurred the Catholic Church acted surprised and condemned those who had left as heretics. They cast their nets into the same fishing grounds and condemned the fish for not being there. They failed to heed Christ's call to fish on the other side of the boat.

When I was a kid, I used to love to watch the Andy Griffith Show. In the first episode, Andy and Opey have a housekeeper named Rosie who is getting married and leaving them. Aunt Bea comes to join the family to care for them. Opey, who is just a little boy at the time, has a hard time accepting Aunt Bea. Andy suggests that Aunt Bea try to join in some of Opey's hobbies to make a bond with him. One of those hobbies is fishing. Andy takes Opey and Aunt Bea to the fishing hole and the camera shows the three of them sitting on the bank holding their poles and smiling. Opey turns to Andy and says, "Pa, how is she going to catch a fish like that?" Then the camera shows you that Aunt Bea is holding her pole so that the fish hook is two or three feet about the surface of the water. Andy reaches over and pushes her pole down as he replies, "Down where she lives the fish will come up and meet you halfway."

My friends, Christ has come to us, walking along the seashore, asking us to get into the boat. Christ wants to make us- the church- fishers of humanity. Those fish out there aren't going to meet us halfway. I've heard many people discuss the decline of the church over the years. People are frustrated, and I know it's hard. It's hard! "Why don't they come?" I often hear. After discussing this question with many of my peers what I hear over and over again is that we're hearing the same things. Hey, how come we're not living up to our values? How come we're not spending lots of time in prayer? How come we're not forgiving others? How come forgiveness is so hard to find in the church? Where's the love in the church? I'm hearing this over and over? We concern ourselves only with ourselves. That's what they're saying out there. We're just every bit as petty and base as everyone else in the culture.

I don't think we can afford to ignore that criticism any longer. The church should be the place where we're transforming our lives into the image of Jesus Christ, and it can be that, if

we'll dedicate ourselves to that. We have to reach out in love to the world. We can't expect them to meet us halfway. We have to practice what we preach.

I can't give away what I don't have. I've come to realize that. Neither can any of you. We can't keep casting our fishing nets into the same old empty fishing spots and then condemning the fish for not coming to us. Karl Barth, one of the most famous of the 20th century theologians, has been quoted as saying, "When the non-believers arrive before God's throne to be judged, God will not ask them, 'Why didn't you believe?' Rather, God will turn to the believers and say, 'Why didn't they believe?'" Ooh, that's harsh criticism, but maybe it's a voice we need to hear.

Jesus has promised to make us fishers of men, but we have to cast our nets where he shows us. If we cast aside our brothers and sisters, if we pass judgement on any human for any reason, if we don't practice the fruits of the spirit listed in Galatians 5, we had better be sure that's what Christ wants, because otherwise we'll come home with empty nets. However, if we follow Jesus when he comes to us. If we have the courage to fish where he shows us- even though it's not where we fished before, even though we may fear our boat will sink- then perhaps the biggest catch of our lives is ahead of us.