

LET DOWN YOUR NETS

I Kings 19:1-8
Luke 5:1-11

January 13, 2013
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When our two children were young, one of the stories they most often requested Mom or Dad to read was "The Little Engine That Could." It is a familiar story. The engine of a little train loaded with toys and delights for the good little children on the other side of a big mountain breaks down. What is to be done? Along comes a sleek, streamlined diesel engine, then a big black shiny engine, then still others, but they all refuse to help pull the train over the mountain. Finally a little blue engine comes along whose heart is in the right place. She agrees to help, though she is quite uncertain she will prove strong enough to pull the train to the top of the mountain. But with "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can" determination she succeeds in the formidable task, bringing joy to all the good little girls and boys.

I suspect this little story is so popular with little children because the demands of growing up frequently confront them with what seem to them to be formidable tasks--tasks more suited to "big people" than to "little people"--yet it is left to them, the little ones, to meet these tasks. The little blue engine sets the example and provides the encouragement to try. In any case, the story clearly embodies much of the wisdom of our popular culture. We Americans are a people whose philosophy is "can do." We are a practical, pragmatic people whose common discourse is effort and hard work. "You never know until you try!" we say. "The third times's a charm." "Never say never." "If at first you don't succeed,"-- or, "If all else fails"-- "try, try again."

This philosophy of life is not be easily dismissed. It is not as superficial as some suppose. It is capable of taking rather seriously the reality of failure as well as success, as evidenced by these words from the WALL STREET JOURNAL:

You've failed many times, although you may not remember. You fell down the first time you tried to walk. You almost drowned the first time you tried to swim, didn't you? Did you hit the ball the first time you swung the bat? Heavy hitters, the ones who hit the most home runs, also strike out a lot. R. H. Macy failed seven times before his store in New York caught on. English novelist John Creasey got 753 rejection slips before he published 564 books. Babe Ruth struck out 1,330 times, but he also hit 714 home runs. Don't worry about failure. Worry about the chances you miss when you don't even try [clipping dated 10-15-81].

"Worry about the chances you miss when you don't even try." There is a lot of good advice in that credo. After all, Thomas Edison did not sit down and give up when his first efforts to find an effective filament for the carbon incandescent lamp met with failure. He sent men to China, Japan, South America, Asia, Jamaica, Ceylon, and Burma in search of fibres and grasses to be tested in his laboratory. Luther Burbank did not quit when obstacles blocked his way. At one time he personally conducted more than 6,000 experiments before he found the solution to his problem. James Watt built model after model of his revolutionary steam engine before he got one that worked efficiently. There is evidently much to be gained by not giving up but still trying.

So much is this attitude a part of our culture that even those of us who would reject the "power of positive thinking" as a philosophy of life unconsciously practice it much of the time. We are immersed in a culture that assures us that if our hearts are in the right place, and we really set our minds to it, there are few things we cannot do. It only took us ten years, starting from our first satellite in space, to put a man on the moon. If we can do that surely we can also solve the problems of our cities, of world hunger and over-population, of budget deficits and unemployment and global climate change and all the rest. What is lacking, we suppose, is not the capacity but only the resolve. If only we would really commit ourselves to the task, put our minds to it and give it our best, any of these problems could be solved.

There is another school of thought, however, less popular, less sanguine about the possibilities of our human efforts, which also has considerable currency in our day. The philosophy of positive thinking, in its view, is really a philosophy of wishful thinking. Realism demands a more sober estimation of what we can accomplish by even our greatest and most persistent efforts. This philosophy possesses a stoic, sometimes heroic determination not to succumb to the most formidable of obstacles. It concedes that it may not be possible to gain many victories or successes, but let us not have defeat! With positive thinking, this view shares a refusal to accept failure as a final word, but it does not hold out much promise of success. "Never say die!" is its motto. Or alternatively, "We may never succeed, but we will die trying." This philosophy of stoic determination appears capable of claiming considerable energy and commitment. It possesses a certain nobility. It says, "Hold fast to integrity!" "Don't give up!" But it offers little hope.

Now there are elements in each of these philosophies, the positive thinking and the determined stoicism, that seem quite at home with Christianity. So much so that we often fail to notice how fundamentally they diverge from the Christian faith. In saying this I am saying that they stand in significant conflict with Christian doctrine and teaching. But I am also saying that they provide an inadequate accounting of human experience and an inadequate interpretation of reality. For whenever we speak of the Christian faith we are speaking of that which we find to be true in our experience of reality. Neither positive thinking nor stoicism is adequate to our experience, neither provides an adequate interpretation of what we find to be the case in our life in the world. How do these two philosophies of life differ from the Christian faith? Where do they fail? We may find the answer to that as we consider our New Testament text.

It is important for us to see that what we have in Luke's account of the call of the fishermen, Simon Peter and his partners, is more than a fish story! Those of you who are fishermen, or fisherwomen, know that fishing is not always a successful venture. Often it requires much time and patience, and even then there may be no catch. This is how it is with fishing. "We have toiled all night," says Simon to Jesus, "and took nothing." Well, if that were only a statement about fishing for fish, it would not long hold our attention. But it is surely also a statement about life.

There are times when we toil all night--and take nothing. Let us begin by asking if we can make this experience our own. Can we identify with Simon's sense of futile toil? Perhaps it would help to identify in our contemporary world those who must share this sense of failure. Consider the laid-off factory worker who has known no other work, who has given his most productive years

to a job he is now being told he may never have again. What about the student who has been devoting the best years of her youth to the mastery of a subject and the pursuit of a degree for which she now discovers there may be no demand? What about those parents who have given soul and substance to the raising of their children, only to find them snatched away in some senseless automobile accident? Or the individual who, in order to be faithful to family needs and obligations, has endured the unfulfillment of a dead-end job, only to arrive at retirement crushed in spirit and health? Or the couple who put their life savings into their dream home that gets swept away by fire or flood? It is not always possible to pick up the pieces and start over. There are businesses that utterly fail. There are marriages that get irretrievably broken. There are people who despair, and die, in all stages of unfulfillment.

Some years ago I heard an American missionary nurse, Esther Wiebe, tell of her work in India. She told of a number of children that she had been given to care for because their mothers were unable to provide for them. She told of many remarkable successes in sustaining and uplifting human life that easily justify the funds given through church missions to support her. But she also told of many failures: children brought to her when it was too late to save them. She told of a mother with two boys, only one of whom could she, in her poverty, favor and care for. Miss Wiebe took the one whom the mother would have left to die and nursed him back to health. But the mother and her other son, whom she had chosen to live, did not survive. There are so many failures that foreclose the chance to try again.

Sometimes we toil all night, and take nothing. Sometimes we do our best, and it is not good enough. Sometimes we keep trying as long as we can, and still fall short of our goal. Our text invites us to identify with the experience of toiling for nothing, the experience of a failure or loss or defeat that we do not expect to be able to overcome. Simon and his partners were not taking a coffee break, or catching their breath, or planning a new strategy, when Jesus came upon them. They were washing their nets. They were "hanging it up." They had done everything humanly possible, everything they knew to do. Now there was really nothing more they could do.

This is reality! This is how it is! Merely human efforts fail. This is not pessimism or defeatism or negativism. This is an insight that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. As a colleague of mine once put it in an invocation, "our strength is not our own, only our weakness" [Kalamazoo College Chaplain Robert Dewey]. To be a Christian is to own a sense of weakness, of failure. To be called to be a Christian, to be called to faith, is to be called out of this sense of toiling for nothing.

But that is not all. Christianity has not only a profounder sense of failure, but also a profounder sense of possibility, than either positive thinking or stoicism can provide. One way to interpret our text would be to say, "Look, Jesus comes along and tells his disciples to put out their boats and let down their nets one more time, and that is all it takes. They just needed to keep trying, and Jesus is the one who prompts them to it." This is clearly not what our text means to say. This is not a conventional, nor even an unconventional, success story. If it were, Simon and his partners would have found some way to haul in all those fish that were breaking their nets and sinking their boats – and really make a bundle.

Rather, this is a story about the possibilities that continue to be present, however hidden, in the midst of our failures. Jesus says, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." This is a command to do yet again what they had been doing all night. Simon is understandably reluctant: "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." Simon does Jesus' bidding, not because he expects it to yield him the catch that had eluded him all night. He does it as a matter of obedience, as a matter of faithfulness to the call of the one who offered them an encounter with the divine.

This story does not tell us that the answer to all our efforts lies in unfailing persistence. It does not assure us that by obeying God we will be sure to meet with great success. It simply and profoundly points us to the truth: Though all our human efforts seem to have failed, and though we seem to have exhausted all the possibilities, we have only seen the surface. We do not know, and cannot know, what possibilities lie hidden in the depths. We do not know what God may yet accomplish in us and through us. We do not know what God may be able to do with our losses or our failures. To us they count as defeat, or worse than defeat. We look down at the waters, and see our own reflection. We cannot see what lies beneath, nor what lies beyond the present hour.

In one of his sermons, Harry Emerson Fosdick tells of his friend who was the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous: "A militant agnostic, scornful of religion, he was hopelessly beaten by drink, and then, to his amazement, reaching out in his despair for some power to save him, he found it. You should hear him talk about God – humbly, no theological dogmatism in him, not thinking he knows much about God, but sure, absolutely sure, of one thing: a Power is here greater than ourselves . . ." [ON BEING FIT TO LIVE WITH, 166].

Let down your nets! This is the invitation of Jesus. This is the word of faith, and hope, and unfathomable love. This is the Good News that only those who own their weakness and failure can fully appreciate and understand. God is full of surprises! There are possibilities yet to be experienced. There are victories yet to be gained. There are astonishing discoveries yet to be made. We have not begun to exhaust the resources that God would make available to us. At best we have only intimations of what they are. "Do not be afraid," says Jesus to Simon, who has been preoccupied with fish and is now overwhelmed by them: "henceforth you will be catching [human beings]."

We can never know what the future holds. What Jesus does is to remind us Who holds the future.

PRAYER: Gracious and Almighty God, who by the power at work in us and in our world, is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, move in our lives in a saving, centering way. Confirm us in our faith, comfort us in our affliction, renew us in our hope, and engage us – hearts and minds and hands – in tasks of joy. In Jesus' name we pray. AMEN.

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