“Nets”

Mark 1:14-20 (RSV)

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.

I have to start today with a confession, which is this: I have never cast a fishing net. In my three-plus decades of living, I’ve been fishing precisely once, at Goose Pond in Keene, NH, on a Sunday afternoon after church. I must have been about ten years old. It was a warm spring day, and a group of us left from coffee hour and drove out to the pond for a hike. We brought a picnic with us, and when we reached a grassy bank about halfway around the lake, we sat down in the sun to eat our sandwiches.

When we had finished feasting on PB&J and apples and trail mix, my friend’s father took out his fishing rod and opened up his tackle box. He showed us the basics—how to cast, how to let the line settle, how to make it wiggle and twitch, how to reel it in. We spent a happy afternoon there on the warm grass, taking turns casting and reeling. By the time we were ready to finish our hike and head home, we were tired and ready for supper. But a meal of fresh-caught fish was not in the cards, because we had caught precisely nothing.

That is the sum total of my personal fishing experience. I know some of you have a lot more first-hand knowledge of fishing than I do, so I trust that you’ll fill in the gaps for me and for one another later. Because fishing is what I want to talk about today.

In the land of Palestine, at the time of Jesus, most fishing would have been done, as it is today, with nets. We can set aside the image of my friends and me on a grassy lakeshore, playing with rod and reel. Simon and Andrew, James and John, were commercial fishermen. Their families depended on their catch for their livelihoods; their neighbors and customers depended on their catch for their sustenance. They worked night and day, winter and summer, in good
weather and foul, because the fish don’t wait for a warm spring afternoon. Fishing, then as now, was a difficult, gritty, dangerous occupation, one that required strength and stamina and teamwork and a lot of just plain hard labor.

In today’s scripture reading, Jesus came walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and encountered two sets of brothers, both of whom were fishermen. The first two, Simon and Andrew, were fishing with a cast net. Picture this with me: Simon would gather up the net—some 20 to 25 feet in diameter, made of linen mesh, and weighted around the edges with stones. He would wade into shallow water and cast the net, flinging it with just the right technique so it would spread out like a parachute and settle onto the water. The weights around the edges would drag it down, trapping the fish underneath it. Then Andrew would dive down and gather up the net and bring it to the surface with the catch. Or maybe it was Andrew who cast and Simon who dove, or maybe they took turns—but either way, you get the idea. Once the net was brought to shore, they would disentangle the fish they had caught and begin the process again.

The second set of brothers Jesus saw were James and John, the sons of Zebedee. These two were sitting in their boat, mending the nets. They could have been using cast nets as well, but more likely, they were using what’s called a trammel net. A trammel net is made up of three layers of mesh—an inner layer of fine mesh sandwiched between two outer layers of wider mesh, with weights along the bottom edge and floats along the top. Picture this with me: working at night, James and John would take the net out in their boat and quietly place it in the water in a wide ark. They would then row their boat in toward shore, between the bank and the net. There, John would splash the oars in the water, and James would stomp on the bottom of the boat. The racket they made would startle the fish, which would make a run for it by swimming toward open water—straight into the net. Tangled between the layers of mesh, they would be trapped there until James and John brought their boat back around and hauled in the net. Then they would disentangle the fish they had caught and begin the process again.

In both cases, both casting and trammeling, the nets would sustain quite a bit of damage. Fish don’t take kindly to being trapped by strands of linen, bundled together, and carried to the surface. Both as they were caught and as they were disentangled, the fish would thrash and flop, and some of the strands of the net would be broken, ripped, torn apart. A net is no good, of course, if it has gaping holes in it. So Simon and Andrew, James and John, would pay careful attention to the condition of their nets. Between casts, or while they were rowing from one place to another, or when the weather was too stormy to go out, or once they had come back to shore from a hard night’s work, they would set about mending—untangling the nets, cleaning them of sticks and scales and grime, trimming the broken threads, tying in new pieces of linen with neat, careful knots so that the repaired nets would move smoothly when they were cast and gathered.

Now, I don’t pretend to know how Simon and Andrew, James and John, felt about their work. But if they were like many of us, they might have found the active moments—casting the nets, drawing them in, returning to shore with a hold full of fish—they might have found the active moments more interesting. By contrast, net mending might have seemed rather dull,
rather tedious, rather boring. It was slow, painstaking, deliberate work, work whose results were invisible unless you knew just exactly where to look. And yet, without that work, without mended nets, there could be no catch at all. Without the attention to those dull, painstaking, behind-the-scenes details, there could be no haul of fish, no food, no income, no success.

And isn’t that a little bit like our lives? Our personal lives, our family lives, and—particularly relevant today, on this Annual Meeting Sunday—our congregational life?

Sometimes the work of budgeting and nominating, of maintenance and upkeep, of motions and seconds and all in favor, all opposed, any abstentions—sometimes this work can feel a little tedious. Wouldn’t you rather be out on the front lines doing ministry, doing the “real work” of the church—worshiping God and studying scripture and loving your neighbor, feeding the hungry and healing the afflicted and sharing good news with the world?

But if Simon and Andrew, James and John, hadn’t mended their nets, then when the schools of fish came swimming along their shoreline, those fishermen would have jumped into their boat and set their trammel nets, waded into the water and thrown their cast nets, hoping for a great catch of fish . . . and when they drew the nets in, they would have found them not full of fish, but full of holes.

If this congregation hadn’t been taking care of budgeting and nominating, maintenance and upkeep, then when opportunities for ministry swam along our shoreline in the past year, we might have let them slip through our torn and tattered nets. But friends, we did not.

When the opportunity arrived to welcome new friends into our church family, to baptize children and confirm youth and marry adults and say goodbye to our loved ones who have died, we were able to provide sacred space for those holy moments, and we were able to bear witness to God’s love made real through the love we share with one another.

When the opportunity came to install solar panels on our roof, we were able to seize the moment and take that major step toward sustainability.

When the opportunity arose to host a mental illness support group, and a community song swap, and a wedding for our friends at the Pomfret Congregational Church, and a production of Scrooge’s Christmas, and so many other community events and organizations, we were able to open our doors and provide them with a home.

And at today’s Annual Meeting, we will consider an opportunity that is currently swimming by, to become hosts for a weekly Northeastern Connecticut Community Kitchen meal.

None of these ministries would have been possible if we had not been mending our nets all along. None of these opportunities could have landed in our hands if we had not been tending to that slow, deliberate work whose results are invisible unless you know just exactly where to look.

But here’s the thing about Simon and Andrew, James and John. They were dutiful and diligent about mending their nets, it’s true. But they were also paying close attention to what was happening around them. They did not get so caught up in their knot-tying that they failed to
see Jesus when he strode by. They did not get so entangled in their washing and trimming that they could not hear his call: “Come, follow me!” They did not get so attached to their oh-so-carefully-tended nets that they could not leave them when they felt God’s power tugging at their heartstrings, summoning them into a whole new way of being. They saw Jesus pass by, they heard him call, and—“immediately,” the scripture says—they left their nets and followed him.

As we embark into another new year of shared ministry, into this 325th year of our congregation’s life together, I pray that we, like those early disciples, will tend to both the front-and-center and the behind-the-scenes, with equal attentiveness and pride. I pray that we will keep our nets in good working order so that we might respond when new opportunities for ministry come swimming by. And I pray that we will have the courage and boldness of Simon and Andrew, James and John—that we will be unafraid to follow Jesus wherever he might lead, even if he takes us somewhere unexpected, somewhere we never imagined going, somewhere for which we feel unprepared, somewhere that means leaving behind some of the familiar traditions and habits and practices and infrastructure we have tended so carefully. I pray that we will mend our nets, yes—and I pray that, if God should call us somewhere new, we will be ready and willing to leave our nets, no matter how carefully-mended, and follow.

May it be so.