

EMPTY NETS – FULL LIVES

TEXT: Luke 5:1-11

Every week, millions of Americans put down a few dollars and buy a lottery ticket. Some might even admit to sending back entry forms to Publishers' Clearinghouse. For many, buying a sweepstakes ticket or a lottery ticket is a harmless little indulgence. We purchase it without faith but with a little bit of hope placed in sheer luck.

Now, suppose tomorrow your numbers suddenly come up and you hold the winning ticket. Millions of dollars are yours for the taking. Now that just-for-fun lottery ticket becomes deadly serious business. No longer is it just a frivolous flirtation. Now it is the key to your whole future. I think this is a little like the story we just read, and it's about the difference between involvement and commitment.

There is a real difference in how we view a lottery ticket when we go out and buy it and how we would view picking the winning numbers. We have some involvement in the lottery system when we go out and buy a ticket. But when the numbers are read and we find that we have a match, we have a real commitment to the whole program. We are a real part of something that was only a far-fetched dream up to that point. We certainly would guard that ticket with our life. We'd run to the nearest lottery official and stake our claim. We would tear our house apart to find that little piece of paper if we had misplaced it. We would now be a committed part of the lottery system.

So let's look at what Simon Peter, James and John were up to. They weren't just playing around with their boats. Fishing was a tough, exhausting profession, a way of making a living that forced them out onto the lake in the wee hours of the night when the fish were rising. It kept them laboring far into the day – washing and repairing their nets, tending to their boats, and hopefully, selling their catch.

These guys had a relationship with Jesus. They had been involved with him for some time. In fact, Jesus was there on this particular evening and he needed a place where he

could talk to the gathered people, a place where he could be seen and heard by many folks. So he stepped into Simon Peter's boat, finished his message to the crowd, then turned to Peter and said "Let's go fishing!"

Now, as we said, these fishermen had been fishing all night. They had been in the areas where they would have expected the best catch and they had come up empty-handed. At this point they were frustrated, tired, and ready to put their gear away until the next night's fishing. And here was Jesus telling them to launch out into the deep again and put down their nets.

So here we have a group of fishermen who have been working all night. And fishing – then and now – is arduous work. They had been fighting the water trying to find the fish that had eluded them the entire night. When Jesus said "Let's go fishing", they must have responded saying "Master, we were hard at work all night and caught nothing at all. We are old hands at this. We sifted the sea all night when fish are supposed to bite, and nothing happened." I can almost hear Simon muttering under his breath something about landlubbers - but he gave Jesus the chance to show his true colors. Jesus was not requiring him to have a lot of faith at this point – just a little obedience.

And that obedience paid off. They went out on the lake and made a big haul of fish, so many that their nets began to split. They wound up loading two boats to the point of sinking. We all know that fish do not fall down from the clouds nor fly in over the sides of the boat. Jesus willed them to be where he wanted them. The miracle was not in his ingenuity but in his authority. To again use the lottery analogy, instead of the useless losing lottery tickets they had been buying, they now had the winner. They were now not just involved in the fishing expedition – they were committed.

But Jesus had another kind of fishing in mind. When the fishermen realized what had happened; when they saw that nature had given in to the power of prayer and that Jesus had lured the fish without the use of bait, they knew they were in the presence of someone special. When Simon Peter saw what had happened he fell down at Jesus' knees saying "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Peter was not terrified because the ship was now overloaded with fish and was sinking from the weight. Peter was terrified because he realized that he had identified the miracle. He knew that a far superior hand was in the catch than just luck.

"Do not be afraid!", said Jesus to Simon Peter; "from now on you will be catching men." What a strange thing to say! What a strange place to be recruiting! Why did Jesus go down to the dock to do his recruiting when the palaces were packed with kings and illustrious campuses were piled high with the disciples of Plato and Seneca? Why did Jesus choose to begin building his team of disciples from uneducated working men who carried no influence or power? Well, I do not believe he was looking for those in high places, or those who were among the educated and elite. I believe God can do more with men and women who know how much is wrong with them and how much has to be done. God began at the bottom layer of humanity and not with the pompous leaders and rulers. God, through Jesus, was calling the ordinary, the poor, those who worked hard for their living, to leave their old life behind to be transformed into new beings. They were being called from their involvement in the day to day work of making a living to their commitment to a new life of following Jesus Christ.

Here were Simon Peter, and James and John, standing in the middle of two boatloads of fish. They were standing in the middle of a more successful catch than they could have dreamed possible. But even then Simon Peter didn't feel like a winner. Instead, he was overcome by his own human sinfulness and inadequacy. In despair, not in thanks for all this bounty, he collapsed at Jesus' knees. He then heard the words from Jesus that would transform his life. It was a message that completely rejected the miracle of wealth that filled the boats. Jesus told him that from now on he would be "catching people". What a challenge! First Jesus dumps a fortune in fish at his feet, then he tells

him to leave this fortune and take up an entirely new enterprise in which he has no experience whatsoever. Simon Peter is to throw away his winning lottery ticket and follow Jesus into a new and very risky venture. Simon Peter is to leave his familiar life of involvement with this man to a life of commitment to Jesus Christ and his ministry.

Were these guys crazy? They left their winning lottery ticket by the lakeshore for someone else to find. They not only gave up new wealth and a new successful image, they abandoned their only continuing means of livelihood and turned their backs on their old profession. Can we even imagine giving up a million-dollar jackpot for a life of catching people for Christ?

So what is Jesus calling us for today? He is calling us to be more than just involved. He is calling us to make a commitment and then to call others out of that commitment. What does that mean?

The story is told of a pig and a chicken who were walking along a road together in a very poor area of Africa. They were lamenting the fact that the poor people of this area had very little to eat. The chicken said “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could cook up a batch of ham and eggs for these folks.” “That’s fine for you to say,” responded the pig. “For you laying an egg is just involvement, but for me to provide the ham is real commitment.”

Jesus came to the seashore and found Simon Peter and James and John with empty nets. When they returned from the sea with Jesus, Simon Peter realized that he was not just standing in the middle of two boatloads of fish. He was standing in the middle of a God-moment, a divine miracle. Jesus’ call to Peter is the main point of this story. He was no longer to be a fisher of fish, but a fisher of men. He was no longer interested in his lottery ticket and whether or not it had the winning numbers. This simple fisherman and his companions were so moved by the spirit of Jesus and the power of his presence that they took a truly stunning course of action. Hauling the loaded boats ashore, they abandoned their new wealth and left behind their old symbols of security. The Bible says “they left everything and followed him.” From now on they would be part of a very

motley bunch of men from all walks of life who would care more about filling lives with faith than filling nets with fish. We may not have empty fishing nets, but we have emptiness in our lives. As Jesus filled the fishermen's nets with fish, so he fills our lives with meaning and purpose as he leads us on a journey of transformation and a commitment to a higher calling. He calls us to be more than just involved in ministry. He calls us to commitment. If you were offered a choice between a million-dollar jackpot and a life of "catching people" for Christ, what would you do?