

“The State of the Church”

Luke 5:1-11

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Every night around 8:30pm, my dog comes and stands in front of me and stares at me. Before this he has been playing, fetching balls all across the house or working for treats or chewing a bone on his own, but 8:30pm is his transition from play time to sleep. Even though he is four years old he still hasn't figured out how to make that transition on his own, so he comes and stares at me, with his eyes slowly blinking, until he can barely keep them open anymore. He waits for me to say, “Go lay down, it's bedtime” and only then does he give in, go to his bed, and close his eyes for good.

The drooping eyes are his tell, the cue that he is all done for the night. This is not unique to dogs. Each of us has tells or quiet cues that we give off when we're tired but haven't directly communicated that. Some of us become quiet or withdrawn. Some of us get inexplicably irritable until someone asks if we are okay and we realize we just need a nap.

My cue that I'm tired and have reached my limit is quite similar to the fishermen in the Gospel of Luke: My imagination closes, negativity sets in, and I find myself saying things like, “That will never work.” “I already tried that.” “You don't know what you're talking about.”

The fishermen say this to Jesus when they are tired. They have been fishing all morning, and have completed their work for the day. They've brought their boats back to shore and all that stands between them and home is the final task of cleaning their nets. They are done. They are ready for a meal and to be off their feet and to rest up or tend to chores around the house or to be anywhere but out on their boat.

Jesus surprises them by leaving the crowds he is teaching and coming over to ask them to get back in their boats and let down their nets to catch some fish. That sounds an awful lot like the work they had already finished. If I was Simon the fishermen I would be thinking, “What makes Jesus think he knows more about my work than I do?” Simon knows who Jesus is - Jesus had previously been to Simon’s house and healed Simon’s mother-in-law. Simon had been witness to his miracles and heard his teachings, but that doesn’t mean he knew how to fish. And besides, Simon was tired. He didn’t want to go back in his boat. He wanted to go home to his family.

Tired Simon replies to Jesus, “We fished all night and didn’t catch anything. This will never work. But because you’re you, I’ll do what you say and let down the nets.” The story goes that they caught so many fish that their nets began to break and they had to call for another boat to come help them bring in the catch. Tired Simon was suddenly rejuvenated and instead of his imagination being closed off or negativity taking hold, the world seemed full of possibility. He was so inspired he left everything to follow Jesus.

Tired Simon is a good story as I reflect on the state of the church ahead of our Annual Meeting this afternoon. 2021 was a tiring year. It was a year of work like none other - work of transitions and adaptations and compromises. It was a year when, for the first time in the history of the church, we had three distinct seasons of very different styles of worship - prerecorded services on Facebook and Youtube, live Zoom worship services all summer long, and then a fall of learning how to be a hybrid church, in person in the sanctuary with folks worshipping from home through live-streaming on Youtube. That alone, when part of the draw and comfort of worship is familiarity and repetition and traditions, is exhausting. It was a symbol for the rest of our life together, and our personal lives apart, and all the changes we endured and survived, all

the new things we were asked to integrate and pretend we've always done it this way or pretend it feels normal.

Groups gathered in different ways. Program planning had different variables to consider. Priorities shifted. Needs amplified. People were tired last year - tired of living with pandemic restrictions - so even as needs amplified, some volunteers stepped back, rightfully preserving their energy in a difficult time or shifting to focus on crises at home or work. For those who were able to continue in volunteer roles, we experienced the thing that happens when you're tired: tasks that used to feel easy took twice as much energy and felt twice as difficult to accomplish.

We are a people who power through, who look for solutions, who readjust and dive back in, but I want you to hear this: it is not a failing to say that last year was tiring for all of us. I took a three month sabbatical - yet another transition that caused other folks to step up in new ways - I took three months of rest and even I was tired by the end of the year because we're living through a global pandemic that is unlike anything we have seen in our lifetime. Tired is not a moral failing. It is a very reasonable side effect of what we are navigating on a daily basis, grief stacked on grief stack on uncertainty stacked on change. Feel tired is a signal that we have been through a lot and we are longing for rest.

Thinking about Simon the fisherman's experience, I'm realizing that what we need in this coming year is Jesus. I mean, we always need Jesus. It's kind of our thing. But this is going to be a year when we need to lean into something that is bigger than you and me, stronger than any one of us, and more persistent than our human spirits. We need to lean into our faith that God is with us and providing what we need. That if we trust and follow, we will not just catch a few fish, but our boats will be overwhelmed with fish.

It was not the fishermen's idea to go back out. They did not determine where to send out the boats. They listened to Jesus. If it had been up to them, the nets would have been tucked away and they would have been in their separate homes eating breakfast. Instead they trusted that this healer and storyteller, this man who revealed something about God's love for them, had something to offer them.

We experienced a small glimmer of this last Sunday. Something had been percolating with our leaders, telling us that we needed to talk to each other, we needed to find a way to gather as one people. It would have been easier to ignore it, to keep doing what we have been doing on Sunday morning, but something that felt bigger than us kept urging us to try something different, just once, to see what would happen. It felt like a Holy Spirit nudge.

We took that risk and transitioned - AGAIN - to a Zoom worship experience so that we could talk as one whole church in small groups. We were just settling into our hybrid style and I was really nervous about making another change - nervous about wrangling technology - nervous that anyone would show up. And you did show up. 75 people showed up in homes scattered across our community. Folks who didn't have access to Zoom even drove to their friend's houses so we could all be together.

And you talked to each other. We had scribes that kept meticulous notes about the questions that were asked and the answers that were given, but the most powerful thing that happened was not about the questions - it was the conversations that happened outside of and around the official questions. You all shared the ways you are longing to be connected. To each other, to new folks, to old friends, to your faith community. You shared the ways you are longing to practice and explore your faith and deepen your spirituality alongside other disciples. You talked about missing each other and longing for these small group conversations and

connections. You were honest about barriers that kept you from going deeper at the church or kept you feeling like you were on the sidelines. You listened to each other and once we logged off, you spent the rest of the week reflecting on that Zoom experience and wondering how we can do more of that. Last Sunday, we were the reluctant fishermen, getting back in our boats, and then somehow we were also the fish, overloading the church and reminding each other of who we are and what we have the power of doing when we focus on relationships, being present with each other, and making space for sharing from a place of deep authenticity and vulnerability. That kind of experience doesn't happen on our own. That's a God moment.

In an hour and a half, we're logging back on to Zoom for Edgewood's Annual Meeting where we will pray together, and lift up gratitude for our ministries and leaders, and will take care of some of the business that is the result of being a church like voting on a budget and a new slate of officers. Some of the business details aren't where we'd like them to be. The budget is living on a wing and a prayer. There are holes in the nominating slate. And, I know we will be counting each and every head to make sure we have 50 members needed for the quorum to pass the business. But if we had 75 people log in last week when the task was to show up and connect with each other, to share a small piece of our lives together -then that shows us where our energy lies. That shows us what work we called to amplify this year. That shows us where God is leading us.

There is work that has to be done that always find a way to get done. There are amazing servant leaders among us who dig within for the energy, who cultivate the relationships and connection with each other and God through that work. Thank you. We need you. And we need people even more to show up for the connecting. There are going to be more conversations. More small group opportunities. Neighborhood groups revived. Calls to minister to our youth.

Calls to pray for each other. Those are the holes we need to fill. This will be a year of relationship and prayer. A ministry of listening to how God is calling us toward each other, even when we are tired, and being open to seeing what we catch.

Nominating Committee asked me this week, “Will the church implode if there are holes in the nominating slate this year?” No. We’re entering the third year of a global pandemic. I’m pretty sure we’re a lot tougher than that. But we will implode if we don’t have each other, if we don’t nurture those connections and relationships that lead us deep into our faith and spirituality and ground us in community. We will implode if we are so tired that we cannot respond to Jesus calling us in our midst and asking us to trust, to show up, to follow him. We are tired. But so was Simon. So let’s follow his lead and listen to Jesus, go out in our boats on more time, and see what we catch. May it be so.