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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 6, 2022
Isaiah 6:1-13; Ps. 138; I Cor. 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

I wonder if you've ever felt this way: You've been burning the candle at both ends, trying to do things the only way you know how, working as hard as you possibly can, and things still aren't working out. You're running on empty and you're coming up empty. And then someone comes along and tells you that you just need to work harder, to keep on trying. And you want to scream "I've *been* trying!"

One morning, that's how Simon felt. He and his crew had been in the boats all night, working hard, trying to catch fish the only way they knew how, but they came back to shore at daylight with empty nets. They got out of their boats and were on the shore trying to wash their nets, all the while dodging the crowds of people who had come to listen to Jesus. And then Jesus got into Simon's boat and asked Simon if could push him out into the water a little way from the shore. Simon, exhausted from being up all night on an unsuccessful fishing trip was probably like, fine, sure you can take my boat—it didn't do me any good last night anyway. Maybe he pushed Jesus out into the water and got back into the boat and collapsed, his body fatigued, and his spirit defeated. But then, looking at Simon, Jesus said, "put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon—exhausted, exasperated, and running on empty—replies, "Master, we have worked. All. Night. Long. But have caught *nothing*." I'm guessing he wanted to scream, "I've *been* trying!"

But there was something that happened in the breath, or perhaps the long sigh, between "but we have caught *nothing*," "I've *been* trying!", and Simon's next words, "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." Yet if you say so, I will follow you. What I want to know is what happened in Simon's head and heart during that breath, during that sigh between those two things he said.

Because how many times have you and I felt like we are working as hard as we can, and our faith is now demanding of us something more? How many times has following Jesus, being part of a church community, just been one more thing on top of all the other things that make you exhausted? Maybe you, too, want to scream "I've *been* trying, Jesus!"

Several of you have been attending Intern Pastor Jory's excellent book study on Richard Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*. There's one more class left on February 16, and you'd be welcome to come even if you haven't been before. The foreword of the book was written by author Anne Lamott, who is in recovery from alcoholism herself and writes about her experience of the Twelve Steps. At one point, she says this:

"... all I ever need to remember on any given day, the ultimate condensation of the first three steps, or the Three Step Waltz, as we call it [is this]: I can't; God can; I think I'll let God. I am powerless over people, places, and things, unable to save or fix or rescue anyone, including myself. But God can, through the movement of grace in our lives: grace as beloved community, grace as spiritual WD-40."

I wonder if during the breath, the sigh, that Simon took on the boat with Jesus that day, he realized what Anne Lamott summarized: "I can't, God can, I think I'll let God." How else could Simon get from "I have been up all night and caught nothing" to "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

"I can't, God can, I think I'll let God" didn't mean that he didn't do any work. In fact, on the boat that day Simon worked harder than perhaps he had in days, months, years...hauling in so many fish that the nets he had just cleaned were beginning to break. So many fish that he needed his partners in other boat to help him. So many fish that when they hauled them into the boats the boats began to sink. So many fish that it drove Simon to his knees in awe and humility. So many fish that those first disciples left everything and followed Jesus.

But here's the thing. Even though we don't hear in this gospel about the families or other commitments they left, what the disciples left wasn't really "everything." It was nothing. Remember what Simon said, "we have worked all night long but have caught...nothing." What happened in the breath, in the sigh between Simon's despair and his trust was that he realized without truly letting God in, all he had was nothing. When all the disciples decided to follow Jesus, it was because all they had was nothing. They realized that first part of the Three Step Waltz: I can't. As hard as I've been trying, I am exhausted, I am defeated, I am coming up empty.

When we feel like we are working so hard and getting nothing out of it, perhaps what we *all* need to do, whether we're in a recovery program or not, is to admit that we can't. We can't do this life alone. We can't have all the answers. We can't change things by ourselves. That, as Lamott says, "I am powerless over people, places, and things, unable to save or fix or rescue anyone, including myself." *We can't.*

Even those of us who call ourselves deeply spiritual or committed Christians . . . if what we are doing, even in church, is making us exhausted, perhaps our language needs to change from "we can" to "we can't," otherwise it may feel like all we're producing is nothing. It's then, as Lamott says, we can take the next step in the waltz: "God can, through the movement of grace in our lives: grace as beloved community, grace as spiritual WD-40." And when we let God lead us in the waltz, the promise in this gospel, the promise of Jesus, is that we will experience so much abundance, it will drive us to our knees in awe and humility.

This week if there's something in your life that is hard, that feels like you are trying but coming up empty, trying waltzing with God: admitting that you can't, realizing that God can, and letting God in. Of course, letting God in or letting God *more* into your life doesn't mean that it won't be work, but it won't be work that you're doing alone. And you'll be doing it with others in the beloved community.

And one last thing. Remember Jesus' last words to his disciples in this gospel were not only "from now on you will be catching people," but "**do not be afraid**, for now on you will be catching people." Do not be afraid,

dear friends in Christ, for the abundance when you follow Jesus will leave you amazed. Amen.