

Sermon for January 21, 2018 (Epiphany3B) **“Net Gain”**
(Based on Psalm 62:5-12 and Mark 1:14-20)

I've been having problems with the Net. I used to have it configured so that I didn't have to do anything at the start. I had checked that box on my internet options that says, “connect automatically.” I'd open up my laptop computer, and everything would be all set, with full access to the Web. I didn't have to do anything extra.

I'm not as tech-savvy as I'd like to be. I prefer mechanical problems, something I can put my hands on, something I can adjust with a screwdriver or a wrench. So I haven't sorted this new problem out yet. I'll try to do something I've always done, and, instead of it working, a box shows up on my screen, saying, “cannot locate server” or “cannot connect” or, worse, the box with the little spinner underneath, saying, “reconfiguring...” I'm sorely tempted to just chuck the whole thing right into the Kennebec, except it might be bad for the fish.

Simon and Andrew had their own problems with nets. So did James and John. These weren't simple fishermen—whether you're working the Sea of Galilee or the Gulf of Maine or Bristol Bay, there's never been anything simple about earning your living from the sea. The place where they lived was a hub of the fishing industry, and their hometown, just down the road, was called “Bethsaida.” Beth is the Hebrew word for house. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which means “House of Bread,” but Simon Peter and Andrew came from “House of Fish.” (I've love to see the halftime show during their big games.) Most of the fish they caught was salted or smoked and packed for transport far inland. Saltfish was on everybody's plate in those days, rich or poor. But if you wanted the best and the freshest fish, the real delicacies, you came to Bethsaida and the neighboring towns. And people did come, travellers of means, booking in groups for a seaside holiday, complete with shore dinner. The work of fishermen was physical then, as it is now, and it demanded a host of other skills: not just netmending, but networking, building relationships with vendors and marketers, salt merchants and sailmakers,

boatbuilders, fish-smokers and fish-packers and all the rest. And they had crews to manage, and marriages, and households full of relatives and servants.

These are the people Jesus calls, to join him in bringing the Good News: not simple fishermen, but complicated people with complicated lives and complex obligations. He walks along their shores, he finds them where they tend to spend their time, mending nets and working on their boats. You know, he could have found someone who had energy to spare, someone on the sidelines who wasn't already invested in other things. But he starts with busy, committed people: Andrew and Simon Peter, James and John. These are the people to whom he says, “follow me.”

And why does he need anyone's help, to begin with? This is Jesus, the Son of God—why doesn't he just surround himself with angels and trumpets and go zooming around the landscape, dazzling everyone with his glory and his grace? Isn't that what this Reign of God business is all about?

Listen again to how his ministry begins: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” The kickoff for his engagement with bigger issues, the thing that got Jesus moving and sharing the Good News of God, wasn't a personal sense of adventure, a desire to start working on his bucket list. It was the realization that someone else was in peril, someone he loved. Yes, Jesus had been baptised, and he had heard the voice of God say he was beloved, and he could have coasted along, enjoying that status, for a long time. But when that certainty of God's love met up with the understanding of another's pain, THAT'S when his work of outreach began. The earthly ministry of Jesus was a direct response to the context of that pain, the social and political and economic and religious structures that had not only failed to protect and support the people around him, but actively sought to exclude and harm them. And Jesus understood that salvation doesn't come from superheroes, or from pop idols. Salvation comes—and the reign of God is revealed—when people witness love in action, when we work together to restore justice

and bring healing to our communities. God knows, if Jesus had faced his grief and pain alone, it could have paralyzed and overwhelmed him. Jesus needed a community of support and solidarity to help him navigate between his inward thoughts and feelings and the world outside his skin, the community that cried out and called to him. And that's why he went to Galilee, to those busy, committed fishermen.

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. --Mark 1:16-20

They followed him immediately. They left their nets and followed him. But this isn't about abandonment. This is about serving together, in the context of community. James and John didn't leave their father adrift to bring his boat in alone—they left him with other members of the community, who were compensated for their responsibilities. They had already set in place an economy of justice and care. And Simon Peter and Andrew, who left their nets? Their household becomes one of the first organizing centers of the Jesus movement, with Simon Peter's wife sharing his ministry, and her mother serving as head deacon and church treasurer.

For two thousand years, this is how we have been called, and how we have served. Through the fall of empires, through civil wars and world wars, through epidemics and government shutdowns. It's the call that led people of faith to start hospitals and schools all over the world. It's the call that led Christians throughout Europe to hide Jews from the Nazi authorities, and now leads Jews in Israel to hide Asylum-seekers and refugees in their homes to keep them safe from deportation. It's the call that leads people of faith to fight for the health of our planet and the well-being of future generations. And Jesus is still calling us to take risks, to boldly place our trust in

the Good News of God, so that each one of us can step away from the nets we've made, and lean instead into the strength of God's grace. So that we can see, through God's eyes, the greater structures that need reshaping. Because we cannot always count on our ability to connect automatically. Sometimes, with the power of God's love and the support of our community, we need to reconfigure the net.

*--Preached by Rev. Holly S. Morrison, pastor
Phippsburg Congregational Church, UCC
Phippsburg, Maine*