

KOININA SERVICE

SUNDAY, MAY 15, 2011

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That Night They Caught Nothing

By Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy

In the twelve step community there's a popular, widely-held definition of insanity. Definition of insanity: doing the same things over and over and expecting different results. Let me repeat that: doing the same things over and over and expecting different results. Of course, in the 12-step community this makes sense. Addiction cycles are insane. It's obvious. Here's the formula: I feel bad. Drinking will make me feel better. So I drink but then I just feel worse when the alcohol wears off...which makes me drink again. Veteran members of AA admit that using alcohol to medicate your problems while expecting one's life to be anything but an alcoholic mess is insane. Vicious cycle of insanity. Many families and the lives of many children have been sacrificed on the altar of addictive insanity.

There may not be many among us who have almost lost lives to alcoholism or addiction of some kind. But how many of us haven't engaged with or embodied this type of insanity in some other way? *If we just argue our point a bit harder, surely so and so will listen. If we just work more hours, surely we will get that promotion. If we just keep buying more and more stuff, surely we will look and feel like we've got it going on. If we just keep fighting, eventually we will win the war.*

Insanity.

That's what our Gospel story is about this morning. It's about a group of guys who keep doing the same thing over and over. They are fisherman, the disciples. They know how to fish; it's what they do. That's what they were doing when Jesus came into their lives. And that's what they're doing when Jesus re-enters their life for the final time. It makes sense. People do what they know. Fishers fish. Bakers bake.

Musicians make music. Preachers preach. Teachers teach. You get the picture. But on this night, the fishers aren't catching anything. The text tells in verse 3, "they went out and got into the boat, *but that night they caught nothing.*" I want us to think about this fishless-night in no uncertain terms. St. John of the Cross, a 16th century, Spanish poet and priest, came up with a term to describe this 'coming up empty' and it's called the dark night of the soul.

The dark night of the soul is the fishless night for the fisherman. It is the night when drinking no longer works in the life of the alcoholic. It is the night when the woman seeking love in all the wrong beds realizes she is empty. It is the night when the person seeking material wealth realizes that all the houses, cars and vacations in the world won't fill that hole inside. It is the night when the gay or transgender person realizes that hiding in the closet doesn't allow h/se to live a full life. It is the night when a person who has been certain of religion all his life questions everything he's been taught and feels hopelessly confused. It is the night when someone who has learned to be angry and hard in order to survive a painful childhood faces their own walled off heart. The dark night of the soul: *it's not working, I am empty, I've got a hole inside, my life is a lie.* The dark
The dark night of the soul is the worst moment in life. And the dark night of the soul is the womb of spiritual birth. Let me say that again: the dark night of the soul is the worst moment in life and it is the womb of spiritual birth. Here's why...

It is when we've come up empty that we are most willing to listen and follow that voice on the shore. If the pain of emptiness, confusion, hopelessness and exhaustion are deep enough, when the Maker asks "Children, you have no fish, have you?" our only option is to answer that question honestly. No, God, we don't have fish. No, God, I don't have love. No, God, I don't have energy. No, God, I don't have time. No, God, I don't have a meaningful life. No, God, I don't have any faith.

Pain can have a way of making us honest in answer to Jesus' question: what do you got? If we're in enough pain, we're going to answer: "I got nothing." But what separates ordinary everyday pain—and we've all got that—from the Dark Night of the Soul—which is luminous darkness and we DON'T all have that—what separates ordinary everyday pain and the Dark Night of the Soul is being so desperate for something different, that you're willing to follow any direction coming from that voice on the shore.

You don't have any fish?

Cast your net over there.

Notice the disciples don't say: *yeah, but we tried that already*. Notice they don't say: *who the Hell are you telling us what to do? We are professional fishermen and you're a mere stranger*. Notice they don't say: *so, let's have a meeting to decide whether this is a good idea*. They do it. They do it immediately. They do it without question. This immediacy, this willingness, this quickness to action tells me that the evening before Jesus' appearance was full of a particular kind of pain for the disciples: the pain of the Dark Night of the Soul. That pain was their spiritual birth.

So let me bring it home real quick. Let me point out a few things in case a few of you have had or are having or will have one of these dark nights in your own life.

First off: just because we've had an encounter with the living God before doesn't mean we won't face times of emptiness, confusion and question. That's part of what it means to be a disciple. And those dark nights of the soul don't cancel out the realness of our encounters with God from before. Second: it is totally cliché, but somebody say amen if you know it's true: the darkest moment often comes right before dawn. Let's hang on to that. Third: the voice on the shore is the most unconditionally loving voice there is

and often it's hard to recognize; often that voice seems overly simple and obvious or only tells you what you've known all along; often that voice comes through an encounter with a stranger. Fourth, and this is what's so hopeful and incredible about this story to me: when that voice on the shore comes, it's probably going to use what you *already are* and *what you already know* in order to accomplish its purposes.

When God says cast your net over there, the disciples don't have to stop being fishermen. They don't have to get a new boat. They don't have to find a different sea. When God says 'turn around and try it over there' teachers don't have to stop teaching and preachers don't have to stop preaching and musicians can keep playing and bakers baking and politicians politicking. Just got to do it a little bit different, *in a different direction*. We tend to think that the big spiritual breakthrough is going to be some monumental change. But what if it's just a tiny shift in direction that yields the big spiritual breakthrough? Same talent, same job, same personality, same relationship: just directionally shifted. From self-seeking to service. From quick fixing to honest and thorough facing of what hurts. From hiding to expressing. From intolerance of doubt to living comfortably with mystery. A tiny shift in direction. We don't have to be different. Our direction is what has to shift.

So what is the "right side" of the boat in your life? Where should you be casting your net? Unfortunately or maybe fortunately, we don't have a human being every second of our lives saying: cast your net here...or there...or right here. So how do we know where exactly to turn? What's exact direction?

We don't. And we won't always.

But if the night has been long...and we keep coming up empty...and there's an immediacy to our need to do things differently, that still small voice **will** pierce silence when

morning comes. Even if we don't recognize that voice. Even if we mistake our God for the wisdom of a stranger. Even if it's only because we've got nothing to lose...faith would have that net flying in the air. Faith would have us wade in the water immediately when we recognize our beloved...our beloved, the one patiently calling, the one patiently waiting on the shore.

