

Nothing But Net

a sermon based on

(with reference to Luke 5:1-11)

and delivered on

February 10, 2019

5th Sunday after Epiphany (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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How many here watched the Super Bowl last week?
How many of you were impressed with “excitement” of that game?ⁱ
At least there was an “exciting” halftime show. Right?
But the commercials? Eh.

Isn't it revealing though, that when discussing the championship game for (what some would say is) the major sports league in America that people are even interested in the halftime show or the commercials?

It wasn't always like that. Before the 1990's the halftime show (even if it included a celebrity) still included a college marching band. Before the late 1980's – commercials were basically bathroom breaks. But not anymore. Even before the game there is an expectation about the halftime production and anticipation for entertaining commercials.

Back in 1993, a certain fast food company aired this (and I've edited it to avoid being a corporate shill) commercial starring Larry Bird and Michael Jordan...

{VIDEO}

When they really started to push it... what did they say in the challenge? “No rim.” “Nothing but net.”

In that context, nothing but net is a good thing. But if you turn to the Gospel lesson today, after Jesus has preached from the fishing boat and tells Simon Peter and the others to go out and cast their nets, Simon Peter says, (and I'm giving my own paraphrase here) “We're tired we fished all night and got nothing but net.” But then he says, but because of what I've witnessed here, we'll do it. The result was a net that was so full they were afraid that it would break.

So what was the difference? I use a solar-lunar app on my phone for determining when fish and game will be most active – so that my fishing or hunting will be more productive. It doesn't always work. Those guys didn't have that app. Maybe they'd just been fishing at the wrong time. But that was their job... so I'm guessing they might have had a little bit of an idea what they were doing. Maybe the school of fish just happened to come by later that day.

But none of those explanations can explain that catch. The catch only happened because they listened to Jesus. At that moment, they were done. They'd done all the right things the night before, but until they included Jesus it was ineffective.

Let me say that again. They'd been doing all the “right” things, but until they invited Jesus into their lives, they were ineffective.

That's the good news that Saint Paul is reminding the Corinthians about – “the good news which (he) proclaimed to them, and which (they) in turn received.” (1 Cor 15:1b) But they need to be reminded to stand firm in that good news. All the way back in the Fourth Century, St. John Chrysostom says in his *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, “The Corinthians did not need to learn the doctrine, which they already knew, but they had to be reminded and corrected from their errors in understanding it.”ⁱⁱ Put another way, they knew what they were supposed to believe about certain things and how they were supposed to behave, but they needed to be reminded that the saving work of Jesus Christ, in his life, his death by crucifixion, and his resurrection is what makes those doctrines and actions effective.

That's not something that was new then or even new now. The Pharisees who so often argued with Jesus had the same issues. They were so consumed with making sure that they obeyed God – or maybe more accurately didn't disobey God, that they filled their lives with so many rules that the rules became the focus rather than God's love and mercy. That is what happens when

rules – even good rules – become the focus. Mercy loses. Redemption loses. Justice transforms from righteousness to revenge (punishment that evens the score).

If we look we can see how forgetting Jesus' place in so many institutions has led to a change. Penitentiaries – were founded by Quakers to bring redemption to criminals rather than flogging or execution. “Penitent” is the first part of the word for those institutions. The “cells” were – in a sense – an imitation of the cells in a monastery where nuns or monks had private space to reflect on their relationship with God. Likewise we can look at the many hospitals – an institution in general – and even in particular for so many institutions – institutions founded by Christians to extend Christ's ministry of healing. We see it in two of the hospitals in our own community – Saint Anthony's founded by Roman Catholic nuns, and Swedish-American founded by members of the Swedish Covenant Church. The most prominent universities were founded by Christians – as United Methodists we hold claim to Duke, Emory and Boston universities. Northwestern University was founded by Methodists. Yale by Presbyterians. Harvard by Congregationalists. But even in some of these institutions Christ has faded. They grew and became glorious because of their inception as means of sharing Christ's love by the expansion of knowledge.

What changed? The universities got really good at research and using the scientific method. Hospitals got better skilled in the application of medicine. These are good things. But maybe in the context of the penitentiaries we can see a bit of what happened. Rather than a means of redemption the privacy of the cell – the respite/removal from normal society became a means of punitive rather than restorative isolation.

I think we all face this in our lives. If you're here, I think I can safely assume that you want to be a good person. Am I right? I didn't say that you are or even think you are a good person, but that you want to be. That's a noble aspiration. You don't have to go to church to be a nice person. You don't have to be a Christian to care about other people. You can volunteer in the community. You can treat others with respect. Right?

But here's the thing. Without Jesus – those things all start to become an end in themselves. People begin to elevate their own ideas of what is good and become judgmental – and condemning on anyone who doesn't adhere to his or her values of what it means to be loving. It's irrational, but even the most rational among us is susceptible. I know they do it with humor, but consider “The Big Bang Theory” how a character like Sheldon is so willing to dismiss any scientific exploration into the realm of physics that doesn't match his primary theory. Not only is he dismissing the faith that his mother tried to instill in him, but he is effectively dismissing the scientific method to which he claims allegiance.

So for us who are here in this place wanting to be good people, what does that mean? Not just what does it mean to be good? But what does it mean to love our neighbor as ourselves? Does it mean whatever makes him happy for the moment? Can it mean making a judgment to divert him from danger?

When we remember to hold on to Jesus as the foundation – when we remember to include Jesus in our good deeds and our care for one another – we hold ourselves accountable to his mercy, remembering the words of John 3:17 that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save it. Without him we can do all the right things and still end up with nothing but net. But with him, even the simplest good we do can grow beyond our own imagination.

When the Super Bowl became about the commercials and the halftime show - instead of quality football – it got boring (that’s not just this year) – but when the halftime show and commercials became about themselves – they too have become boring and ineffective.

Keep Jesus in your good works. Keep Jesus in your lives not as an afterthought but as a primary purpose in all that you do. Do so, and your nets will be full and others will be blessed through you. AMEN

ⁱ Super Bowl LIII was a snooze fest between the New England Patriots and the Los Angeles Rams. It was a low scoring game with the only touchdown coming in the fourth quarter.

ⁱⁱ NPNF 1:12:227