Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

It’s a fish story, but it’s not really about fish! When all is said and done, they leave the fish on the beach. Why would they do that? If the story was about the fish, they would have sold them and put the money in Jesus’ treasury. But they didn’t. They left them. Two boat loads of fish!

That’s admirable, but does this mean you have to leave everything to follow Jesus? If everybody left everything, the world would be in utter chaos. You’re in
surgery and your doctor walks off to follow Jesus? How does that work? You’re in court and your lawyer leaves? No dessert, the waitress is gone! By all logical standards, this story can’t mean that. So, what does it mean for those of us who have no physical Jesus to follow? It can’t happen to us this way.

* We can relate to this. People do fish all night and catch nothing. That still happens. You can get there in a variety of boats; marriage, work, school, relationships. Faith can be an empty boat, as can finances, or the sense of your own self-worth. All those boats can come back empty. It’s not for lack of effort. You did fish all night. You even did the right stuff, but still came up empty. How can that be?

* You ever known loving parents who lost a child to drugs or alcohol? I’ve known too many. They provided everything. Soccer, band, church, summer camps...all of it. A loving family and they come up with empty nets. Fished all night and caught nothing. There’s nothing more helpless than to not be able to help your own child. That’s an empty, empty net. You need Jesus to get into that boat in a hurry, but you’re not even sure how to do that. Sometimes you’re not even sure if it ever happens.

You can also come up empty when you have everything. One of my classmates at Duke Divinity School was David Lloyd. David was the President and CEO of Putt-Putt International, based in Fayetteville, NC. He had a good life. Married a former Miss North Carolina; homes, trips and private schools - the whole package.

I was extremely curious as to why somebody like David would leave all that to come to seminary. Turns out he had somewhat of a life crisis. With all his blessings and possessions, he was empty. He sunk so low as to believe that if he had the newest Corvette, his life would be complete. So, he ordered it, and it wasn’t.

Somewhere in the midst of all that, David Lloyd had a spiritual awakening. His nets were full of everything a person could possibly want, but his heart was empty. He was a high achiever, but he had never received God’s love and grace in his life. Sometimes it’s more difficult to be a receiver than it is to be an achiever.

Seminary turned out to be a place of searching for David, but not a call. Not everyone needs to go into full-time ministry. If we did, there’d be no one in the pews! David returned to the business world, but with a different perspective on what it means to fish! He was the one that got caught!

* We need more people to get caught, not for church membership, but for discipleship. Sometimes those are mutually exclusive. You can be a member of a church, but not a disciple of Christ. You can be a member of a church and be empty. You can
have a fishing license, but never fish! Membership doesn’t really mean anything if you have never been caught by Christ. It’s not about the fish. It’s about the relationship.

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Jesus got into Peter’s boat. He wasn’t invited. It wasn’t Peter’s idea. Peter was tired and probably frustrated after fishing all night and catching nothing. Nothing! That’s a terrible word. But there is hope here. How many people need Jesus to get into their boat? Uninvited, unexpected, undeserved, based on nothing I did, or didn’t do. God interrupts my life. I fish all night and catch nothing, but Jesus gets into my boat and almost sinks it with fish?

I envy Peter having Jesus right there in the flesh directing him. It’s not that easy for us. We have to listen for his voice. We have to discern his call. We have to pray and wait, pray and wait. In the process, some of us just quit fishing. Folks wash their nets of the Christian faith and they go home.

I’ve thought about doing that at times. Ministers are not immune from empty nets. It happens. Sometimes you have to fake it, like your nets are full, when deep inside you know they’re not. You’re empty. I know what it is to fish all night and catch nothing. Maybe that’s the first step to recovery, admitting you are empty.

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But that’s not where this story ends. Peter said; “Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.” (5:5b). There’s another narrative. Something happens that’s not supposed to happen. They catch fish! Lots of fish. What we cannot see below the surface of the water, God can see. What we do not know in life, God knows.

And while they are catching those fish, Jesus was catching them! It’s not about the fish! Everything that happened next was a life full of meaning and purpose. Not an easy life, but a purposeful one.

You think we’d be talking about Peter, or James and John on September 16, 2018 if all they did was catch fish? Christ transformed their lives! Jesus turned their lives into something else. He gave Peter the keys to the kingdom and made him the leader of the Church. He renamed him Cephas, which means “rock.” Not because he was a rock, but because he would become one!

Christ took James and John and used their lives for incredible things! He renamed them, “Sons of Thunder” because they were hot heads! He used that passion to change the world. That’s the real catch! That’s the real miracle! You leave everything on the beach for that life.

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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: Amen