

NET GAINS

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John 21:1-14

If you have ever owned or run a business, you know how vital it is to make a profit. For a business to be viable, it must, over the long term, take in more than it spends. If a business makes a profit, then it experiences what the accountants call net gains.

That word ‘net’ has always been confusing to me when used in personal finances to describe net income and gross income. But I’ve learned the difference. Gross income is the amount you are paid. The net income is the amount you get to keep after taxes. It’s called the take-home amount. Someone once explained it to me this way: Imagine that on payday, your boss has your salary in dollar bills that he throws at you. That’s kind of gross isn’t it. That is your gross income. Your boss throws the money at you while you stand there holding a net. Whatever you can catch with the net, you get to take home. That’s your net income.

For businesses it is more complicated. Net gain is the measurement of income minus all expenses. The net gain is central to calculating taxes. In practice, determining net gains can be complex, but the concept is simple. At the end of the day, you want to take in more than you expend.

In our reading for today, Simon Peter and some other disciples experience their own net gain—both literally and spiritually—as they fish on the Sea of Galilee. This passage is another post-resurrection appearance by Jesus that I have been looking at for the past three weeks. First, there was Jesus appearing to Paul on the road to Damascus. Then, Jesus appeared to two men on the road to Emmaus. And last week, we looked at the passage just before our reading today where Jesus appears to the disciples in the locked room in Jerusalem. He comes to them confers upon them the power of the Holy Spirit and sends them out into the world to forgive sins. But they don’t comply with Jesus’ command. They don’t do as he says. Maybe they don’t know how.

Today, we read is that Simon Peter and six other disciples are now in Galilee. We know for some of them, the region of Galilee was their home turf when they were called to accompany Jesus. Simon and some of the others had been fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. (In our reading it is called Sea of Tiberius).

Peter announces to his cohorts, *I am going fishing*. And why not? This is something he knows how to do—he knows how to fish. That detour with Jesus that took him away from his fishing—that didn’t work out. Jesus was killed by the authorities. Peter has been given the Holy Spirit but he’s not sure what to do with

it. It didn't come with an instruction manual. The safest course of action for him is to return home, pick up his old life.

Peter doesn't consult with the others. He doesn't ask for their permission. He just says, *I'm going fishing*. The others say to him, *We will go with you*. They get into a boat, they go out onto the water, they fish all night, and catch nothing.

To be clear, this is not recreational fishing with a line and pole. This is work. They are fishing with nets. They could be casting nets, but they are probably using a seine net. They would drop one end of the net in the water, and row in a circle letting out the rest of the net until they closed the circle. They would then haul the net from both ends and pull in any fish that got caught. It is tough, physical work, and they struggled all night setting and pulling nets and coming up empty.

In the morning, as the sun rises over the low hills in the east bringing daylight, the men notice someone on the beach. It is Jesus but they don't recognize him. Maybe the sun wasn't bright enough yet. The man on the beach calls out to them saying, *Children, you have no fish, have you?* They answer, *No*, because they don't. They still don't realize that the figure on the beach is Jesus. Perhaps he is a buyer seeking fish to purchase to take to market that morning. It doesn't matter; they've got nothing to offer anyway. Their nets are empty.

Then the man says something odd. He instructs them to cast their net to the right side of the boat. There, he says, they will find some fish. Even odder still, the fishermen do as he says. They have fished all night. No doubt they are tired and frustrated. What could this man know that they don't? What can he see that they can't see? So, as if on nothing but faith, they cast to the right. As they retrieve the net, it is so full of fish that they can't lift it into the boat.

One of the disciples connects the dots. He turns to Peter and says, *It's the Lord*. Peter figures this must be true; it's the only explanation that makes sense. So, in typical Peter fashion, he jumps overboard. This is the Peter that we know—impetuous, loyal, devoted, less-than-perfect.

Peter doesn't simply jump out of the boat. He "throws himself" into the water. He swims ashore. The others remain with the boat and row it back slowly dragging their filled net. When they get to the beach, they discover a low fire is burning with some fish cooking on it and some bread as well. Jesus is there. He tells them to bring some of the fish they have caught. The net is still in the water so Peter drags it up on the beach. The disciples count their catch and discover there are 153 large fish in the net. That many fish should have torn the net, but the net was intact. Jesus invites the men to the fire saying, *Come and have breakfast*. He gives them some bread and fish to eat—food that he has prepared for them.

Right now, in the midst of the COVID pandemic, we are all a bit discombobulated. Our future is unpredictable. We are not really sure what we should be doing. We have what we need, we are comfortable enough in our homes, but we feel a bit empty. We feel anxious. Maybe it is the isolation. Maybe it is the uncertainty. Until we get more data about this disease, we feel stuck in the moment. We have different layers of government giving us conflicting information and guidance. Not knowing exactly what to do, we've opted to 'go home.'

The disciples are in the same boat. They had spent three amazing years with Jesus and then he is gone. There no one to guide them. Yes, he came back for a while and shared the Holy Spirit with them, but it doesn't feel the same. Not knowing what else to do, Peter returns to his home in Galilee and decides to resume fishing. That worked for him before; it seems the logical thing to do now.

So, he gives it a go, but he comes up empty. Maybe that is how his old life had been before—before meeting Jesus. Maybe it was this emptiness then that compelled him to join up with the traveling rabbi who spoke of the way to salvation.

This story takes place at the Sea of Galilee. The last time Jesus and the disciples were here was that day when 5000 were fed from just a few bits of fish and bread. On that day, it was a boy that provided the outlay for a meal which fed a ravenous multitude with leftovers to spare. For the disciples now, hungry for purpose, Jesus brings them the fish and the bread. Like the crowd that they fed, they now need Jesus guidance. They have learned that when they do listen to Jesus, the result brings abundance.

This story of Jesus and the disciples on that beach in Galilee continues with another commissioning of these disciples, and a sending of Peter specifically. Jesus will ask him, *Peter, do you love me?* And Peter will answer, *Lord, you know I love you.* Jesus tells him, *Feed my sheep.* (That is our passage for next week.) Peter's old life in Galilee is not to be. Christ is sending him out to feed a hungry world with the word of God.

For us, the calculus that drives our own lives each day is one based on loss and profit, expense and gains. Whether in business or just our ordinary lives, we always try and maximize our profits and limit our losses. We try and make the most money, have the most fun, be the most fulfilled. We do give to our neighbors when they are in need, but we are counting on getting a return with interest. This is what makes sense in our world. Those are the rules.

But as Jesus explains time and time again, in his kingdom this math doesn't add up. The rules are different. In Jesus' kingdom, the gains are infinite, the losses are nonexistent. Jesus is showing his disciples not just a new way of living, but a new reality—a new kingdom—a kingdom where water becomes wine, the dead are raised, and life is abundant. In this kingdom, there are no losses because all

expenses have been paid. They were paid by Christ with his sacrifice on the cross. In this kingdom, the nets are full; in this kingdom is life and meaning and God.

Peter and the others do go out into the world. With the power of the Holy Spirit, they share the teaching of Jesus. Together, they weave a great net that we call the church, and they become fishers of people. Those that they catch are brought to where Jesus is waiting to offer them the food of the kingdom.

Friends, we are that church. Each of us are strands in that net tied tightly together into a greater whole. We may be isolated now, but we are never alone. We are (and will be) together in the great kingdom.