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The Message: Failing in order to Succeed: 'Learn'

After Christmas we visited a small-boat salmon and halibut fishing family in northern California. When Tom takes his boat out, he battles weather, tides, and large ships. A veteran of the Vietnam war, I am sure he has risked his life more fishing the Pacific than he did in Vietnam.

After a hard night of fishing Jesus tells Simon,  
"Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch."

The reply is so human,  
"Master we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything." But Peter says, "because you say so, I will let down the net."

This is a story about failure. Disciples who fish all night for their livelihood and catch nothing.

We know there is an important message here. Why? Because Luke doesn't bother telling us what Jesus said to them -- what he taught them in words. No, the important teaching came after the words.

What does Jesus give the disciples? Fish? No, what Jesus gives the disciples is infinitely more precious than fish: a lesson in failure.

If the fish had been jumping out of the water like Asian carp in the Mississippi, Jesus wouldn't have had this opportunity to teach the disciples and by extension us. Fishing wasn't a sport for them. It was the difference between eating and not eating.

In the 80s I taught at the theological college at UBC. I lived on campus, in a Georgian stone tower looking up Howe Sound and across English Bay to the Islands. Occasionally I could hear the distress calls of boats in trouble. Weather reports became much more significant during that time. When I was invited to preach at Trinity United Church in Port Coquitlam (Terry Fox's family church), I was hosted by a salmon fishing family who lived on the Coquitlam River.

The river's name comes from a Halkomelem Halq'eméylem word meaning "stinking of fish slime."

When they described being off the south coast of Vancouver Island, overnight for 3 and 4 nights at a time, scared of being hit by huge ships, in all kinds of weather, sea sick from fear, - well, the smell would be the least of their worries. I doubt there is any job more challenging. There was nothing worse than the nights, they told me.

The disciples were fishing, risking their lives all through the night in order to eat.

It's not an uncommon experience today. You work hard, do everything right, and still you fail.

In the midst of failure, along comes Jesus and tells the disciples – let your nets down on the other side of the boat. What Jesus gives the disciples is hope. What one needs to try again, to carry on – not just doing what they were doing, but moving into uncharted waters, carrying on in a new direction -- with Christ.

There are going to be bad days. Sometimes we are going to fall on our respective faces. These failures don't have to be endings. They can be the avenue to experience God's grace more widely and more deeply.

The bounty of the catch is so unexpected, it is startling. The nets begin to tear, two boats can barely handle the load; the boats begin to sink and then the realization sets in.

Peter is astonished.

This is a miracle of hope that had Peter let down the nets, even though he knew there were no fish

Our challenge today is to recognise the signs of hope around us even in the midst of our worst failures; acknowledge the presence of Christ in our lives, and commit ourselves to do more than catch fish, more than hope for security – commit ourselves to take risks for the kind of deep relationship that Jesus offers.

As I preside over funerals of successful business folk, I think I hear this same pattern happening in the business world. As business developed in the past forty years, individuals were able to shape whole industries, influence the ethical standards of whole sectors. I sense that today the pattern has changed. Gifted, good people can labour in the vineyard for a lifetime and not be noticed or appreciated in the same way.

Perhaps this is a good thing. We can't fool ourselves by thinking that we are masters of our own success. So how do we live successful lives when success is not the outcome of our own efforts?

That was the dilemma of Simon Peter and his friends. Carefully made their nets; mended them when they broke. Built their boats, cared for them carefully. Searched for the best spots; found the best time to make their catch. Fished all night; did their best, but no fish. Put their all into it, but only failure.

Then this teacher shows up, asks them to take him off shore so he could teach the crowds without being consumed by the masses on shore. When he has finished, he tells them to just pop their nets over the side. Doubtful, they do and almost sink two boats with the catch.

Simon has an odd initial reaction: "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man!" Almost as if this success was not welcome because it depended on this good man and Simon wasn't good enough. Simon was afraid.

"Don't be afraid, Simon!" You have another challenge: you will be catching people not fish.

Simon realized that his concept of success was irrelevant. He left it all to follow Jesus.

The same is true of every aspect of our life together. Success is seeing how God works through you all.

The paths of our lives do involve failure. And it is in our failures, that we are opened up to the success of God working in us. The paths that are offered to us promise to shape us, build our character, change our world view, set us out in new directions.