

John 21:1-14

Peter and the Great Catch of Fish

We know from the other gospels that some of the disciples were fishermen, and at least three of them are in our scripture, Peter and the sons of Zebedee, James and John. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the first thing Jesus does as he begins his ministry is to call these fishermen while they are at work, and tell them to follow him and he will make them “fishers of men.” So it seems odd that we have to come to the last chapter of the gospel of John to find any mention at all of fishing, or of the disciples being fishermen. Here they are fishing on the Sea of Tiberias, better known as the Sea of Galilee; the only other time in this gospel that an event occurs at this location is in chapter 6, where Jesus feeds the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, and then immediately afterwards, when Jesus comes walking on the water to the disciples in the boat. So, I find myself full of questions, wondering why the writer sets the final scene of the gospel here in this out of the way locale.

And why is it that now Peter wants to go fishing? Are we supposed to know already that Peter and the others make their living on the Sea, though the gospel tells us nothing about that, and that now Peter decides it’s time to get back to work? After three years following Jesus around Galilee and Judea, that now they should be back on the job? And yet, Jesus is still with them, he hasn’t ascended

into heaven yet. He has even given them another job to do- in chapter 20, he has sent them out, just as God had sent him. So here, are they simply trying to take a break? They had followed Jesus for a long time, tried to understand what his words meant, tried to take in those astonishing miracles; then saw him taken from them and killed- certainly a final, traumatic event, and one that made them think the authorities might come after them as well. And then, he is resurrected. The impossible thing happened. So maybe, the disciples just need to evaluate all this, let it soak in, try to comprehend what it means for them. They need a vacation, or a ministers' retreat.

Here is where I need someone to explain to me what would make this a meaningful, contemplative time? What makes *fishing* the desirable get away? It is the quiet, the solitude, or conversely, the camaraderie with one's mates; is it the thrill of the battle with the big one that won't get away this time? Is it getting your hands into the worms and minnows and stinky bait? Is it the game- knowing how to use the right lures and hooks and line, knowing the right locations and depth? Is it simply being in nature, the primal sense of being part of nature, the sounds and smells, being on the water or in it? I will confess that I don't get it, but I'm glad that some people do- don't forget we have a fish fry next Sunday after worship,

thanks to someone who gets it. And these seven men seem to get it. And wouldn't you know, at this unlikely time the Lord appears to them again. Not while they are reading their bibles or saying their prayers, but crowded together on the boat and probably frustrated after a night of futile fishing.

Now, the story we are more likely familiar with from chapter 21 is the "reinstatement" of Peter, when Jesus asks him, "Simon, do you love me?" The purpose of the story is to show that Peter has been readmitted as a disciple after his denial of Jesus the night before the crucifixion. The author uses a nice literary touch- has both Peter's denial and his profession here take place around charcoal fires; has Jesus ask Peter three times, "do you love me?" just as Peter denied the Lord three times in chapter 18; has Peter grieving when Jesus asked the third time, as the questions must have recalled to him the bitter memory of his failure and fear that night. Where the other gospels show Peter weeping as he suddenly realizes he has just denied his Lord, the author of John shows Peter's realization here on the beach- weeks later perhaps, as he was confronted and questioned by his Lord and Teacher. Perhaps he went fishing in an attempt to get away from the awful pain caused by his denials.

Maybe fishing is one way to come to health after emotional distress. There is a report out of a wonderful work being done at various sites around the country, where injured veterans are being taken on fishing expeditions, and where healing sometimes begins. Everything from learning how to use new prosthetic limbs to the soothing of traumatized minds by the serenity of the outdoor solitude and by the patient exercise of tying fly-fishing lures and waiting for the fish to take the hook. The soldiers are being healed in the natural setting. And perhaps in a figurative sense, they are being met by the Risen Lord, just as the disciples were that morning long ago, and hearing his questions in the memories of their pain and fear, and now hearing a welcome word of hope and forgiveness and comfort and wholeness.

But we've got to talk about the fish and the boat and the net and all the important elements, the symbols, of this passage before us. Jesus comes in the early morning. They don't know him until he speaks or does something out of the ordinary, like telling them where all the fish are. Now that they know who is that stranger along the shore, they are in a hurry to get to where he is- maybe just that one simple thing is a lesson for us. And when we come to him we see that he has prepared for our arrival. There is food and fellowship with him. There is the idea

of a communion meal in this passage, but I think the author rather wants us to think of the feeding of the 5,000, where Jesus supplies our needs- note how fish are already on the fire before they bring their catch; bread is there.

These breakfast fish (Gk. opsarion) are the same as the fish from the miracle in chapter 6. The Greek word used for the fish in the net is a different word (ichthus), and in our passage they have a different purpose and destiny. We will talk about them a little later.

I think there are two important things to see from this scripture. The first is that the Lord keeps coming to us, meets us in the most ordinary moments of our lives: in the quietness of our own thoughts, at our jobs, at breakfast, or at this communion meal we share week after week. Or he may meet us when we least expect him, when we don't even recognize him at first, or while we are just trying to get away from it all, when we are tired and irritated having spent the entire night at whatever enterprise- or even having spent our entire lives- without success. The second point, really, is a follow-up to the first. He gives us a job to do; he makes sense of and redirects our striving, and gives it success. The good news that we bring with us to worship and to this communion table is that we can come with our

failures and still find love and fellowship and acceptance, and here meet the Lord who has not failed.

Perhaps we should look at this passage differently, as a metaphor, and consider how we go about our lives, and even how we go about doing church, sometimes making a mess of it, sometimes just playing safe in the symbolic boat, until Jesus comes to us and commands, and we obey; we try the opposite side of the boat, and then our net is stretched and full. We need to think about how the sea has always been a symbol for chaos and darkness, which is true even today. There is a new program on TV called “River Monsters,” where scientists and anglers travel the waters of the world going after big, ugly, scary fish like the 800-pound catfish of the Amazon and the 10-foot long alligator gar in East Texas. There are frightening things out there in the world, but we can’t just hide in the boat- the Lord says, “cast your net over the other side”; and in doing so we may save some from the monsters, from danger and despair. That is the job we have to do.

Our passage describes Peter going back to the boat to pull this great catch of fish onto shore. Here is why we must see that this word for fish is different from the word for the fish in the frying pan. The fish in the net are not for eating; *they*

are for saving. Peter brings them to the Lord- “hauled the net ashore” verse 11 says, the word is the same word Jesus used in chapter 6, verse 44, and in 12:32, when he said that when he was lifted up, that is, lifted up on the cross, he would “draw” all people to himself. The idea is that these lucky fish are brought, drawn, hauled to Jesus Christ and given life. And of course, not fish, people. Look at the number 153. Just an arbitrary number? Well, some writers think that people in those days believed there were 153 different species of fish; or, that may have been the total number of nations in the world at that time. If either of these is a correct assumption, then that 153 represents not a finite number, not a limit, but is a symbol that tells us the gospel is available to all people. The message of Jesus Christ is not just for one special group, not just for one race or one color only or one culture, but for everyone; not just for nice people or for the people we like, *not just for the people in the boat, but for everyone*; for all who may be drowning in the suffering and violence of the world, or their own personal hurt and sin. We must cast over our nets and, by the power of God’s grace, haul them out of the darkness and to the Risen Lord who provides, who speaks words of healing and love and hope; who will keep them safe and make them his own. This is the job we are given to do.