

Third Sunday of Easter, John 21:1-19  
April 10, 2016  
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When life gets difficult, when we become lost, confused, and afraid, when the changes of life are not what we wanted or think we deserve we tend to run away. We try to go back to the way it was before to something safe, something familiar. Often we revert to old patterns of behavior and thinking. Even when we know better and do not want to go backwards it seems easier than moving forward.

Peter and six others have returned to the sea. They have left Jerusalem. They have come home to the Sea of Tiberias, the place where it all began. Discipleship, the upper room, the cross, the empty tomb, the house with its locked doors are some 80 miles to the South. Peter decides to go fishing. He knows how to do that. It is familiar and comfortable. Perhaps it takes him back to life before Jesus. The others are quick to join him.

My hunch, however, is that Peter is not really trying to catch fish as much as he is fishing for answers. We can leave the places and even the people of our life but we can never escape ourselves or our life. Wherever you go, there you are. Peter may have left Jerusalem but he cannot get away from three years of discipleship, the last supper, the arrest, a charcoal fire, denials, a crowing rooster. He cannot leave behind the cross, the empty tomb, the house with his doors locked tight, the echoes of "Peace be with you." So he fishes.

Peter fishes for answers. What have I done? What were those three years about? Who was Jesus? Where is he? Who am I? What will I do now? Where will I go? What will happen to me? Peter is searching for meaning, a way forward, a place in life. Peter is dark night fishing. We have all spent time dark night fishing; asking the same questions as Peter, looking for our place in life, seeking peace, and some sense of understanding and meaning. More often than not dark night fishing happens in the context of the failures, losses, and sorrows of our lives. It happens when we come face to face with the things we have done and left undone. We have all been there, fishing for answers in the darkness.

"Children, you have no fish, have you," Jesus says. This is more a statement of fact than a question. Jesus is not asking for a fishing report. He is commenting on the reality and emptiness of Peter's and the other disciples' lives. Peter is living in the pain and the past of Good Friday. He is fishing on the Good Friday side of the boat and the net is empty. There are no fish, no answers, no way forward. The nets of dark night fishing contain nothing to feed or nourish life.

Wonder if we have been fishing on the wrong side of the boat? Jesus seems to think so. "Cast your net to the right side of the boat," Jesus says, the resurrection side of the boat. This movement of the net from one side of the boat to the other symbolizes the disciples' resurrection. It is the great Passover. Jesus calls us to move out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.

- In so doing we see and proclaim, "It is the Lord," and:
- \* Emptiness gives way to the abundance of a net full of fish, large ones, a hundred fifty-three of them;
  - \* Darkness dawns a new day with new light;
  - \* A new charcoal fire kindles hospitality in place of the cold ashes of rejection;
  - \* The last supper has become the first breakfast;
  - \* Confessions of love overcome denials of fear.

Our Gospel lesson begins with a scene of weary fisherman ending an unsuccessful night. Suddenly a stranger appears and gives them some unrequested advice on how they ought to fish. What he says does not make sense but they do it anyway and suddenly their nets are full. If that is not reason enough to assure them of the Lord's presence, Jesus invites them to the shore where he has prepared a kind of Eucharist with bread and fish, cooked over a charcoal fire.

But the critical moment in our Gospel lesson is not breakfast on the beach with Jesus, no matter how charming that story is, but rather the momentous dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Imagine the fear and humiliation Peter must have experienced when he was suddenly in the presence of the Lord he had denied in front of that other charcoal fire in the High Priest's courtyard.

And then Jesus asks Peter: Do you love me? Three times Peter responds: Lord, you know I love you ... assuming you can overlook that little breach of loyalty when your life was on the line and danger filled the air.

The Early Church remembered this important encounter because they saw themselves in this exchange. And we should too. For no matter how intensely we may feel we love the Lord, we are always subject to the same moments of weakness and failure. How important it is that we remember that the love of God is greater than our ability to deserve it or live up to it.

This conversation between Jesus and Peter captures two critical and essential events: the restoration of Peter, who had denied his Lord three times in the courtyard of the High Priest, and the renewal of the sacred task that Jesus had given to his disciples to go to the whole world and share the message of God's unconditional love and acceptance.

You'll remember that Jesus asked Peter: Simon son of John, do you love me more than these? Obviously Jesus meant do you love me more than boats, nets, fish, food, family, and friends? At Peter's lowest moment he had indicated that he loved his life and his skin more than anything. In his denial Peter stated that he did not want to die. He loved the things of this world more than he wanted to follow Jesus to what was clearly a premature death.

That is the challenge we all must face. What is important for us? Do we like Jesus or do we love him. There is a critical difference. At this point we see our Lord move away from fishing language in order to embrace the critical call to a caring, shepherding ministry.

Our Gospel lesson reminds us that we are to care for those around us, particularly those who are in need. We are to minister to both the physically hungry and the spiritually hungry. Within our circle of family and friends, we are to sustain and encourage each other, always in the name of Jesus Christ. And if we are parents or grandparents, we are to fulfill our duty not just to the physical care of children in our trust, but also to their spiritual growth and development. That means we will care as much for our children's souls and faith development as we care for their nutrition and physical welfare.

There is urgency to all of this. It is a terrible thing to reject God's invitation. But it is a worse thing to have never received it. Jesus final words to Peter were Follow me. Like Peter we are called to be in the world for others and to invite people to enter into a life-altering relationship with Jesus Christ. Let us pursue this holy trust with a spirit that is both winsome and effective.

"It is the Lord." Dark night fishing is over. This is Easter. Good Friday is real. Pain, death, sin are

a reality of life. But the greater and final reality is Easter resurrection. "Follow me," Jesus says, "and live as resurrected people. Follow me and fish in a different place. Follow me." "Follow me" is the invitation to examine where we have been fishing. On which side of the boat do we fish? On which side of the cross do we live? Good Friday or Easter resurrection.

It is my hope and prayer that the Lord will continue to bless the people of St Matthew's so that we may grow in grace and abound in hope. Let us tend and feed our Lord's flock. May God bless us and strengthen us to that end. Amen.