

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday in Easter
May 5, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 19:4-8

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

John 21:1–14 NRSV

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But, the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.

Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?", because they knew it was the Lord.

Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus at the Shore

One of the great experiences of my childhood was **learning to fish**. Now, I think I have related this to you in the past, but let's just say that I can handle a hook and load it with live bait. I can use a float and a pole, and I can cast a lure. But, I **rarely land a fish** except with the hook and worm and that red and white float bobbing on the water. I have used the oh-so-tricky fly rod, with dry flies from Wal-Mart, with modest success. And, I rarely go out in search of the native, cunning rainbow trout of our upland and mountain streams. In summary, I would starve and remain penniless if fishing was my principle occupation. Thankfully, I found other things to do for a living.

Now, today's **scripture lesson** is something of a **fish story**, or rather, a story about fish; but it also is a story of fishermen and **fishers-of-people**. It includes the **Risen Christ** acting out a familiar scene in providing food and sustenance: literally and spiritually **feeding his disciples**. And, those same devoted followers of Jesus take in much more than food, as they **reenact the miracles** of their recent past and the **sacrament** they received just days before at the Last Supper. Jesus is at the shore, but there is **much more** going on here than fishing.

So, if you know your *Bible* pretty well, especially the Gospels, you should realize that this scripture lesson takes place after the **death and resurrection of Christ**. The most straightforward hint is the chapter number: 21. It is the last chapter in the *Gospel of John*. At the very beginning of these verses, the writer wants us to know that this is not the first contact between the Risen Christ and the disciples, who have left Jerusalem and are back in Galilee about 100 miles away. This is the third encounter of the **Resurrected Christ** with his deflated, demoralized, and rather **confused followers**: Those men who were closest to him, who have been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry.

In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus tells the disciples to go to Galilee and wait for him there, but on a mountain. In John, they are in Galilee, certainly, but by the Sea of Galilee (Sea of Tiberias). You should know, also, that the writer of *John* may have **added** this story, since the end of Chapter 20 seems like a pretty good conclusion. We can't settle these issues which continually occupy our *Bible* scholars, but however it happened it seems that **Peter** got a bit restless and left wherever the disciples and other followers were hiding in Jerusalem. In Galilee, Peter can return to his "**comfort zone**" and principle career of **fishing**. And, being a natural leader, others went with him.

Now, other Gospels describe a similar scene when Jesus called the disciples (*Matt.* 4:18-22, *Mark* 1:16-20) at the Sea of Galilee. However, the *Gospel of John* does not describe their calling in that way. The other Gospels describe a miraculous catch of fish, so some of today's scripture lesson is an intentional **retelling** of elements of that story. Other references to the **miracles of Jesus** follow in these verses. The failure to recognize Jesus and the **slow recognition** of the significance of the moment are not new events to us, since the Gospel depict most of those affected by the healings as hesitant to understand Jesus as the **Son of God** (*John* 9). The meal prepared by Jesus is **fish and bread**, which immediately brings to mind the **feeding of the thousands** following the sermons he preached (*John* 6:1-15). And, like the two men who met the Risen Christ on the **road to Emmaus** (*Luke* 24:13-34), the disciples immediately recognize Jesus upon **sharing the bread**. No one asks a question after that among the disciples. There is no need for speech: **Jesus is Risen**, and there is new and strong **power** in Him. Now, the disciples fully recognize that Jesus is the **Christ**.

Well, this is pretty packed with topics for preaching with **reformed theology**, **sacramental theology**, the importance of **sharing** what we have, and the undeniable presence of **Christ at the Eucharist** which is our sacrament and blessing. Putting most of those topics aside, I want to place at least a couple of things before us today.

First of all, scripture lessons like this and nearly all of the **parables** have unique features. They are based on **everyday experiences**, certainly. They are in all four Gospels, and they typically begin with “There was a” In addition, parables draw us into the **setting** of the story, allowing us to identify with one or more characters and the situation. They bring out the best of intentions, but soon they **flip our typical experience** into something more profound and **deeper**: affecting the core of our personalities and our **faith**.

Now, we come to a practical aspect of the sermon and the first question for us this morning: Can you **picture yourself** in this story? Does it draw you in as an **observer**? Are you like me and identify with the impetuous, almost comical behavior of **Peter**, desperately trying to clothe himself before his Lord and Master and jumping into the water when the boat was likely already in the shallows. It is an entertaining portion of the story and it **contrasts** with the serious subject of **Christ’s appearance** and his message to the disciples. How about the other disciples that are trying to figure out what’s happening around them and to them? **Isn’t that every day** for most of us? I know that I can never anticipate all that happens to me and around me each and every day. And, I often get it all wrong. But, through it all God remains with us.

The parables and these verses help us identify with Peter and the disciples: You might feel something moving within you at the prospect of the **Risen Christ feeding you** both physically and spiritually in a way like no other. In contrast, if we look at this and think of this superficially, treating it as if it was a brief **report** on the nightly news, then I believe that we miss out on the full impact of this story. And, if this does not affect us at all, then I would say, **keep reading**. Something is likely **to change**.

Earlier, we mentioned the echoes of **previous miracles**. If you can recall the story of **feeding the thousands**, Jesus and the disciples started out with nothing: **no food** at all. Then, some **portions** of food appeared but just for a few people, hardly taking care of Jesus and his twelve disciples. But, through the blessing and **power of God**, the entire **multitude** was fed; and, **each had enough**. Not only were they satisfied, there were **leftovers!** In a previous sermon, we described this in terms of the **overflowing love of God** and God’s mercy, which we know through Christ. The thousands on the hillside experienced Gos that day. And, God’s power, mercy, and love **continue** in this story and to us today.

Like the feeding of the thousands, this story begins with nothing, as well. Peter and the others are fishing, using the boat and a net or seine. They **fish all night long** and have **nothing** at all. Jesus calls out to them. Now, I am not sure how you say, “**Any luck today?**” in Aramaic (the common language among the people in Palestine), but Jesus was doing something like that. But, the disciples did not recognize him. This reminds us that they did not recognize his **full divinity** when he was alive among them, prior to his arrest and crucifixion. And that, is what **you and I should recall** at this time in the story.

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus discussed being born again with the Pharisee, **Nicodemus** (*John* 3:1-21). In those verses, Nicodemus only **gradually understood** the underlying meaning of the words of Jesus. But, the conversation this time gradually builds **insight for the disciples**. Peter and the disciple Jesus loved are the first two to **notice Jesus** on the shore. One stays in the boat, which apparently is in shallow water. Peter, acting on impulse, comically tries to cover himself before the Risen Lord, and then impatiently hurls himself into the water, likely wading and walking to shore to be with Jesus.

Soon, they are all gathered there on the shore of the **Sea of Galilee**. And, gradually the full impact of this **third appearance of Christ** begins to act on them: physically, emotionally, and then spiritually. It may not happen all at once, but aren't those the same things that we experience in our **worship**, in our prayers, in our study, and in our devotion and **work and ministry**? Isn't this **gradual understanding** the typical way that we are **nourished and fed** by God's Spirit? Isn't this the frail, fallible, sometimes funny way that we **experience God**?

There are obvious talking points in this scripture lesson. We can start with **the water** itself: abundantly present as far as the eye can see. The waters of **our baptism** come to mind with God's Spirit overflowing for us and into us as part of this sacrament. In the story, the blessing of abundance continues in the miraculous **catch of fish**, like God's overflowing **grace and mercy**, and the experience of bringing **God's Spirit**. And, it comes to us whether we jump in with both feet or steadily row to shore. Our second sacrament of **the Eucharist** is reflected in the feeding of the disciples, **prepared by Christ**. These are ordinary elements of food for the **everyday people**: They were readily available to them then, just as they are now. And, **God's Spirit remained** with the disciples, just as it does with us.

In addition, the feeding of the disciples becomes a veritable feast that reflects the abundance of the **heavenly banquet** that awaits us. Furthermore, **Christ was present**, even making the preparations for the meal. And, no one is hindered or prevented from participating: **All were welcome** for this meal; and, all are welcome at the table today.

Lastly, this encounter with Christ **changed the disciples**: all of them. They finally understood that this was the powerful **Risen Christ** before them. They asked no questions, probably because they came to the **full realization** of God's presence among them: There were no more questions of "Why?" There was only **amazement** and the realization of the significance of this moment.

In our scripture lesson today, the disciples are still "**in the dark**" about Jesus, literally, even though he has presented himself to them twice before this encounter. While in the dark of night and during this **dark time** of their mourning and confusion, they returned to what they knew best: **fishing**. They had **little reward** for their efforts as far as catching fish: There were none. But, the actions they took that night through the early morning brought on a far more significant **encounter** with the Son of God, **Jesus Christ**. The many things that followed were familiar and, yet, **brand new**. The previous miracles amazed thousands, even the curious onlookers and followers at the periphery of the ministry. But this encounter **on the shore with Jesus** brings a full awareness of the **Risen Christ**, the **love of God**, and the resilience of the **Holy Spirit**.

In this concluding portion of *John*, the disciples were **changed forever**. But, it was not the end of the story for any of them. Instead, it was the **beginning** of the great story of **the Gospel**, along with the **faith journey** of the disciples themselves which began at that moment on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Because of these events and the witness of the disciples and others, the **story of the Gospel** came into being, and was passed from disciples to their followers and to **all believers** in God through **Jesus Christ**.

Thanks be to God: Because this same message and resulting **blessing** are available to every person: follower, doubter, believer, servant being, and true disciple of Jesus Christ, our **Risen Lord**.

Stan Reid © 2019