

Easter 3C 2019 Sermon

April 10, 2019

John 21:1-19

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.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

In Holy Week and throughout the Easter season we are steeped in John's Gospel. One of the characteristics of John's Gospel is that John loves to use **signs** –

visible, outward things that point to *invisible* spiritual realities. In John's Gospel, there is almost always more *meaning* in the text than meets the eye; layered meanings beneath the surface.

Today's Gospel is certainly a case in point. And since there are more layers of meaning in today's passage than we could address in a **month** of Sundays, I will touch on only a few.

To begin with, I would suggest that, just as our **First** Reading today tells the story of the transformation of *Paul*, so our Gospel today tells of the transformation of *Peter*. And since throughout John's Gospel Peter is representative of **all** disciples – including us – today's Gospel has a lot to say about our *own* transformation.

Let's start by putting today's passage in its context. Jesus has already risen from the grave and has appeared to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning; then he appeared to the disciples (minus Thomas) on Easter Evening; and then to the disciples *with* Thomas the following Sunday. In today's passage, the scene has moved from Jerusalem to Galilee. Seven of Jesus' disciples are gathered together, and Peter says, "**I** am going fishing." The others respond, "We'll go with you." And they fish all night long, catching nothing. What are we to make of that?

Fr. John Shea suggests that "fishing" carries two meanings: "First, it brings to mind the missionary activity of the early church. Jesus called his disciples to fish for people...

"Secondly, fishing is a metaphor for hidden spiritual reality becoming visible. The spiritual is *always* present, but often unseen. However, there are times when the spiritual comes shining through outward appearances... [and... these times...] are like the moment when nets, bursting with fish, break the surface of the water. The fish were always there, present but unseen..." – signs of an ever-present but unseen spiritual reality: the presence of our unseen God.*

"**I** am going fishing." In John's Gospel, these are the first words out of Peter's mouth since that fateful night when he stood around a charcoal fire outside the place where Jesus was on trial some hours before he was crucified (John 19:18). What were the words that came out of Peter's mouth while he stood around *that* charcoal fire? Three times he denied knowing Jesus – despite the fact that he had *sworn* that he would **die** before he would *ever* deny his Master. (John 13:38) The first word out of Peter's mouth in **today's** story is the first word we have *heard* from him since he denied Jesus 3 times. And what is that first word out of his mouth? "I". **I** am going fishing. Peter's ego is in charge here. And the fact that the other disciples immediately join him means that they are on the same page. Peter and the other disciples have put all their hope in their own unaided efforts to fish.*

Now if, as we noted earlier, “fishing” symbolizes both the missionary task to which Jesus has called his disciples *and* the effort to bring up from our unconscious depths a spiritual reality that is always present though hidden beneath the surface, it is no wonder that the disciples catch nothing all night long. When we are firmly situated in, and operating from, our egos – “**I** am going fishing” – we are not going to be very successful in fishing for people; nor are we going to be open or receptive to any depth of *spiritual* reality, which requires that we *surrender* our egos to God. When we are staunchly in our egos, we are not in that place where we can say, as we have just sung, “Take my life and let it be / consecrated, Lord, to Thee;” or as we will sing later, “Here I am Lord; I will go Lord... I will hold your people in my heart.” **Those** are words of ego *surrender*.

And the fact that the fishing in today’s story takes place *at night* should *also* be a tip-off, for throughout John’s Gospel *darkness* symbolizes either a failure to see or understand or a state of opposition to God. (Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, and didn’t understand [John 3:1-21]; Judas leaves the last supper to betray Jesus and John tells us, “It was night” [John 13:30]; but the Samaritan woman came to the well at high noon, and she **did** understand. [John 4:1-42]) The fact that John tells us the disciples are fishing *at night*, then, is a clue to the reader that they are going to fail.

But John *began* his Gospel speaking of the ultimate **triumph** of light over darkness. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it,” John tells us at the very beginning of his Gospel. (John 1:4-5) So we might anticipate that John would *end* his Gospel with light *overcoming* the darkness! And that is indeed what we see. We read in today’s passage: “Just as the day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.” (Dawn is breaking, but the light is still dim.) And from out of that first light, Jesus’ voice calls to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?”

How strange that Jesus would call these adult fishermen “children”! But John is once again, here at the end of his Gospel, hearkening back to the beginning of his Gospel where he wrote, “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him... he gave power to become children of God...” (John 1:11-12)

“Children, you have no fish, have you?” John Shea remarks: “It is because they have *forgotten* this relationship [as God’s children] that the risen Jesus **knows** they have failed during the night. He does not *ask* them if they have caught fish. He **tells** them what he *knows* to be the case [‘you have no fish, have you?’] and makes them acknowledge the futility of what they are attempting to do.”* When you and I are acting from our egos, what Thomas Merton called our “false selves,” **we** will never catch fish, either – whether in the sense of our mission to “fish for people” or in the sense of bringing up from our unconscious depths a spiritual reality that is always present but hidden. We will never catch fish by our **own** efforts alone, functioning from our egos, our false selves. Only when we

listen to the word of the risen Christ (“cast the net to *that* side of the boat”), only when we are receptive to the flow of the Holy Spirit within and through us – only *then* will that super-abundance of shining fish be brought to the surface and overflow our nets. *Then* the deep truth of our relationship as beloved children of God and sisters and brothers of one another can be brought up from the depths of our unconsciousness into the light of a new dawn.

When the disciples come ashore, they see a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. This early morning charcoal fire signals the *reversal* of the events surrounding that **other** charcoal fire around which Peter had warmed himself on that dark night when he had denied Jesus three times. *Now* it is the dawn of a new day, and this is a **different** charcoal fire, on which there is bread and fish, loaves and fishes once again, *spiritual* food which will nourish the disciples for the mission that is ahead of them. Jesus does not *remind* Peter of that *previous* charcoal fire; in fact, **nowhere** in *all* of the Gospels does the risen Christ remind his disciples that they had forsaken him or denied him. Nor does the risen Christ need to remind **us** of *our* betrayals and denials. The powerful immediacy of the Resurrection means that we do not need to say the confession in our worship throughout the Easter season.

Just as he did in his earthly life, the *Risen* Jesus in today’s Gospel invites his disciples to a meal – but *this* meal is breakfast, for a new day is dawning. “The disciples *must* engage in the exceedingly important task of eating,” writes John Shea. “They must receive and ingest the love of God that accompanies the bread and fish.”* For this is sacramental food, and it is in ingesting the love of God that Peter finally begins to turn the corner. And Jesus, like the good spiritual director he is, cajoles and encourages Peter to reach down into his own depths and draw up to the surface that love which has too long been kept in the darkness of self-sufficiency and fear. He asks Peter three times, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” It was *fear* that had caused Peter to deny Jesus three times. But now is the moment of transformation when the love of God that Peter has ingested – that love which, in the person of Jesus, had just conquered death – it is now the moment when perfect love casts out fear, as John writes in his First Letter (1 John 4:18). Jesus even gives Peter the opportunity to step back into his competitive ego – “Simon, do you love me *more than these*?” But Peter doesn’t take the bait; his transformation is past the point of no return. He has ingested the love of God, and he responds *from* that inner place of love: “Lord, you know all things” – which implies, “and I, Peter, do not know much at all.” It is a profound statement of surrendering his ego, his false self.

Now, scholars note that John’s Gospel sees Peter as a *representative* disciple, which is to say, Peter’s actions and words in this Gospel should not be understood as unique to the *person* Peter, but as representative of what **any** disciple might say or do – including you and I. So it can be said that it is you and I who object to having our feet washed by Jesus; you and I who deny Jesus three times. *And*, it is you and I whom Jesus calls “children,” you and I whom Jesus feeds at each

Eucharistic meal, you and I whom he asks, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” It is you and I whom he commissions, in response to that love: “Feed my sheep. Tend my flock. Follow me.”

In short, this Gospel story is your story and my story. So let’s be honest with ourselves: How much of what **we** plan and do each day issues forth from our ego alone – “**I** am going to do this... “**I** am going to do that” – rather than issuing forth from that inner space where we know ourselves to be beloved children of God, open to, and guided by, Divine Life flowing into us and through us? What fears are keeping those receptive, loving, and vulnerable parts of ourselves hidden in darkness beneath the surface of our consciousness?

As we come forward to receive the body and blood of Christ this morning, may it be for us not just a routine act that we perform each week, but rather a sharing of a sacramental breakfast with the risen Christ at the dawn of a new day. May the partaking of bread and wine act to draw up from unseen depths within us that Life that springs eternal (John 4:14). May our prayers open us to Christ’s love received, returned, and shared. And may every word spoken and every act undertaken this week emanate from that place deep within us where we **know** we are a beloved child of God.

AMEN

*The quotes, and many of the ideas in this sermon, come from: John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 117-128