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John 21:1-14
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Haven't You Any Fish?

Do we have any fishermen or fisherwomen here this morning?

Would you consider yourself an experienced fisherman? An intermediate? Or a novice? What is it that you like about fishing? What don't you like about fishing? Why isn't it called catching? If it's called fishing and not catching, it sounds like when you go fishing that you are not guaranteed to catch something, right?

What are some things that you can do to increase the likelihood that you'll catch some fish? Where you cast? What bait or flies you use? How you cast? How well you behave above the water so you don't spook the fish? All of those things are factors that we can control to raise the likelihood of catching some fish, right?

Have you ever been skunked? What was that like?

Say you were an expert fisherman, this was your livelihood, and you had been up fishing all night with your buddies, and you didn't catch a thing. You were skunked. You feel pretty crummy, right?

What if as you were hauling in your empty nets to call it a night and some one from the shore calls out to you, "Yo! Rookies, haven't you caught anything?"

How would that make you feel?

Pretty mad, right? Like maybe you'd want to jump out of the boat and strangle the guy. Right?

That perfectly sets the stage for today's scripture lesson. It's been a few days since Jesus' resurrection and he has appeared to his disciples several times. But some of them had become restless of waiting for Jesus to tell them what they should do next. So one of them has a brilliant idea and the others decide to follow him.

Please join me as read this story for ourselves from the Gospel of John 21:1-14 and we hear for ourselves what happens next.

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: **2** Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. **3** "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

5 He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”

“No,” they answered.

6 He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. **8** The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. **9** When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

10 Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” **11** So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. **12** Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. **13** Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. **14** This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There are a couple of things that I’d like to do this morning. One is to fill in the gaps that we sometimes skip over so that we can fully understand what is going on in the text. We’ll also see where a similar story occurs in the Gospel of Luke. Then we’ll look at this interaction with Jesus and Simon Peter. I think we’ll see the playfulness of Jesus as he interacts with his disciples who for all intents and purposes have abandoned Jesus’ call to be fishers of people. And finally, we’ll ask what is God saying to us today through Jesus’ question?

So first, let’s fill in some of the gaps that we see in the text this morning. Several of the disciples have left the locked prayer room and gone fishing on the Sea of Tiberius also know as the Sea of Galilee. There was Simon Peter, one of Jesus’ closest disciples who denied knowing Jesus three times during his arrest and trial. Thomas (called Didymus which means twin) who we sometimes call “Doubting Thomas” because he wouldn’t believe that Jesus had risen from the dead unless he saw physical evidence of it. Then there was Nathaniel from Cana in Galilee who was there when Jesus first called disciples to follow him and Nathaniel sarcastically said, “Jesus of Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

Then there are the sons of Zebedee, also known as the Sons of Thunder for their boisterous hot headed personalities. These were brothers James and John, who is also the writer of this gospel and who refers to himself as “The Disciple that Jesus loved.” And then there are two unnamed others, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, who was the first to have found “The Messiah.” And the other was Philipp, who was also from Bethsaida like Simon Peter and Andrew who pointed Jesus out to Nathaniel. What connected them to each other, was that they were all expert fishermen who had left their fishing jobs behind to follow Jesus for three years.

Luke tells the story of when Jesus first called these guys to follow him.

They were out fishing, having worked all night, and caught nothing. Sound familiar? They were just coming back into shore and putting their boats up when Jesus got into Peter’s boat and asked him to go back out and put out his nets out into deeper water for a catch.

Peter answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that his nets began to break and boat began to sink.

Peter responded, “Go away from me, Lord: I am a sinful man!”

But Jesus responded, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch people.”

So they pulled up their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.”¹

What this story shows us is that it wasn’t only time that resulted in a miraculous catch when they trusted Jesus for direction.

While each of these fishermen were present, we get the sense that Jesus’ interaction was really with Simon Peter as a precursor for the serious conversations that Jesus would have with him when he reinstates Peter three times in response to Peter’s thrice denial.

Jesus is anything but mad here. In fact, I think we see his compassionate and playful side coming through. I wonder if his friends have returned to fishing, not as a way to avoid their true calling of being fishers of people, but to simply deal with their grief in a constructive way. Peter apparently was the first who had had enough of sitting around moping and waiting around said, “I’m going fishing.” And the rest of them said, “We’ll come too!”

One commentator wrote, “If grief comes, it is best not to sit solitary, moping, and desolate, but to get back to one’s daily work. It will be dazedly that one puts it through, moving about in an unsubstantial world of shadows, and of things that have lost their momentousness. Yet it is wise. And in temptation it is common

¹ Luke 5:1-11

sense to fall back at once on some hobby or play or game or interest that will hold the attention, fill the mind, crowd out the evil thing [of death.]”²

Have you ever experienced grief like this before? Where you just longed for some normalcy to your day, to get out of the head space of being suffocated by your loss, that you just needed to get back to work and think of something else for a change? It’s completely normal and healthy. But as one does, we need also to give ourselves some grace, because working amidst grief is like walking through quicksand. Not going any where fast. Getting nothing done. Like fishing all night but catching nothing!

Jesus understood that with his friends. We get no sense of shame here especially since they had temporarily left their calling of being fishers of people behind for the moment.

In fact, we see a bit of Jesus’ playful side come through here.

Remember, they have been fishing all night. They are tired. They are discouraged. They are probably a bit grumpy. And Jesus calls out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?”

Remember my questions earlier? What do you typically ask a fisherman? “Catch anything?” Or better yet, “Any luck?”

You don’t say, “Haven’t you caught any fish?” Worse yet, is how Jesus addresses them as friends. Now that is NOT what the Greek says. The Greek word that Jesus used is “Paidia.” It is literally translated as “little children, half grown boys, or rookies.” Not what you call grown men who are professional fishermen.

Little Children! Haven’t you any fish?

Now let us remember that whenever Jesus asks a question, it is never because he doesn’t know the answer to it. He asks to see if we know they answer to his question. Jesus knew that that that they not caught any fish.

To which they simply say, “No.”

Jesus then offers a little friendly advice “Hey, try throwing your nets on the other side of the boat for a change and I’ll bet you’ll find some there. Yeah! The right side. Not the wrong side!” Do we get a sense here that maybe Jesus is getting a little sarcastic dig? I do!

It’s a wonder that the boisterous Sons of Thunder and manly man Peter don’t dive out of their boats and attack this guy.

But sure enough when they did what Jesus said, they hauled in a bumper crop of fish that their boats were nearly sinking. Thats when the pieces started to fall into place.

² George Arthur Buttrick, ed, *The Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VIII The Gospels of Luke and John*, Notes on 21:1-15 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), p 803.

Something in Jesus' voice and the way things were miraculously turning out, alerted John, the disciple who Jesus loved, that it was Jesus. "It is the Lord," he said. And Peter, again, all show and no results, jumped out the boat nearly naked, and ran toward Jesus on the shore.

When they made it to shore, they were dumbfounded because they knew it was Jesus and yet didn't want to ask him just to be sure.

When they landed, there was already a fire burning and some fish cooking on the fire, and some bread. Breakfast was ready.

Have you ever been so discouraged about something because it seems like you have been trying really hard to make something happen, but it just feels like you are pushing a ten ton boulder up hill and you're not getting anywhere? Jesus knows. He sees our hard work. He sees our effort. And he is working behind the scenes to make something happen on our behalf.

Or maybe better yet, you've been putting your nets out on the wrong side of your boat, or in waters that God doesn't plan for you to fish in. What if we took Jesus' word today to try a different approach? How might that yield better results?

Jesus knows and is inviting us to trust that he will provide just we need.

Just as he did with his disciples.

As we take all this into consideration, what might God be saying to us through it?

The first thing is how much influence Peter has on other people. My friends, people all around us are watching and learning from the choices we make. We can either lead them toward Jesus, or away from him. We need to constantly check our actions to see that they reflect being faithful followers of Jesus all the way to the end. Or are we just Petering out ourselves, losing faithfulness and steam to further the Gospel?

A second take away is that there is much value on waiting on God. And there is no shame in doing something else until God's calling comes to be. Many years ago when I was laid off from a job right before our eldest child was born, I started a consulting business, until an opportunity came along to go into full time ministry. Then when my Young Life Area Director job ended a few months before going to seminary, I worked as a gardener. And then before coming here while at seminary, I worked in the library and did some odd jobs.

The real work however was in waiting on God to come through. I knew that it was coming, just not now.

Another take away is how we see the gentle way that Jesus woos us to rely on his strength and not our own experience, strength, or ability.

And finally, I think that we are being encouraged to listen for Jesus when we feel like we are at the end of our ropes and don't know what to do. Particularly

when we feel stuck and our old ways of making things work are no longer working.

Jesus said, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”³

So may we remember that we are deeply connected to others and our actions have big impacts. May we have grace for ourselves and others when we fall short And may trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in us to help us finish life strong and not Peter out.

Amen.

³ Matthew 11:28-30