

Easter 3C 2022 Sermon

May 1, 2022

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."

Throughout the Easter season we read from the Gospel of John. Now, we have seen that John uses signs, metaphors, images, double-entendres, all in an attempt to convey spiritual reality through the totally inadequate tool of human language.

We see John's use of metaphor and imagery in the very first verse of his Gospel, where we are told, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." "The Word," capital "W," is a metaphor that is not immediately understandable to our logical, concrete minds. John has in mind the eternal Christ, present *with* God and *as* God, from before time. John tells us that the world came into being *through* this Word (v. 3). John tells us that this Word was **in** the World; but the world did not know him (v. 10). This Word came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him (v. 11). Yet, to all who **did** receive him, he gave power to become **children of God** (v. 12). *The Message Bible* puts it this way: "[The Word] came to his own people, but they didn't want him. But whoever **did** want him... He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves." (John 1:11-12) Whoever **did** want him... He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.

My friends, we must keep in mind these words from the *beginning* of John's Gospel if we are going to make sense of **today's** Gospel passage from the *end* of John's Gospel.

As **today's** Gospel reading begins, Jesus has already risen from the grave and has appeared to his disciples – including Peter – twice. Now, you would think that having seen the risen Christ twice would have changed these disciples completely and permanently. And yet, even St. Paul, after his own *powerful* experience of the risen Christ – an experience which literally knocked him to the ground and temporarily blinded him – even St. Paul needed to go to the desert of Arabia for 3 years (Galatians 1:17) to *process* that experience, in order that his ingrained, lifelong mindset, perspective, and consciousness might be transformed, making him ready to take the Gospel to the world. And so, it should not surprise us that, as the curtain rises on today's Gospel scene, we find Peter reverting back to his old way of life as a self-reliant fisherman, saying, "**I** am going fishing." And the other disciples respond, "We'll go with you." And they fish all night long, catching nothing.

"**I** am going fishing." In John's Gospel, these are the first words out of Peter's mouth since that fateful night before Jesus' crucifixion. If you remember, after Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was taken to the house of the chief priest to be questioned. Peter followed, at a distance, and waited outside in the courtyard of the high priest, where there was a charcoal fire. Peter stood near the charcoal fire, warming himself (John 19:18). And what were the words that came out of Peter's mouth as he stood near 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. (Matthew 26:35; Mark 14:31; John 13:38)

Now, Fr. John Shea suggests that “fishing,” in John’s Gospel story, “...is a metaphor for hidden spiritual reality becoming visible. The spiritual is always present, but [like fish in the sea,] often unseen. But 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...”*

Access to the realm of the Spirit does not come through human will or ego alone; and so, the disciples, operating *only* from their human wills and egos, catch nothing throughout the night. (John’s Gospel often uses the image of darkness or night as a sign of the inability to see the presence of the divine.)

But then, John tells us, “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?’”

What a *strange* way to address these sturdy, experienced, adult fishermen – “children!” It sounds condescending; almost an insult! But remember what I said at the beginning of the sermon – that we would not be able to understand *today’s* passage unless we recall the very **first** verses of John’s Gospel? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God...” “[This Word] came to his own people, but they didn’t want him. But whoever **did** want him... He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.” (John 1:11-12 *The Message*) When Jesus calls his disciples “children,” he is calling them *out* of their **ego** selves *back* to their **true** selves, who they are as children of God.

My friends, when I am operating solely from my self-sufficient ego – “**I** am going fishing” – drawing energy only from my own human reservoirs, I am not going to be very open or receptive to the always-present-yet-unseen realm of God, that realm beneath the surface of life’s seas. Such openness and vulnerable receptivity to the Spirit require that I *surrender* my ego to God. When I am *only* living from my ego and **its** resources and energies, I am **not** in that place where I can say, as we just sang, “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*.

“Children,” Jesus calls to the disciples, “you have no fish, have you?” John Shea remarks: “It is because they have *forgotten* this relationship [as God’s children, their true selves] 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 and makes them acknowledge the futility of what they are attempting to do.”*

But now it is daybreak, and the capital-W Word of God comes across the waters to the disciples in their boat. “Cast the net to the right side of the boat...” And they listen to the Word; they submit to the Word; they allow the power and energy of the Word to flow through them. And *then* they are not able to haul the net in because there are **so** many fish. The ever-present-yet-hidden world of the Spirit breaks into consciousness when we open ourselves to the energy and flow of the capital-W Word.

When the disciples come ashore, they see a charcoal fire there. 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. But *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.

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 self-surrendering 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 around that **first** charcoal fire that dark night. But *now* is the morning of transformation when the love of God – that love which, in the person of Jesus, has conquered death – it is now the morning when perfect love casts out fear, as John will write later (1 John 4:18).

Now, Bible 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 me. 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 ask *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 empowered by, Divine Life, the capital-W Word of God flowing through us?

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

* John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 117-128