

## “Gone Fishing”

John 21:1-19

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- 1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.
- 2 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.
- 3 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.
- 4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.
- 5 Jesus said to the, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.”
- 6 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.
- 7 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.
- 8 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.
- 9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it and bread.
- 10 Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.”
- 11 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.
- 12 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.
- 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.
- 14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.
- 15 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.”
- 16 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.”
- 17 He said to him a 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.
- 18 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.”

19 He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

In my life before coming to Fort Hill, I worked in Youth Ministry. Each summer, I would take 25 or so Senior High's up to our denomination's Montreat conference center for the annual Youth Conference. And each summer we would experience a week like no other – one full of engaging speakers; and thoughtful small groups, tight knit home groups, and amazing and engaging worship complete with music, Scripture and sermons geared towards Senior Highs. Make no mistake - it was a busy, full week that was exhausting...and it never failed that we all left there changed in some way. We were charged, inspired, motivated, and excited to continue to live out our lives as faithful disciples. But then we would drive out of those Montreat gates and ever so slowly the feeling would start to dissipate and the reality set in that no matter how hard we tried...we would never be able to recreate that same mountain top feeling again. Perhaps you've had such an experience – a situation that built you, that charged you up to a point where you felt ready to take on the world. Maybe you felt it (or are feeling it for some of you) upon graduating from high school or college; maybe a rest-filled vacation, maybe your own inspirational conference. You felt that motivational, all is right with the world high...and then, it left as you realized you can't stay in that place because the everyday is calling you back. If you have ever had such an experience, then you may have a glimpse into the workings of our Scripture passage this morning.

We find the disciples gathered by the Sea. But make no mistake, they have just come down off of the 'figurative' mountain. Not five verses earlier, Jesus has appeared in his resurrection glory to the disciples and to that loving character, Thomas whom we often refer to as the doubter. Jesus has just invited Thomas to put his finger in Jesus hands and to touch his side...all in an effort to help Thomas and all the disciples realize Jesus is who he has said he was all along...God incarnate. And it ends with Thomas' exclamation and realization, "My Lord and my God!" It is the climax of the John story...the mountaintop experience...and yet, just five verses later, we find the disciples back in the midst of reality. And what do you do when you return to reality, well in Peter's case, you go fishing! Now I can introduce multiple reasons as to why the disciples are fishing including that some certainly were fishermen and they may be returning to their livelihood or maybe even the reality that they were just hungry...but the ultimate point seems to be that the disciples have just come through a surreal experience of living and working with Jesus, observing his horrible death, and discovering and meeting him in his resurrection. And in their overwhelmed – what-do-we-do-now state – not really knowing what to do – they return to their everyday, ordinary life which if you are by the sea - includes fishing.

But they are evidently not doing so well because they have fished all night and caught nothing. Yet as day breaks, an unrecognized Jesus calls out to them from the beach and encourages them to cast their nets in a different direction and when they do, they catch an abundance of fish. Upon hearing the disciple that Jesus loved proclaim that it is Jesus, impetuous Peter jumps right into the water. He doesn't stop and help

with the fish, but his excitement at seeing Jesus and his desire to be with him always drives him to jump right into the water and rush to Jesus. And then joined by the other disciples, Jesus fed them a breakfast of bread and fish.

This post resurrection encounter with Jesus feels almost like a “let down”. It is anti climatic and feels almost “random” in its placement. Actually this final chapter of John is a later addition to the text but one that appears to be added to help the reader. This final chapter of John bridges the whole story of Christ and the disciples to the story of the church. It literally serves as the text that connects the rest of John to the Book of Acts for you turn the page and there is Acts chapter 1 when Jesus ascends to heaven (returns to God) ...and not 26 verses later we are in Acts 2 which contains the story of Pentecost which we recognize as the birth of the church. So this text literally moves us from Jesus’ earthly ministry, crucifixion and resurrection on into faith and living that faith in the life of the church. The gospel writer helps us to move off of the mountain and shows us how to live in a post-Easter world. And Peter – the one Jesus called the cornerstone on which he will build his church – Peter is the key...

Right after the disciples eat breakfast with Jesus on the beach, Jesus turns to Peter and asks three times about Peter’s love for Jesus. And three times Peter passionately pronounces his love for Jesus. While there is some debate about Peter’s love, it is Jesus’ love that helps us understand. The love Jesus is talking about is a freely given, deep-abiding love that seeks nothing in return. It is full of grace and forgiveness as the tri-fold nature of this encounter seeks to redeem any previous denial on Peter’s part. It is the very same sacrificial, unconditional love that God has for each and every one of God’s children including you and me. The love God shows through Jesus is all consuming – it is a love that not only fills us but overflows out of us. It is a love that is so overwhelming that it evokes a response to live out our lives in thanks. It is this type of love in which Jesus challenges Peter to share. Peter, feed my sheep.

In this epilogue of John, Jesus intentionally comes to Peter and the disciples in their everyday lives to make a point. Peter and the disciples have come off the high of their mountain experience and their lives are changed forever. They will never be able to go back to their old lives because they are different people. They are people transformed by Jesus’ love for them and their love of Jesus...and when Peter is called to feed my sheep...Peter is called to love others with the same passionate, consuming love that he has for Jesus. Peter is to love Jesus by living out the practice of caring for Jesus’ sheep.

In her book, Encounters with Jesus, Frances Taylor Gench says this passage serves as a blueprint for the church. “We, like Peter, are less-than-perfect people who are called to love and care not as a way to earn forgiveness and acceptance but as a way of expressing gratitude for the gift of grace, and as a way of living the new resurrected life we have received. In John, the question “Do you love me? is the qualifying exam for ministry” – (it is) the question that must be answered before one is entrusted to care for Jesus’ sheep. (Mark Allan Powell says), “Jesus doesn’t just want his sheep fed; he wants his sheep to be fed by someone who loves him.” Jesus question isn’t do you love

my sheep? which is important because sheep are not very easy to love.<sup>i</sup> (While often depicted as cute little lambs, in reality) they are smelly, stubborn, ornery, not very smart and they like to nip and bite. Like some of our fellow disciples, they are not very lovable...and whatever love we do have for them will most likely not sustain us in ministry. Thankfully, we are not called to love in our own way...instead we are called to love with Christ as our motivation; a love that is lived out in the practice of caring for Jesus' sheep."<sup>ii</sup>

Obviously feeding sheep isn't an easy task. For goodness sake it appeared to take Peter three times to just catch on to what Jesus was saying! But it is not as if Peter has a blank slate...Jesus spent his life modeling the very tasks we are challenged to undertake – watching over people, talking to them, gathering them together, visiting them, clothing them, protecting them, guarding them, praying with them, listening to them, helping them through difficult times, worshipping with them, teaching them feeding them, healing them.<sup>iii</sup> Simply it means loving them... not as we think they should be loved but with that same unconditional, life altering love that Jesus showed and shows for each one of us.

In a recent book on advice, I read an excerpt on giving of yourself by reporter Lisa Ling...in it she tells this story sent to her by email, "On a street corner I saw a cold, shivering girl in a thin dress, with no hope of a decent meal. I got angry and said to God, 'Why did you permit this? Why don't you do something about it?' God replied, 'I certainly did something about it. I made you.'<sup>iv</sup>

"Peter, do you love me? Yes Lord, of course I love you. Then Feed my sheep!"

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Gench, Frances Taylor. Encounters with Jesus. Westminster-John Knox, Louisville, KY, pp.148-9.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Couric, Katie. The Best Advice I Ever Got. Random House, New York. p.191.