

## More Fish Stories

Last week we followed two men on the road to Emmaus, saw what happened when Jesus joined them on their walk and then returned to Jerusalem with them where we met Jesus again. We noticed then that fear and doubt were still strong in the minds of these Jesus-followers until He ate a piece of broiled fish, convincing them that He wasn't a ghost!

Today we're going to look at another post-resurrection story that involves fish, this one from the final chapter of John's gospel:

*Later Jesus appeared again to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. This is how it happened. Several of the disciples were there -- Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the 'twin'), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two other disciples. Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing." "We'll come too," they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night.*

Seven disciples, growing now in their confidence that Jesus was alive, but also noticing that things were very different than they had been before the crucifixion. Jesus wasn't around them much. There didn't seem to be much purpose to their days; no one was leading them into the activities of the Kingdom of God.

So Peter, who was a natural leader, one who led others without really trying, decided to break the boredom and maybe make a little cash on the side. "I'm going fishing." They may not have seen Jesus for a few days at this point and they could easily have been running out of the money that had been given to support Jesus' ministry before His execution. Peter probably just felt like he had to do something and why not do the thing he knew, the thing he had done for a living, an activity that ought to provide them all with some way of sustaining themselves for awhile.

And, perhaps another indicator of Peter's leadership gift, they all said, "We'll come too." Unfortunately, the long night of fishing didn't bring them any economic benefit, just a lot of frustration that wasn't helped by the voice they heard coming across the water from the beach:

*At dawn the disciples saw Jesus standing on the beach, but they couldn't see who He was. He called out, "Friends, have you caught any fish?"*

This is phrased in a way that expects a negative answer, as if Jesus was saying, "No luck, fellas?" And when you have been up all night working at a task that has brought no satisfaction, the last thing you feel like doing is telling someone else that your efforts have been fruitless.

*"No," they replied. Then He said, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get plenty of fish!" So they did, and they couldn't draw in the net because there were so many fish in it.*

Okay, maybe the second last thing you feel like doing is telling someone else that your night was wasted. The very last thing any fisherman wants to do after catching

nothing all night is to have some wise guy yell at him to try the other side of the boat. Seriously? You want me to throw the nets out again, only this time on the other side of the boat? This is not the Queen Mary -- the other side of the boat is maybe 8' away and the weight of the nets will drag them underneath the boat to just about where they were.

The Cotton Patch Gospel retells the gospel story in a modern setting in America. Jerusalem is Atlanta, Bethlehem is Gainesville and Nazareth is Valdosta. In the script for the musical version, Tom Key has Jesus on shore yelling at Peter to cast his fishing line with his left hand and he'll catch a big one. The sarcasm is dripping as Peter reacts by saying, "Oh, Andy, how dumb we have been. We thought that merely because we are right-handed people, we should cast with our right hand . . . just what I need, some turkey telling me how to fish . . . alright buster, this one's for you", and he casts with his left. Of course, he lands the big one and the band launches in on "From that time on, Rock and Andy were hooked on Jesus."

What that expresses so well is how hard it would have been for Peter and his mates to throw the nets out one more time, with no reasonable hope of success, just because somebody calling from the shore told them to. But they did it. They threw out the nets just on the say-so of this voice coming from the shore, 300 feet away, and when they did, the nets filled with fish, 153 of them.

*Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (that's the outer garment), (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and swam ashore. The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore . . . When they got there, they saw that a charcoal fire was burning and fish were frying over it, and there was bread.*

*"Bring some of the fish you've just caught," Jesus said. So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to shore . . . "Now, come and have some breakfast!" Jesus said. And no one dared ask Him if He really was the Lord because they were sure of it. Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish.*

Now, remember back to the last two weeks and how reluctant any of the disciples were to believe that Jesus was really alive. Notice the progress of faith that's evident here. First off, John, who always refers to himself as "the disciple Jesus loved", sees the catch of fish and quickly puts two and two together -- "It is the Lord!" That was pretty quick, considering the track record of Jesus' disciples since His resurrection. And Peter clearly believes John's assessment, because he grabs his cloak and jumps into the water and starts the 100 yard swim to shore. Then notice the end of the story where we're told that "no one dared ask Him if He really was the Lord because they were sure of it." They have seen Him recently where they weren't sure if it was really Jesus or if it might be a ghost, and here they are, not wanting to question because they are so convinced it's their Master. This is progress.

We love to look at the disciples, at what they're learning, at how they're fumbling, at how far from "getting it" they can be at times . . . and the reason we love to study their

words and actions is because they are the characters in the gospels that are most like us. We're funny like that, too. We can be slow on the uptake, a little dull in our response to glory, and really quick to say something that is so far off base that it's funny. Because we identify with the disciples, we want to know them better. Because we think they're funny, we want to watch them react to Jesus. But sometimes we see them getting to places that we would love to get to, but haven't yet. We are amused at their dullness in the gospels and amazed at the depth of their awareness in the book of Acts. And here we see them in transition, moving from fear and unbelief towards faith and joy.

But it's not enough for us to look at the disciples -- we need to spend a little time watching Jesus in action in this passage. Did Jesus know they were going fishing that night? Sure, but He didn't go with them. They needed, at least this one more time, to experience the failure of their own strength and the success that came with His power and presence. So Jesus built a little fire on the shore and waited for them to come back, frustrated and discouraged.

Why would He do that to them? Why didn't He just go out with them in the boat, tell them where the fish were and watch their joy at the huge catch? Because -- and please forgive me for saying this all you fishermen out there -- the main thing was not the fish! The goal of the exercise was not to bring 153 fish onto the shore so these guys could have a good day at the market. The goal was to teach them the power of obedience, the reward of doing what God tells you to do even if it doesn't make much sense. "Throw the net out on the other side of the boat". "Okay".

Jesus taught using parables. He taught using the Old Testament Scriptures. He taught by explaining what He did and how He was able to do things the disciples could not. But He also taught His followers by using the circumstances they faced in life and helped them to see those situations in a different light, from a God's-eye view. Here, He is teaching them that God is with them, that He is caring about their needs, that if they obey His word to them, they will receive blessing, that the blessing will be abundant, that He won't add any sorrow to it - like nets that are torn full of holes because they were carrying too much weight.

The lessons that Jesus has been teaching them in all the time He's had with them, He is teaching them again in this story. And there's another one at the end of the story: Jesus served them the bread and the fish. All through their time together, Jesus had served His disciples. On the night of His betrayal He was washing their feet. And here He is, risen from the grave, triumphant over all the power of Satan, alive forevermore, about to ascend to the right hand of the throne on high . . . and He's serving His disciples bread and fish, breakfast on the beach. Jesus never stopped providing for His followers. So when He promised to be with them always, until the end of the age, He was saying that He was going to keep doing the things He had always done with them: teaching, encouraging, serving.

Let's take a bit longer to look into the lessons of this story today, again starting at the

end and working backwards.

1. While the world pushes us to “be somebody”, to make ourselves “successful”, whatever that means, or looks at life as a competition to see who gets the most toys by the end, Jesus teaches and models the opposite. Listen to a couple of passages from Matthew’s gospel:

*You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must become your slave. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25-28)*

Then look just three chapters later (23:8-12):

*Don’t ever let anyone call you “Rabbi”, for you have only one teacher, and all of you are on the same level as brothers and sisters. And don’t address anyone here on earth as “Father”, for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. And don’t let anyone call you “Master”, for there is only one master, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

Jesus was the greatest among the small band that He led. He had the authority to lead the others and yet He willingly served them. There are a number of people in this fellowship who are not just willing to serve, but eager to serve. They volunteer to help others by driving, by making meals, by helping wherever there’s a need, and it’s not just because they have some time on their hands - it’s because they enjoy being a servant. People can always find other things to do with their time, but not everyone is eager to volunteer, or is thinking of ways to bless others, or even is all that aware of the needs around them. There are several people in this congregation who I would describe as eager to serve, including my mom who has developed a lifestyle of serving through the years.

Jesus said that leaders serve and He offered Himself as an example of a servant-leader, a person who gave His life up for others. The church in our day has become fixated on a different style of leadership than what Jesus modeled. We tend to look for leaders that are different than the twelve men Jesus chose -- more educated, more business savvy, more polished -- and we tend to expect them to function in different roles than the twelve men Jesus chose. As a result we have different kinds of churches than the ones that formed in city after city around the Mediterranean circle.

2. The second big lesson in this passage is that you and I are always being watched. And because people see us in relationship, in a discussion group, at work, on the golf course, in our home - wherever we are - we are always a teacher. People, especially our own children, or perhaps people who are watching to see if our faith is real, or even peers who watch how we handle the stress at work or how we respond to tragic events that happen ‘close to home’; these people are learning from us how believers

live. They are learning how Christian faith makes a difference in the way we respond to all the circumstances of life. They are learning that we can have peace -- or that we are living in the same turmoil and stress that they are. They are seeing in us the presence of the Holy Spirit, His wisdom, His grace and power, His guidance and assurance. Jesus was very deliberate about what He did because He was very aware of how He taught, how His disciples learned from Him. And so He chose to use the situations that presented themselves as opportunities to teach the essentials of faith.

Be aware of who is watching you and be concerned about what you are teaching them. Does that mean you can never relax or let your hair down? No, but it means that there are certain things you don't do because you don't want to model those things to those who are watching. You don't want them to pick up that this is what a person who is following Jesus will develop in his/her character.

What are some of those things? Let me start with a simple, common thing that most people do at least occasionally and some can't communicate without, and that's swearing -- which I'll define as using coarse, crude language as a means of communication. Did Jesus use that kind of language in talking to people, even Romans? No. What are you really trying to get across when you use foul language? Maybe that you're angry, maybe that you're cool, maybe that you're not inhibited by old social standards and maybe that you're just like everybody else. None of which is a good reason. I hear Christians swear quite often, not as often as what I heard when I worked on the railroad in my younger days, but that was non-stop. When I hear Christians swearing I wonder about what motivation lies behind it and I cringe a bit because I know what it sounds like to me and I think it can't sound like the Spirit of Jesus to anyone else, either.

Another one that Christians can fall into is trying to control people with our anger, especially parents with children. When we break out in the major venting, we communicate to others that we have lost control and are desperate to get it back again. When Jesus was angry, He was angry for the sake of righteousness. He was angry when people used the temple courts for buying and selling instead of for prayer. He was angry when religious people opposed Him for healing a man on the Sabbath. Our anger is not usually like that. It's usually selfish, because we're irritated and tired and put off by something, but not because we're interested in justice or God's glory.

3. I could go on, but let's move to #3, which is simply that Jesus teaches the same lesson that is taught over and over again in the Old Testament and here it is again in the Gospels -- it's better to obey than it is to understand. If you know that God has spoken, that He has told you what to do in a particular situation, then do it. If you don't want to do it, then you will make up excuses like, "But I don't understand why God would ask me to do this," but the bottom line is that the best thing is to do what He's asking you to do. "Throw the nets out on the other side of the boat." "That won't help. There's no fish around this part of the lake tonight and throwing the nets a few feet from where we just pulled them in is a waste of time. Why is God asking this?" Just

do it.

4. Finally, life is a journey and that is so fundamentally true of the life of faith. Don't be discouraged with how far you have to go on the journey. It's more healthy and helpful to be grateful for the distance you've already come than to get weary and frustrated with how far you have to go. The death of Jesus was a crisis in the faith of Jesus' disciples -- I doubt if they faced a greater crisis of faith than that. They were disillusioned, discouraged, hurting, broken-hearted. When they heard that Jesus was alive, they couldn't quite wrap their heads around that concept. They didn't have the faith in them to believe that this was true. But it came, and by the time of our story today they were so convinced that it was Jesus on shore, cooking them fish and serving them bread, that no one dared ask Him if really was the Lord -- they were sure of it! When Jesus ascended into heaven, they returned to Jerusalem, full of joy, ready for the task that lay ahead when the Spirit came. When Jesus left them, He left a group who were sure that He had risen from the dead, so sure that they went on to give their lives for that glorious good news. They were full of passion for the mission of God's Kingdom on earth -- embrace that, and allow the Spirit in you to build faith, to build hope, to build trust in you.