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John 21:1-19

## Caught in Jesus' Net

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: **2**Simon Peter, Thomas (called 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**Simon Peter climbed aboard 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. **15**When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." **16**Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." **17** The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. **18** I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." **19**Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

### Jesus taught a lesson

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. So now what? That is the question before us just as it was before the disciples. The disciples had seen the risen Christ. Thomas had touched Jesus' side. This is good news. But now what? Think about the consequences. How on earth are seven disciples from Galilee going to accomplish anything in the world of religion? How are they going to stand against the great religious institutions of the Roman Empire? How are they going to compete with the sophisticated Greeks in the marketplace of ideas? How is this little band of disciples supposed to bring the gospel to the ends of Israel, much less the ends of the world?

This is a daunting task. No wonder Peter went fishing. Whenever any of us get overwhelmed, we often turn to those activities that bring comfort. For me, it is eating a bag of peanut M&M's and a large coke. Whenever you see me with this combination, you know I am overwhelmed. With the Great Commission before him, Peter turned to fishing. However, instead of catching comfort, he caught a lesson.

We read, in verse 3, that the disciples fished all night and caught nothing. I love what happens next. Jesus comes to his disciples and gets straight to the point: "Children, have you caught any fish?" Their reply: "No!"

Wives you know that when your husband says "No!" to a certain question he does not want to talk about it. Did you get the promotion? "No!" Did you fix the car? "No!" Do you want to talk? "No!" In other words, "No, I do not want to talk." "No, I do not want to be bothered." "No, I am not alright."

Early in my ministry, I attended one of those church growth seminars. It was held at Disneyland. The seminar was about using the same strategies Disneyland uses to grow their business in order to grow a church. As I have reflected on that seminar, I now understand why there are so many Mickey Mouse churches. At the time, however, I bought into it. I remember coming back to the church office and writing down all the techniques needed to grow the church. In particular, I wanted to be a church that had many adult converts and baptisms. As I sat at the desk, I became overwhelmed. I quickly realized that as a small church we could do none of these techniques. I broke down and began to cry at my desk. If I was a more faithful man, I would have prayed for strength. Instead, I told God that I quit.

I imagine Peter and the disciples wanted to quit. If they could not catch fish, how would they catch people? The disciples needed a miracle. Jesus gave them one:

"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!'" (21:6-7a).

What is important is not the catch as much as its connection with the feeding of the 5000. Only two incidents take place beside the sea of Tiberius: the feeding of the five thousand and this appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples. On both occasions Jesus "took bread and gave it to them, and likewise with the fish" (21:13 & 6:11). After Jesus fed the multitude he said that "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). In other words, people cannot come to Jesus without God "drawing" them. This word is important because at the end of his public ministry, Jesus used the same word to identify himself as the one who did the drawing. He said, "I, when I am lifted from the earth will draw [helkyein] all people to myself" (12:32). Now in John 21:6, it says that they were unable to haul/draw (helkyein) the fish because the catch was so abundant.

This is important because the miracle of the catch was really a lesson for the disciples. Jesus was teaching them that he would draw the fish. He is the true fisherman. Success did not depend on the disciples. Jesus accomplishes the task. The disciples are the instruments. They are simply the net in Jesus' masterful hands, the very hands that stretched out on the cross.

I learned this lesson as well. I told you that I wanted to quit. I would have quit if there was anyone in the church office to receive the letter of resignation. However, a few days later Carolyn Pagano came to our Sunday morning service. Carolyn wasn't raised in church. She came because she lived across the street and was curious. At that service, she saw a baby get baptized and afterwards asked if she could

be baptized. A few days earlier, I had quit because I did not know how to get adults converted and baptized. God did not quit. Instead, God brought Carolyn to church and she asked me to be baptized. Jesus is the fisherman; we are the net within his hands.

A few months later, Jesus went fishing again as three High School students came into my office and asked to be baptized. And then just this last Ash Wednesday, after the service, George asked me if I would baptize him. I told him we should wait for Sunday because the choir was practicing in the sanctuary. He replied, "Pastor, use a bottle of water. I want to be baptized now." Here I was actually trying to delay him in being baptized. But Jesus was fishing that night. And so we walked into the sanctuary and George was baptized in front of the choir. Jesus is the fisherman; we are the net within his hands.

Fear not, I am with you, oh, be not dismayed,  
For I am your God and will still give you aid;  
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand,  
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand

*(Verse 2, How Firm a Foundation, LBW 507)*

### **Jesus gave good gifts**

There is a funny thing about lessons learned, namely, they are quickly forgotten. This is the third time, after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples. You would think they would get it. But they needed something to hold onto. On the seashore, by the charcoal fire, Jesus gave them two gifts to hold on to.

*The first gift was absolution.* In verse 9, we are told about a charcoal fire. There are only two charcoal fires mentioned in the N.T. It was by a charcoal fire where Peter denied Jesus three times. It would be by this charcoal fire where Jesus restored Peter three times (21:15-19).

Did Jesus need to hear these words from Peter? Did Jesus need Peter to say, "I love you"? No! But Peter needed to say these words. It was for Peter's benefit. That is how confession and absolution work. God does not need to hear our confession. God does not sit in heaven and say, "Wow, I did not know you were such a sinner. That really surprised me." God does not need to hear our confession. God wants us to confess so that he can lavish the absolution upon us.

A few years ago a young woman came into my office. She said she was raised in a Christian home but because of life events she had gone down a terrible path. She said that she was a prostitute. She began to cry. She had never told anyone these words. The reality of her sin was before her out in the open.

The first thing I did was to tell her she was not a prostitute because our practices do not define us. Instead, I put my hands on her head and told her that she was a child of God. And then I absolved her. With these words, she was put back together. She realized that she was not a prostitute. She was a child of God. She was forever changed.

Jesus forgave Peter on the cross. However, it was by the charcoal fire where Peter heard the words of absolution. This was a true gift from Jesus.

*The second gift was the meal.* There was a meal cooking on the fire. Jesus had prepared fish for the disciples. These fish are not the same fish they caught. That would send a terrible message towards evangelism (God catches and cooks us). No, Jesus provided the fish. Jesus invited the disciples to breakfast as his guests. The meal was the gift.

What is important is that it was in the breaking of the bread that the rest of the disciples knew he was the Lord. Verse 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." That is how Jesus is recognized in His resurrection. In the breaking of the bread, Jesus makes himself known. In the signs, sacraments, he reveals his death and life for you.

There is a young boy in this church who has severe autism. As a result, most Sundays he is in the nursery. One Sunday, we did not have nursery care and so his mom kept him in the narthex. When it came time to receive the Lord's Supper, Kathy brought Danny forward. As he knelt at the rail I gave him a blessing. As I passed, he stretched out his hand and said, "Give me Jesus!" Here is a boy who had not been instructed in the meal and could not comprehend it. However, in the breaking of the bread his eyes were opened. He saw Jesus. Flesh and blood did not reveal that to him. It was the Lord. I gave him the Lord's Supper on the spot.

Like the absolution, the Lord's Supper is God's gift to us. Knowing that we often forget the lessons taught to us, Jesus meets us in the meal to forgive our sin and strengthen our faith.

### **Conclusion**

Back to our original question "now what?" Today, we break ground on a new sanctuary. The temptation is to be overwhelmed by such a daunting task. How are we going to pay for it? How are we going to fill the sanctuary? Jesus' answer to us this morning is the same answer given to the disciples: "I am the fisherman; you are the net within my hands. I will sustain you. In case you forget, receive the gift of Absolution and the Lord's Supper. Be so satisfied by these gifts that you might say with the beloved disciple, 'It is the Lord!'"

**In Jesus' Name,  
Amen**