

“Fishing in a New Place”

Sunday, April 18, 2010 - Third Sunday in Easter

John 21:1-19

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I once read about a woman who put up a plaque in her kitchen that read “Prayer Changes Things.” The next morning, she came down to breakfast to find that her husband had removed the plaque. “What’s the matter?” She asked her husband, doing her best to conceal her irritation. “Don’t you like prayer?” Her husband responded: “Of course, I like prayer fine. It’s change I don’t like.”

He speaks for a lot of us. Change is hard. Most of us don’t go out looking for it. And when it’s thrust upon us, sometimes our dearest wish is to get back to the way things used to be.

As John tells it, that’s what happened to the disciples after Easter. It’s true, the resurrected Jesus had appeared to them—not just once, but at least three times. He’d shown them his wounds, breathed the Holy Spirit on them, and sent them out, saying, “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” But the specifics were a little vague. Where exactly were they being sent? What exactly was Jesus sending them to do? And how exactly were they going to do it now that their Lord was no longer with them, at least not in the way he used to be? So they figured they’d best wait for some further instructions. So they waited. And waited. And waited. And after a while, they found themselves getting tired of waiting.

That’s when seven of the twelve, starting with Peter, decided it was time to get back to the way things used to be. Before Jesus came along and turned their lives upside down, they were fishermen. Fishing was their livelihood. They knew how to do it. It was familiar, it was safe, it was comfortable. So it’s no great surprise, I think, that they returned to fishing as they struggled to make sense of all that had happened to them. The dreadful crucifixion. The way they let Jesus down when the going got rough, then abandoned him altogether when it became clear their own safety might be in jeopardy. They could sit around feeling guilty and anxious, trying to keep the dreadful images of Good Friday at bay, missing Jesus terribly and worrying about what was next, or they could go back to the way things used to be. That choice was easy.

So the disciples went back to their fishing boats, hoping they could pick up their lives where they left off before Jesus called them to fish for people. But something was different. They tried doing everything just the way they always had, but it just wasn’t working. They fished all night, with nothing to show for their time and effort but empty nets. And then Jesus shows up and asks them: Have you caught any fish?

I don’t think Jesus’ question was really about fish. I think he was asking his disciples the same question he puts to us today: So, you’ve gone back to doing what you did before you met me. As Dr. Phil likes to say, How’s that working for you?

The disciples had to face it: their nets were empty. I think Jesus must have been heartbroken to see it. These seven men who had been the closest to him throughout his brief ministry on earth, the ones who’d seen and heard everything he said and did, the ones he’d picked to carry on his work, were acting like none of that had ever happened. I can think of a lot of things he could have said at that moment. Maybe something like: What’s wrong with you people? Do you not

get it, even now? But that was not his way. Jesus never forced anyone into a life of discipleship. He never shamed or guilt-tripped anyone. He didn't get people to follow him by manipulating their fear of hurting his feelings or their desire to please. Instead, he had a gentle way of holding up the mirror and inviting people to look. So, you've gone back to fishing. Have you caught any fish?

I think today Jesus asks us to look at the places we're stuck doing what we've always done and coming up empty. Maybe it's at work where we show up every day, do what's expected of us, and leave feeling like we haven't accomplished much that really matters. Maybe it's in our relationships, where we keep having the same struggles with the same people and nothing ever seems to change. Maybe it's in our spiritual lives. We show up for worship, we sing the hymns, we say the prayers, but it just feels like we're going through the motions. Maybe it's at church, where we keep trying to recreate the way things were back then, and wondering why it no longer seems to work. Where is your empty net?

Jesus says: Cast your net on the other side of the boat.

I can just imagine the first reactions of Peter and the others. "Hey, we've been fishermen all our lives! Who does this dude think he is, telling us how to do it?" The nets were heavy and cumbersome. They were tired after fishing all night. The prime fishing hours were almost over. "Oh come on, let's pack it up, go home and get some rest. It's too late to start over. I don't see how moving the nets a couple feet over could possibly make any difference. That'll never work, it's a waste of time and effort."

How did the nay-sayers get convinced to try something new? We know that a power greater than simple human persuasion was at work. They did as Jesus suggested, and you know what happened. Suddenly their nets were full. Suddenly, the disciples saw differently. They recognized the one who had been talking to them was Jesus himself.

Maybe, Jesus says, just maybe, new life means something beyond just doing things the way we've always done them. Maybe an abundant life involves venturing outside our comfort zone. Maybe, if you'll pardon the pun, we miss the boat when we keep holding on to the familiar, insisting no one has the right to force change on us. Jesus just looks on us with compassion, holds up the mirror and asks: Are your nets empty? Maybe it's time to try something different. The results might surprise you.

Maybe, just maybe, if you make just a small change—move just a little bit in the other direction, you just might find your whole angle of vision changes. Maybe you'll find that change brings you joy. Maybe you'll find that empty net becomes astonishingly full.

When I first came here, we had two worship services on Sunday morning, a practice that had little to do with overcrowding and a lot to do with divisions within the congregation. When we began talking about having just one service, there was resistance. Could those who liked the contemporary songs and those who preferred the traditional hymns learn to coexist peacefully? Five years have passed since we negotiated this change. I can't tell you how often I've heard people say how great it is to have everyone in worship together. Everyone gets to enjoy the ministry of the choir. Everyone gets to enjoy the children's time. Everyone gets to see who our leaders are when we ordain them and to welcome the babies when we baptize them. We get to

experience the advantages of being a small congregation where people can really know each other and care for each other. Sometimes the best way to help overcome our natural resistance to change is to periodically remind ourselves of the positive changes we've experienced. Sometimes when we cast our nets on the other side, we find our lives really do become more full. That's when we also start to see that Jesus had his hand in the process all along.

As you are all aware, the Session has recommended that the church sell the second manse, and this recommendation will be presented for congregational vote at a congregational meeting on Sunday, May 2. Reasonable people can and will reach different conclusions as to what is the best course of action here. This is to be expected. Sometimes controversial issues can make us very anxious, particularly when they involve money. When we get anxious we have a way of doing what the disciples did—we go back to our fishing boats and start taking refuge in old, familiar ways of doing things. You know what I'm talking about. We get fearful about expressing our opinions, because someone might disagree with us and might get angry at us for having a different viewpoint. And maybe someone might stomp off in anger and someone might blame us for it. We get suspicious of those with different opinions and we question their motives. Or maybe we just convince ourselves that our viewpoint is the only correct one and so there's no need to listen seriously to the viewpoints of others.

So I think Jesus might be asking us to consider: Have these patterns helped us make good decisions in the past? Have they helped us deepen and enhance our relationships with God and with one another?

Maybe this is the moment to try casting our nets on the other side.

After Peter recognizes Jesus, he jumps in the water, swims to shore where the two of them have a joyful reunion. And Jesus asks him, Peter, do you love me? He asks the question three times, the same number of times that Peter pretended not to know him. Each time Peter answers, Lord, you know I love you. And each time, Jesus responds with: "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep." If you love me, Peter, you have to show it. I'm not really interested in what you say, I'm interested in what you do. So if you love me, show it by loving others. That's what discipleship is all about, it's love in action. What do we mean by love in action?

It means letting go of the idea that we better pretend we all think alike if we want to be in relationship with one another.

It means letting go of the idea that if you disagree with me, you've rejected me personally and my only recourse is to walk away from you.

It means demonstrating our belief that all of us have something to learn from one another and we learn best when everyone speaks honestly and everyone listens attentively.

It means showing each other we can vigorously disagree on issues in a manner that is courteous, respectful, and mindful of the Biblical command to treat others the way we would like to be treated.

It means practicing gracious acceptance of whatever the community's decision turns out to be, even if it doesn't go the way we would prefer.

Love in action is about how we relate to one another, but it's also about how we relate to the world outside our doors. As we reflect on this upcoming decision, as we talk about the issues together, I pray we will see that this is not just a decision about whether to sell or hold on to a piece of property and the financial implications of doing one or the other. It's an opportunity to talk about who we are as a church, what our calling is in Jesus Christ, and how this impacts not just the words we say on Sunday, but what we actually do and how we go about doing it.

May we be faithful to follow our Risen Lord, who calls us to try our nets on the other side, and then watch and see what happens.

Thanks be to God. Amen.