

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
“Catching Fish and Tending Sheep”
John 21: 1-17
3rd Sunday of Easter
April 10, 2016

John 20, last Sunday’s Scripture lesson, concludes with these verses: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

These verses at the end of chapter 20 seem to signal that the stage curtain has come down at the close of Jesus’s final act. John the gospel writer seems to be laying down his quill and dusting off his hands and rolling up his parchment scroll and tying it with a nice neat bow.

These verses seem to signal “The End” of the story.

However, just when it sounds as if it is all over except the applause, here comes another chapter. Chapter 21: 1-17 is today’s gospel lesson.

Some commentators call John 21 an epilogue. (1) In this epilogue, John reprises a number of the themes of Jesus’s ministry which have bubbled up throughout the gospel narrative. As today’s Scripture lesson is read, listen carefully and see if you can tease out and identify some of these themes.

Many say that this epilogue, this postscript that is John 21, is almost certainly a later addition to the Gospel according to John. In all likelihood, it wasn’t written by the original gospel writer himself and probably not even by one writer at a single later moment in time, but rather over a period of time by many hands. (2)

Maybe, scholars speculate, the early church added chapter 21 because there was some unfinished business from the previous 20 chapters.

Perhaps the early church was unsettled about what happened with Peter. Perhaps his three denials were still ringing loud in its collective memory. John 20 may have been an attempt to resolve Peter’s status.

Perhaps there was still some question about whether or not Jesus had really been resurrected and so the writers wanted to squash the rumors by setting up a courtroom scene with exhibit A: he roasted fish over a fire; exhibit B: he ate breakfast with some friends.

And remember the foot race between Peter and the unnamed disciple, called the Beloved Disciple, about which we read on Easter Sunday, how they began at the same startling line, but one got there first, and then the other lapped him and pushed past him to get into the tomb, but it was the first one who actually believed. Perhaps there was still a little bit of lingering competition going on between those who were members of the Church of St. Peter and those who attended the Congregation of the Beloved Disciple down the road, and John 21 was an effort directed toward smoothing over the rivalry. (3) Peter has a role of leadership, but this doesn’t replace the faithfulness of the Beloved Disciple.

It could be any of these reasons or even others, I suppose.

But whatever the reason and whoever the writers of John 21 were, it is clear that they had breathed in the themes found in the first 20 chapters and not only that, they had breathed in the light, air, and freedom that comes as a gift of the Risen Christ and in chapter 21, they sought to breathe out encouragement to all who would walk in the way of the Christ.

Let’s take a closer look at three of those themes.

First, there is the theme of the extravagance of God’s love. Remember some of the signs of God’s love that have appeared earlier in John’s gospel: at the wedding in Cana, water turned into gallons and gallons of \$300 a bottle cabernet sauvignon, twelve baskets of leftovers from a tiny snack of 5 loaves of bread and two fish from a little kid’s lunchbox, perfume that cost as much as most people find reported on their yearly W-2’s poured out by Mary on Jesus’s feet, and now... “Cast your *empty* nets on the other side of the boat,” Jesus says. And the result: dozens and dozens and dozens of fish, oh my!

It is a another sign, a sign not only to first-century readers, but also to us, all these many years later, that the abundance of God’s love and grace is available to us no less than it was to our forebears in the faith. It reminds us that when we have those moments in our lives when a black curtain seems to have fallen over our lives and over the world as a whole, but somehow our hearts for no reason that we can discern surprise us by nearly bursting with joy, this is a sign, a sign of how extravagantly we are treasured by our God.

A second theme found in John 21 is a promise really. It is the promise that is enacted when Jesus sits down to breakfast with the disciples on the beach and invites them to dig into the fabulous feast he has prepared. It recalls the feeding of the 5000 about which we read in John 6 and even more, the meal that Jesus shared with his friends at Passover on the eve of his death, bending down to wash their feet after the dessert tray had been passed. This breakfast on the beach is a sign of God's truth: that by no means was the meal on the eve of his death The Last Supper. Indeed, we eat supper with Christ every time we share the bread and cup when we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We say, "We lift up our hearts to the Lord," and it is a conviction of our Reformed Sacramental theology that the Risen Christ lifts us up to heaven so that we experience his real presence in the sacrament, and in this manner, he supplies us the strength and nurture that we need for faithful lives and work. (4) This is the sacrament's great mystery, and it is the sacrament's great truth.

A third theme rises to the surface in the powerful scene during which Jesus asks Peter to confess his love. Three times Peter does this, though by the third time he is disheartened, even hurt, it appears. But what Peter doesn't quite get in the moment that it is happening, we readers do catch when John 21 is read. The last time before this time that Peter was facing a charcoal fire was when he was in the high priest's courtyard and denied his Lord three times. Now Jesus invites Peter—three times Jesus invites him—to confess his love, thus symbolically erasing the three times that Peter denied.

Moreover, Jesus doesn't just forgive Peter, he doesn't just love him, he also invites Peter's participation in the Risen Christ's own mission by commissioning him "to feed my sheep."

It's hard work, this business of feeding sheep:

Showing up every week to tutor students at Amigos de Cristo.

Getting up early to prepare and serve breakfast and offer a word of encouragement to a teacher on teacher work days at Blythe Elementary School.

Spending a Saturday building raised gardens at Blythe.

Devoting the Martin Luther King holiday to assembling sandwiches for homeless neighbors

All of this is hard work. It takes time. It takes energy. And people are so, so hungry, wherever we look. And sometimes we are tempted to give up. Sometimes no matter how hard we work, it doesn't seem to us to make much difference in the grand scheme of things.

But John 21 prepares us for all this. We are going to feel like failures from time to time. Heck, we are not only going to *feel* like failures from time to time; we actually are going to fail. We will fall short of our best intentions. We will not always follow through. We will time again disappoint and even fall away. (5)

So this is why John 21 is good news for us. Jesus did not give up on Peter, and God does not give up on us. Ever! Every time we fail, every time we get discouraged, every time it seems as if a dark curtain is falling on us or on the world and we are on the brink of giving up hope, the Risen Christ embraces us in extravagant love which knows no bounds, feeds and nourishes our souls with bread and cup, and recommissions us to go out into the world and engage in the work of Christ's own mission, work that really matters.

1. Thomas H. Troeger, "Homiletical Perspective: John 21: 1-19," *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 421.
2. Lewis R. Donelson, "Exegetical Perspective: John 21: 1-19," *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 421.
3. Gerard S. Sloyan, *John* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 227-230.
4. Troeger, 423.
5. David Lose, "Commissioned Yet Again," www.workingpreaching.org, April 7, 2013.