

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Heath K. Rada
“It’s Rally Day – Let’s Go Fishing”
John 21: 1-14
17th Sunday after Pentecost
September 11, 2016

It is a privilege for me to be with you at Davidson College Church this morning. Thank you to the session, and to Lib as well as Robert Alexander whom I have known and loved since he was a very young lad. I understand he has told stories on me. He should know better, because I have every bit as many to tell on him, and invite you to hear them sometime when I am around. There are Many dear friends who are part of this faith community, including former moderator Doug Oldenberg and Claudia. Also there are others whose memories are deeply emblazoned in my heart as I come here today- Two of them I especially wish could be here on this occasion. Bill Boyce, my former minister and one of my mentors, and also my close friend Wool Howell, whose service celebrating his witness to the resurrection I attended here on Wednesday. In this place we are surrounded by the saints and spirit of so many whom we love and have loved.

Today’s Bible passage is a familiar one. So familiar in fact that instead of reading it to you in one piece, I am going to share elements of it throughout my sermon. You see, it is the sermon about Jesus appearing to the disciples after his crucifixion. They had been holed up, somewhat afraid of going out in public, and trying to reassess who they were called to be and what they should do. It must have been a time of great anxiety for them, don’t you imagine? Jesus - their Lord, their professed Savior, the one for whom they had given up most everything to follow - and then watched the crowd, or better yet, the mob, cry out to crucify him! Would they be next? Is that what they were called to do?

So it is understandable that when Peter said “I’m going fishing”, they all said “Well if you’re going we are going too.” Fishing - an activity most if not all of them knew very well. A place where they could go out on the water in a boat, and be away from the madness that had surrounded them the past days. And then, though they had fished all night, they had not caught a single fish. Imagine. Obviously they had experienced light catches over the years. But this night, when they were feeling so low and unsure, it was just one more experience of frustration that enveloped them - and they didn’t catch one fish. You remember what happened next. Daybreak, the light is dawning, and they could make out the coast over there - a number of yards away, the figure of a man who was walking on the beach. He called out to them. “Friends, have you caught any fish?” Probably out of politeness they responded, “NO.” and then the guy on the shore says to them, “Well throw your nets on the right side of the boat”.

Imagine how insane they might have thought this man to be. These were seasoned fishermen. They knew how to fish. They knew that the rigs of the boat were set to cast the nets on the left side, not the right. To change the rig wasn’t just a simple turning around and throwing out your fishing rods on the other side. It required a somewhat complicated process of redoing those rigs - and making them work on the right side of the boat.

Here is the amazing part of this story. Without knowing who that stranger was, the disciples did what he told them. Why? We haven’t been told. But they did it. And then the enormous and amazing bounty of fish were captured in the nets. They caught so many fish they were unable to haul in their nets. Can you imagine the excitement on the boat. Can’t you almost hear them all talking at the same time? Can you believe it? Have you ever seen anything like this? I can’t wait to tell the folks on shore what happened. This is amazing.

And then came the slow realization that something bigger than catching fish had happened. And suddenly the light was bright enough that one of the disciples could identify who was standing on shore. And he shouted out to the others that it was Jesus. In a clamor, Peter put on some clothes, probably out of

respect for Jesus as he had just been fishing undressed comfortably with the guys. And he jumped out and rushed to the shore. The others pulled and tugged on the nets, which miraculously didn't break, and took the boat to the shore to see Jesus.

There is lots more to this story, but let's stop right now and think about what this means to us, today. The point of all of what I share with you today is the critical importance of our being willing to fish out of the other side of the boat.

Today is Sept. 11. A few years ago, that would only mean that we were eleven days into the month of September. Today, however, 9-11 has another whole set of meanings that ignite our emotions and feelings.

Erik Kolbell, the former minister of Social Justice at Riverside Church in New York, compiled a list of remarkable stories into a book, entitled *When YOUR LIFE IS ON FIRE WHAT WOULD YOU SAVE?* Most were based on interviews with famous people like Alan Alda and Jamey Pauley. But one I found particularly powerful. Listen to these words -

There was a firefighter in New York City named Brenda Berkman. She became a firefighter out of her calling - she even said it related to the beatitudes. She felt that she wanted to serve people who were at the end of their ropes, who were feeling totally devastated, and to try to make their worlds feel whole again. But to do this, she had to fight discrimination of the worst kind from male firefighters, and other men who didn't feel a woman had a place in those ranks. She tells of serving on 9-11 - which was to have been her day off. She couldn't get to her own precinct so she went to another one and joined that group in going to ground zero. In one story she shared that the scene was tale of Dante's first circle of hell - blazing heat and blinding smoke, mass confusion and system wide communications breakdowns. She sought to find some of her colleagues, but to no avail. And she worked until midnight, went home bone-weary fourteen hours after arriving. For six weeks she returned to that site to work those long hours = almost every day. Listen to her account of what happened:

At first there was this extraordinary bond among firefighters, forged by our grief. None of the differences that might have one time driven us apart could keep us apart. Lots of fugging, lots of tears. then after a long pause and downward gaze, she added - "and lots of funerals. But the goodwill was more a flicker than an eternal flame. Even before the last of our comrades was laid to rest I began feeling the sting of discrimination that has been a part of every woman's tenure - my own included - on the force.

She went on to say, I particularly remember an incident that happened when I attended the funeral for Father Mychal Judge, chaplain to fire department and one of the first casualties of 9-11. I considered Mychael a dear friend and a real confidant, and I was more than a little broken up the day we buried him. So it just added to my grief that morning when a retired firefighter - a male, a real crusty old timer - came up to me at the funeral, looked me square in the eye and said, "I wish the towers had fallen on you instead." I can't tell you how deeply that hurts - a real dagger in the heart."

Brenda chose to fish on the other side of the boat. First she did so by entering a profession where she knew she might be ostracized and not appreciated. But then she also chose to recognize that even with the pain and discomfort of discrimination, she was called to fish on this side of the boat, and she did it. Secondly, she managed to turn the wrath and ugliness of those who opposed her into fuel which allowed her to witness her faith, and to be even more dedicated to her profession

In this day of prejudice and discrimination we are often forced to consider on which side of the boat we want to fish. Discrimination between races, religions, cultures, educational endeavors, - the list goes on, and we are caught in the tension of doing what is familiar, and doing something different. And what are you and I doing to make a difference? Where do we stop what we have been doing and fish on the other side of the boat?

I wish I could tell you that we Christians were different. I wish I could tell you that we don't discriminate or behave in prejudiced ways that hurt others. And the saddest part of all, too often we do this in ways that use our faith as a cover, as an excuse, as the motive for saying and acting in certain ways.

I have seen that in the divisions that have occurred in our denomination in recent years. Whether we are talking about Palestinians and Israelis, South Sudanese, refugees from Syria and Iraq, gay ordination or marriage, how to interpret the Bible, our responsibility related to the environment, and especially as it relates to fossil fuels, incidents of violence against black young men, and also against police officers? And I imagine that this afternoon, after certain NFL football games are played and players express themselves during the playing of the National Anthem, we will hear more divisive talk and rhetoric.

Even in our local families of faith- the local church - we too often see divisions that are almost impossible to conceive.

Just last week I was invited to address a congregational meeting in another state, which was in a rather large church that is considering leaving the denomination. Here are some of the words that were expressed during my time with them.

“The Presbyterian Church does not represent God’s love and acceptance. It is too concerned with polity, and does not allow us to be Christians in churches in ways we believe are faithful.”

“We are tired of feeling like the PCUSA believes they are the know all, end all when it comes to our church property. We sacrificially gave the millions of dollars that have built and sustained this church. We want to continue to worship here and be a church of another denomination. Why does the PCUSA think they can tell us what to do? It is unChristian and insulting.”

And then some of those who did not want to leave share their points of view. “We understand Presbyterian Polity and what this means. We shouldn’t let all the Baptists come in here and tell us to do things differently.”

“We feel that only one side is willing to be heard, and those of us who want to be part of the PCUSA are not being given a chance to represent what we want.” and another -

“I was a member of this church for 22 years, and nine months ago when I learned about the desire of some to change this from a PCUSA congregation, i decided to return to lend my support to those who wanted to remain in the denomination. I give every Sunday, and attend both worship and other activities regularly. But the minister and the session won’t let me join. They refuse to accept my membership.”

And she sobbed as she recounted this to me.

And then the worst statement of all _

“I pray every night that the young minister who is chairing the Commission from the Presbytery will die and burn in hell.” This was stated by an elder in the church.

What has happened to our embracing and understanding the basics of our faith as taught to us by Jesus? What are we doing to support people who are being discriminated against - in our own PCUSA churches? Do we stand up for them? Do we embrace them in love? Certainly there are those who do not feel the PCUSA is the denomination for them. They have every right to understand and participate in faith communities that are more aligned with their understandings of the faith. But demonizing one another is not, nor should it be, the driving force. In one of the most familiar passages in the Bible - 1 Corinthians 13, known by many of us as “the love chapter” we are told that “today we see in a mirror dimly but tomorrow we will see face to face.” Folks, the Bible tells us that none of us, not a single one of us, has the wisdom to know the full truth as God knows it. We are left with the responsibility of trying to determine what truths we CAN see, and in the best of all worlds, to look in our dim mirrors, and to share with each other what we are seeing - our partial glimpses of the truth which together might help us see even more. We are not told to judge in those circumstances where God must be the judge —in fact we are asked not to do so. Instead, might we be being asked to cast our nets on the other side of the boat? To try something that we have never done, and frankly which is against our entire system of doing things? The disciples did. And remember, they did this without knowing that Jesus was the one who suggested it. They were just frustrated that they had been fishing all that time and had nothing to show for it. When will WE become frustrated enough to do something differently?

And while I am on this, I am going to step into dangerous territory

of meddling (you know the old saying “Reverend, you’ve gone from preaching to meddling.”) Well I’m going to meddle by talking politics. Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell you for whom you should vote. I think it is absolutely wrong for ministers to use the pulpit to advocate for one candidate over another. But I also believe that ministers, and frankly, each of us who claims to be a Christian, confront one another about the qualities that we need in a president, in a governor, a senator, or any other office. Do we hide behind separating church and state, and feel that different values apply in each situation? Are we willing to write out a list of qualifications that we believe would be most Christ like, and use them to judge the candidates? What would happen if Davidson College Presbyterian Church members came together, and said, “Let’s come up with a list of qualifications that Jesus would want to see in our candidates, and then let’s go promote those values in the newspaper, on television, in community forums. This isn’t a lame way to say we must do something superficial. And we always need to know that we are seeing these issues and answers through our dim mirrors, our limited understandings. We should not condemn others - but we should consider inspiring them, getting them to think. Some would say that is baloney, that deciding matters of state solely on Christian values overlooks many factors of reality which could cause our nation to experience unprecedented problems - economic, social, even lead us to war.

And I say, “ Where do we draw the line? Where do we determine what we do and don’t do because it might cause us hardship or difficulty”. Please hear me, I don’t take any of this lightly, nor do I pretend that there is an easy to follow answer. It is complex, but folks - we are called by Christ into a complex world, to make hard decisions, to live out our faith. We cannot, we must not, opt out for convenience or comfort reasons. Jesus didn’t. And we cannot either, if we believe what we profess.

At times, we must learn that we are called to fish out of the other side of the boat. Our current actions are not enough - we must do more.

Today is Rally day in this church. It is a day of new beginnings - for each of you. It is not just a day for children to return to Sunday School, but it is a time when each of you is being asked to recommit yourself to the idea of learning more about our faith, and how to incorporate it into our daily lives. So what are you going to do? Are you going to continue coming on Sunday morning to worship but leaving the rest of the work to others? Or are you going to take seriously your personal call - the response you made when you joined the church? And if so, then get involved in some form of study and response for God’s will to be done. No time has the old saying been more true - If not you, then who?

Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to give even more time to study, to interact, to explore how we are called to be Christians in this very complex time?

If you listen carefully I think you might hear an answer. Listen, Listen carefully. Is that person on the other side of Main Street looking over here at you right now, sitting in your pew. Is that person calling your name? Is that person saying, “Friend, fish on the other side of the boat. The time is now.”

It’s Rally Day. Let’s go fishing!!!