

Providence Presbyterian Church
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John 21: 1-19

What made Peter go back to fishing? What made him leave Jerusalem? He was usually one to be right in the fray. Jesus has risen, you would think Peter would be right there, eager for what is next, just as he and John went running to the tomb. He leaves Jerusalem, goes back to Galilee, gets in his own boat, and goes out to where the fish run and lets down his nets? Peter says to the others, “I am going fishing.” The others said to him, “We will go with you.” And so, “they went out and got into the boat.”

Now, we know that Peter and the other disciples will come to play important roles in the early church. Our reading from Acts gives a picture of Peter preaching, not long after these events. But it is interesting that John’s gospel conveys that it was not a straight line from the resurrection to the early church, meaning Jesus has to re-call, as in call again, at least some of the disciples, and in particular, Peter.

Fishing, for them, is not what you do on your day off. It’s what you do to pay the bills, it a vocation, it was their vocation when Jesus came on the scene, their vocation until Jesus said, follow me and you will fish for people. But the story has come full circle, and now they are back to fishing for fish.

Certainly, people had followed Jesus and lost hope, or felt that Jesus was asking too much, or got a stern letter from their mothers and headed home. But, Peter... he was among the most fervent. He had proclaimed that he would follow till the death. He was the first to jump in, literally and figuratively. He was the most eager, most committed, most “wear your emotions on your sleeve” type. He was not the kind that discourages or gives up easily. So, it must have caught the others’ attention when he asked if they wanted to join him, when he said that he was going back to fishing.

And so, I return to the question: what made Peter go back to fishing? The one who was always at Jesus’ side, who wanted that seat at the head of the table, who was the most believing and aspiring. What made him go back to fishing? Had he stopped believing? It doesn’t seem that was the case, he had seen the empty tomb, and he doesn’t question the possibility that Jesus was risen when John realizes that is the Lord calling to them across the lake. He seems to know and acknowledge that Jesus is risen. So, what is it?

Does he just not realize that Jesus' mission continues, that his work and redemptive vision have not ended. Did he think there was no more left to do? This also seems unlikely. Peter was the type to jump in and try to make things happen, such as when Jesus was being arrested and he grabbed a sword and started swinging.

It seems more likely that he has, in some way, lost faith that he is the guy, that he is the one capable of following to the death, questioning his own fervency and the faithfulness. It seems he had questioned his own place in Jesus' ministry and plans. He had questioned whether Jesus needed him or wanted him. I think this is closer to what is going on. And the way Jesus will ask him three questions around a *charcoal* fire, a detail we are given to link this with the fire in the courtyard when Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, further suggests that Peter is discouraged, perhaps haunted by his failures and shortcomings.

Something has changed in Peter, some retreat, some loss of hope, a hope that he had a role to play. I'm not sure how we might best describe it. A broken heart? Embarrassment? Disenchantment? Maybe you have a better word.

Have you ever felt such a way yourself? Ever been in that place where lose a vision for your place, lose hope that you have a contribution, lose confidence that God is both interested in the details of your life, and that he has some important role for you?

And perhaps, more importantly, what do you do when you get to the point of losing hope, or faith, or love, or trust? When the road has been too tough, the traumas along the way too penetrating, what do you do? How do you get your hope back, your faith back, your love for Jesus back, or your love for your neighbor back?

That is the interesting thing in John's gospel. He records the miraculous catch of fish not at the start of the gospel, as Luke does, not when Jesus is first calling the disciples, but now at this juncture, after all that had happened, calling them again to leave their nets, to leave what they know of others and themselves, and to follow again. And just as the nets became bursting with fish, in Acts, we see the church bursting with those that believe and follow in the way.

But the scene in our passage that is the most striking is the sitting by the fire. That seems to be the turning point, even more than the miraculous catch of fish.

As they sit, Jesus asks Peter a question that likely touches that sense of disappointment and failure that Peter experienced, that deeply human response of himself and the others. “Do you love me more than these?” Peter had boasted that even if all fell away, he would not. Peter’s fervency and love was such that all the gospel writers tell of it. Jesus’ question is either a mean jab at what Peter knew he failed at, or a penetrating question of a friend, seeking to restore Peter. Do you love me more than these? Peter’s response is not full of the confidence he once had – yes Jesus you know I love you.

Three times Jesus asks the question to match the three times Peter denied knowing him. Each time Jesus issues the call, feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Notice Jesus does not offer any platitudes of encouragement – such as, it was one time, we all make mistakes, I’m sure it won’t happen again. Don’t worry about it Peter, it’s no big deal. I’m sure you will all do better next time. Jesus does not base anything in such shallow assertions. He asks only, do you love me. And he issues the call, feed my lambs.

It is a sober moment there in the quiet of the morning, by the crackling of the fire. A moment of calling, asking Peter to leave the world of fishing, to leave his home in Galilee once again and to carry on Jesus’ work, to fish for people, to feed the lambs.

Jesus calls Peter, but it is not a general call. It is not a general appeal to see who might respond, one where you could easily say, I’m sure someone else will respond, I don’t need to. It is a personal call, a call rooted in personal knowledge and love and forgiveness and grace, a call issued face to face and by name. A call not so easily dismissed.

So, what are we to make of this story? How do we determine what it means? What is our approach to reading and interpreting? We could read this as an historic account, telling us how things happened, how it was that Peter went from denying Jesus to becoming this forceful preacher and figure in the early church. We could also read it looking for transferable principles, such as that Jesus loves and forgives us even when we falter, or that Jesus calls flawed people to do his work.

There is yet another approach, sometimes called a narrative approach to interpretation – it is to see the narrative movement of the gospel story as paradigmatic, as parallel to what Christ might want to do in our own stories. We, then, identify parallel moments in our own journey, and are invited to follow a similar contour.

Have you ever lost faith, questioned your place, retreated to what you know, been tentative to step out or to think God wants to do something in you? Have you ever been embarrassed, or uncertain, or focused on everything you can't do or don't have?

Where, in your own journey, have you responded like Peter does when Peter pulls away from Jesus and goes fishing? And then, what would Jesus say to you, what questions do you imagine he have for you, if you were having breakfast over the fire, or coffee together at your favorite coffee-shop, or walking together on a familiar walking path, or whatever your place of retreat is?

The implication is that Peter's story is paradigmatic, that Jesus would have similar questions and similar faith in us, similar love and forgiveness, and a similar call, issued by name, looking into our eyes – a call to carry on the work, the love, and forgiveness. To fish for people, to feed the lambs, to follow.

Now, you may not like this approach to reading scripture, because it does put you right into the story, you can't retreat to the crowds, can't do the non-response thing where you assume someone else will step up. No, in this approach, Jesus is speaking to you. It is not a general call. It is a personal call, a call rooted in personal knowledge and love and forgiveness and grace. And if Jesus was to look in our eyes and speak such sincere words to us, would it be enough to mend our tattered wills and faith and hopes, would it be enough to cause us to accept ourselves even as Jesus does, and rise to the call to follow, even as Peter does?

For this is how John ends his gospel. Jesus is risen, the power of sin is broken, there is forgiveness and grace for all. But, things are just getting started. This is when the miraculous catch of fish comes, and this is when the call comes, this is when Jesus seeks to restore our faith and our hope and our fervor, to carry on the work.

We know how Peter responded. How about you?

And all God's people said... Amen.

John 21 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ² Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin,^a Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³ Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶ He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards^b off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus and Peter

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

^a Gk *Didymus*

^b Gk *two hundred cubits*