

"Casting Nets on the Right Side"

The story of Jesus' appearance by the sea in the Gospel of John is one of the great stories in the whole Gospel tradition. Most of the disciples have gone back to Galilee and are sitting around doing nothing. Just "sitting by the dock of the bay...wasting time." Simon Peter has had enough of this. He gets up saying, "I've had my fill of just sitting around. I'm going fishing." "All right," agree the others, "we'll go with you." And so they go out, fish all night --- and catch nothing.

They have returned to their previous vocation and with the dawning of a new day they head back to shore with empty nets. They are tired, frustrated and disappointed. They just want to go home! And there stands Jesus. His call to them is to go back out and try again --- but this time put the nets out on the right side of the boat, which they do. The amazing thing to me is that the disciples did not know who he was at first, yet they went back out. Was it their desperation for a catch, a love of task, a desire for success, a sense of the specialness of the man calling them to return to their task, or something else? Whatever it was, they ventured back out and find success with nets filled to overflowing.

Part of the fascination of this episode of the story is that John, in telling the story, is letting us know what is going on, while the disciples do not. This is so similar to the resurrection appearances in the stories of the two on the road to Emmaus and Mary Magdalene weeping at the tomb, supposing he is the gardener.

They return to the shore where Jesus has placed some fish on the barbie, along with some bread. He invites them to come and eat --- as he will invite us in a few moments here in Knife River. It is a Eucharistic event despite the lack of wine. And it is at this meal that they receive a recommissioning from the Lord. They are reminded who they are and for what they were originally called --- "to abandon their small boats and fish other seas."

The Early Church remembered this important encounter because they saw themselves in this exchange. And we should too. Here is the one who denied him and others who deserted him. I am guilty of having done the same, for no matter how intensely we may feel we love the Lord, we are always subject to the same moments of weakness and failure. How important it is that we remember that the love of God is greater than our ability to deserve it or live up to it.

"Children, you have no fish, have you? Cast your net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some."

Here we have a text that allows for some creative discussions what our lives, in times of frustration and depression might look like if we dropped our nets on the other side and if we fished on the side that Jesus' asks of us rather than the side suggested so often by our worldview.

This conversation between Jesus and Peter captures two critical and essential events: the restoration of Peter and the renewal of the sacred task that Jesus had given to his disciples --- and to us as well ---to go out to the whole world and share --- and to live out the message of God's unconditional love and acceptance.

"Follow me." The tone is invitational, not commanding --- an invitation to carry on all that he taught us by what he did and by what he said. The common motif at the end of all of the Gospels is the mission of the disciples. John's treatment is the most direct, and the most personal. It is consistent with the approach he takes throughout his Gospel. In John, we come to know Jesus intimately. At the last supper in the upper room and at this breakfast on the shore, there is the opportunity in John's stories to come to know Jesus more than anywhere else in the Gospel tradition.

And coming to know him in this intimate way, we decide if we accept the invitation to come, to follow and to go --- or do we choose to just sit "by the dock of the bay... wasting time?"

Our lives, as we live them in this world, are dominated by questions that never will be asked. "What do your annual earnings look like this past year? "Is your portfolio matching the national average?" "Don't you have enough money to retire?" "When are you going to start living your Minnesota winters in Arizona?" "How many friends did you say you have on Facebook?"

When the day comes for the Good Book to be opened and paged through until the Northey is found under the N's, it will note:

- ✓ God didn't ask what kind of car I drove; He did ask how many people I drove who needed transportation.
- ✓ It will note that God wasn't at all concerned with the square footage of my house; He was more concerned as to how many people Trish and I welcomed into it.
- ✓ God didn't ask in what neighborhood I lived; He sought to see how I treated your neighbors.
- ✓ God paid no attention to the clothes in my closet; He noted how many I helped clothe.
- ✓ God spent no time counting how many friends I had on my Christmas list; he had an interest in how many saw how I lived out the story of Christmas.
- ✓ God saw a list of achievements and awards, but his concern was the values and character found behind their attainment.

Whether we cast our nets on the right side or not, will be determined by the priorities found in our hearts and our determination to continue to fish. The question we all are going to face may well be, "What have you done for the least of mine?"

A seminary professor took a student aside and chided him: "Mike, you look like a man knocking on doors, hoping and praying no one answers the door."

When one immerses oneself in another's situation one can better understand compassion and justice. In doing so, we find ourselves moving from a comfort zone and

voices from the heart dictate action. But what was true of Mike is often what is true of us. In the musical, *My Fair Lady*, one song spoke bluntly:

The Lord above gave man an arm of iron
So he could do his job and never shirk
The Lord gave man an arm of iron-but
With a little bit of luck
With a little bit of luck
Someone else'll do the blinkin' work!
With a little bit...with a little bit...
With a little bit of luck you'll never work!

The Lord above made man to help his neighbor
No matter where, on land, or sea, or foam
The Lord above made man to help his neighbor-
but
With a little bit of luck
With a little bit of luck
When he comes around you won't be home!

Back to those first century Christians. A few weeks ago, in our Lenten Bible study, we spoke of the church communities they built and what they taught us of how it was done. They lived out the Gospel as they heard it, simply living out the teachings and the welcoming warmth of Christ found in them. Centuries have passed, millions of church structures constructed, millions upon millions of sermons preached using millions of commentaries. But what builds a church --- this church --- remains the warmth and welcoming that reflects Christ to all who are sent among us.

Imagine that morning long ago when the disciples breakfasted with Christ. Jesus appears and causes empty nets to be filled with 153 large fish. He prepares a meal and warmly invites them to "Come." After the meal, in speaking to Simon Peter, he directs him "to feed my sheep."

In Matthew, the disciples are commissioned with the imperative to "Go and make disciples and to teach them everything that I have commanded you."

In my senior year in college, I was asked by the bishop to become the pastor of a small Methodist church in Cromwell. It had been served by a college senior who was to leave for the seminar --- a friend from a neighboring community on the Iron Range and with whom I had worshiped and played ball against.

Both of us had been mentored by Pastor Ralph Hendricks, a soft and gentle shepherd who could rise in emotion and voice when speaking of the Gospel. "You," he said, "have an obligation to preach the Gospel --- and all the commandments that are in it!" And would add, as if to reveal a guarded secret: "And there are more than ten."
Amen.

3rd Sunday of Easter, Cycle C, Knife River Lutheran Church, May 5, 2019