

A God of Second Chances

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
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John 21:1-19

After Jesus' crucifixion and the subsequent discovery of the empty tomb, Jesus' male disciples were in hiding. They were gathered in a house in Jerusalem with the doors locked, because they were afraid of the authorities. It was there that the resurrected Jesus appeared to them for the first time. A week later he appeared to them a second time.

But now as the last chapter of John's gospel begins, we find that seven of Jesus' disciples have left Jerusalem and returned to their homes in Galilee. Without Jesus there with them, without him to follow, they have gone back to what they know – they've gone fishing.

We find them on the Sea of Tiberias, better known as the Sea of Galilee. They've been fishing all night and they've caught nothing. Then, early in the morning, as the sky begins to lighten and the sun begins to rise, someone appears on the shoreline about 100 yards away from them – the length of a football field. In the dawn's early light it's hard to see who it is so far away. He shouts out to them: "Hey, you haven't caught any fish out there, have you?" They shout back: "No, we haven't!" They must have been pretty discouraged by this time! They had nothing to show for their efforts – not one fish after hours of fishing! The figure on the beach shouts to them: "Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you'll find some fish!"

Now, if I were them, I think I'd be rolling my eyes at this character's suggestion! He must be joking! What difference is it going to make whether we let our net out on the left side of the boat or the right side of the boat? There just aren't any fish out here. Who is that guy on the shore, anyway? What does he know?

Nevertheless, they decide to give it one more shot before heading into shore. I suppose they had nothing to lose and everything to gain by trying one last time to catch some fish. They let out their nets on the right side of the boat as the stranger suggested. And to their utter surprise and amazement, their net filled with fish – so many that they could not haul the net back into the boat. They had to leave the net full of fish in the water and drag it slowly to shore.

It was at this point that a light bulb went off in one of the disciple's heads. Peter, he said, "It's the Lord! It's Jesus!" When Peter hears that it is Jesus who has been shouting to them from the beach, Peter is literally caught with his pants down! John tells us that he is in the boat naked. He's so flustered he's not sure what to do first. He wants to return to shore right away to greet Jesus. But now there's a net full of fish tied to the boat, so rowing in will take a while. He could jump in the water and swim to shore, but he doesn't want to greet Jesus without any clothes on. So, he puts his clothes on first, and then he jumps into the sea, and he swims the hundred yards to shore as quickly as he can. Meanwhile, the rest of the disciples slowly row their boat to shore, hauling the net full of fish behind them.

Another curious detail in this story is the specific number of fish caught that morning. John tells us that when they hauled the net ashore, it was full of large fish – 153 of them – and yet the net was not torn. I don't know that there is any particular significance to this number. It may be that like in any fishing trip, the first thing people want to know is how many fish you caught. So, we count! And that particular morning, they caught 153, or so the story goes.

When the disciples finally come ashore, Jesus greets them with breakfast already prepared. He has built a charcoal fire, over which he is broiling fish, and he has set out bread as well. And he says to them: "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught. Come and have breakfast." And Jesus served them right there on the beach. The scene was reminiscent of other meals that Jesus had served: the feeding of the 5,000 and the Last Supper. He "took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the

third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.”

Now, after breakfast, Jesus and Simon Peter have a little heart to heart. Jesus asks him, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” And Simon Peter answers, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus says to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time Jesus asks him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” And Simon Peter answers him again: “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus says: “Tend my sheep.” Then a third time, Jesus asks him the same question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” And when Jesus asked Simon Peter this same question a third time, Peter felt hurt. He answered: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” And Jesus said to him again, “Feed my sheep.”

What’s going on here? Why does Jesus ask Peter the same question three times, and why is Peter hurt after the third time he is asked? Well, we have to think back to what Peter did after Jesus was arrested. Jesus was brought to the high priest to be questioned, and Peter waited outside in the courtyard, warming himself by an open fire. But other people who were there in the courtyard, by the fire, thought that he looked familiar. They thought they recognized him from somewhere and asked if he wasn’t one of Jesus’ disciples. He was asked three times, and three times he denied it. He was worried about guilt by association. He lied to save his own skin. Peter betrayed Jesus just like Jesus said he would.

So, the seemingly repetitious back and forth between Jesus and Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, was Jesus giving Peter an opportunity to redeem himself. Having denied Jesus three times, he was now being given the chance to declare his love for Jesus three times. It may be that he felt hurt only after the third time, because it was only then that he remembered betraying Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. Now he was getting a second chance. But it wasn’t enough to declare his love for Jesus in words alone. He had to show his love for Jesus in deeds, by caring for others. “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.” And Jesus concludes his conversation with Peter, saying: “Follow me.”

This passage reminds me that through Jesus Christ we worship a God of second chances. The disciples, who appeared to have given up on the movement that Jesus had started, who went back to their previous lives, fishing in the Sea of Galilee, were being given a second chance to follow Jesus, their risen Lord. The disciples, who appeared to be unable to catch a single fish on their own, were given another chance to put down their nets and haul them in full. And Peter, who had betrayed Jesus three times, was given a second chance to declare his love for Jesus and restore their relationship.

We worship a loving God, a forgiving God, a merciful God, who yearns to be in relationship with us. No matter how separated or alienated from God we may feel, no matter what we have done, even if we think we are beyond forgiveness, God longs for our return. God stands ready to welcome us back. That doesn't mean that God approves of everything we do. Sometimes we disappoint God. At times, we may even anger God by our words or actions. But through it all, God continues to love us – unconditionally.

That's why our service of worship includes a Prayer of Confession and an Assurance of Pardon every Sunday. It is our acknowledgment before God that we are only human, that we make mistakes, that we fall short of God's hopes and expectations for us, that we say and do things that are contrary to God's will, that we sin, and in so doing, we separate ourselves from God. And the assurance of pardon reminds us that God loves us nevertheless, that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. God forgives us for our shortcomings. God forgives us our sins. And we are able to start again with a clean slate. Our God is a God of second chances. By confessing our sins, we open our hearts to God, we seek God's forgiving, loving embrace, and we find God waiting with open arms. Thanks be to God. Amen.