

The Essential Question
John 21:1-19
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 18, 2010

Today, the third Sunday in Easter, roughly corresponds with the timing of this morning's Gospel reading which took place several weeks after Christ's resurrection.

The Gospels reveal, for each of the disciples, the joy of that first Easter morning took a long time to sink in. The disciples' initial reaction to the news "He is risen" was a combination of confusion and doubt. That's why Jesus came to them twice in the Upper Room, to personally confirm his resurrection and also to empower them to deeper faith and action. But apparently they still didn't get with the program because instead of spreading the news, they went back home to Galilee and sat around, not quite knowing what to do next.

That's when Peter announced, "I'm going fishing." Can you picture the scene? They're all sitting around, bored, frustrated and as obtuse as ever, when suddenly Peter couldn't take it any more. He didn't quite know what to do, but he knew he had to do something so, maybe with a disgusted look on his face he said to no one in particular, "I'm going fishing." I imagine the other disciples looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders, "Why not?" So one of them called out, "Wait for us Peter, we're coming with you."

You probably have a hard time imagining yourself sitting around with nothing to do because you're so darn busy with careers, home repairs, kids, church work, community involvement...you'd love to be able to loaf around wondering what you should be doing next but that's not your luxury. However, if you look at it on a deeper, spiritual level maybe the disciples' predicament will begin to resonate with your personal experience and deepest longings.

On second thought I'm not quite so sure those disciples were lounging around with beer bottles in hand wasting away the days. Remember, they went back home to Galilee and I'm sure their wives had long honey do lists (after all they were away for three years) plus their children were demanding their long lost fathers' attention. At the same time, their fishing expedition wasn't for pleasure, it was their jobs, they still had to make a living to feed their families, so back they went to what they knew best, fishing.

So maybe, subconsciously, Peter was drawn back to the sea because that's where he first heard Jesus say, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." It's also probable there were deep unresolved spiritual implications in Peter's decision to take out his boat one more time. Maybe there, out on the

water, he'd reconnect with his Lord and be reenergized enough to finally get his act together and find that sense of contentment he was searching for.

So, out they went at sundown, when the fish were biting, to cast their nets, but with no luck, setting the stage for one of those "Déjà vu all over again" moments.

At dawn, returning to shore, they noticed on the beach in the early light a shadowy figure calling out, "Children, you have no fish have you?" You'd think at least one of them would've recognized him, but none did. "No," they shouted in reply. "Then cast your net over the right side of your boat." Again, not one of them wondered, "Didn't this happen before, three years ago?" Maybe they were too tired and distracted to remember. But they did what they were told and in short order they weren't able to haul it in because there were too many fish.

That's when the lights came on, at least for John, the Beloved Disciple. "Peter, it's the Lord!" Peter, in character, impulsively jumped in and swam to shore, leaving the others behind to haul in the boat load of fish.

Once on shore they discovered Jesus tending a charcoal fire and preparing a meal of fish and bread. "Come and have breakfast."

I believe this simple scene is the perfect metaphor for the Church, Christ inviting his beloved friends to break bread with him. When he said, "Bring the fish you caught," the disciples had to realize maybe they caught the fish, but Jesus showed where to find them. Likewise, we tend to our careers, we raise our families, we love and serve one another and do our best for the least of these, but as Jesus told them earlier, "Without me you can do nothing."

So there they sat that early morning sharing their catch and experiencing community both, by the way, provided by Jesus. But what completes the "Church metaphor" is the conversation Jesus had with Peter.

It doesn't say Jesus took Peter aside for a private conversation, so what was said was for all the disciples to hear. "Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Three times Jesus asked that question, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter answered, "Yes Lord, you know I love you," growing more agitated each time because Jesus didn't seem to accept his answer.

Why was Jesus repeating the same question? Was he out to embarrass and shame Peter in front of the others? Many Bible scholars believe asking Peter, "Do you love me," three times was Jesus' way of undoing Peter's three Good Friday denials, because each time Peter said, "Yes..." Jesus gave Peter the responsibility and authority to feed and tend his sheep. This interrogation told Peter, "all is forgiven, so let's now get to work."

But there's an equally valid reason why Jesus asked the same question three times. In the original Greek translation Jesus was asking Peter, "Do you love me?" using with the Greek word *agape* (love) the highest brand of love possible, the total, unconditional self-giving love Jesus showed on the cross. Peter knew he couldn't match Jesus' brand of love. The Greek word Peter used for love was *philia* (brotherly love), the love of an intimate friend. Peter also knew Jesus was asking him for something more than he could give. Peter couldn't love Jesus the way Jesus loved him.

Can any of us? And yet Jesus entrusted the care of his flock to Peter. Feed and shepherd my sheep Peter, but then Jesus went on to say, "...when you were younger you fastened your own belt and went wherever you wanted. But when you grow older someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you don't want to go." In other words, the day would come when Peter would love Jesus with all his heart and lay down his life for his friend in a martyr's death. So, maybe Peter's love at that moment was inadequate, but in time, by grace alone, it would grow.

Having said all that, let's now take a second look at this beautiful scene and consider its implications.

Jesus was grilling breakfast for them and at the same time, they were enjoying a deepening sense of community with their Lord and one another. They realized they caught the fish, but only because Jesus told them where to cast their nets. They also realized the only reason they were friends with each other was, again, Jesus. He gathered and kept them together, and as always he was feeding and serving them.

What completes the metaphor is Jesus' frank conversation with Peter. "Do you love me more than these? Are you ready to match my love with your love?" Even when Peter couldn't love Jesus with equal devotion, Jesus understood Peter was giving the best he could for now, but in time Peter's love would grow and be transformed as he tended and fed the flock Jesus entrusted to his care.

It's such a lovely, heartfelt scene. The rising sun, the cold morning, the warm fire, the circle of friends, the simple breakfast, and Jesus, at the center of it all, bringing them together, feeding their bodies, nurturing their souls, inviting them to love him and challenging them to feed and shepherd his ever growing flock.

But something else was happening. Jesus was passing the baton. His time with them was growing short. Soon they'd be on their own, but never alone, to carry on Jesus' ministry to the world God so loved. Think about that. Despite all their failures, their bickering, their doubts and fears, their betrayals and

denials, Jesus still counted on them to “love him more than these” so they could be empowered to love the least of these.

Today, you are being asked the same question. Jesus speaks your name and asks, “Do you love me more than these?”

How you answer that question will impact not only your life, but the lives of everyone else God has entrusted to your care.

“Do you love me? Then feed my lambs and tend my sheep.”