

John 21:1-19

I don't know about you, but one sure sign for me that things are trending toward summer is barbecue. There's something about food cooked over a fire that means taste to the nth power. It doesn't even need to be meat—just a simple little kabob of zucchini, onion, and cherry tomato roasted over the grill is like heaven on a skewer. So it makes sense that Jesus would emphasize his perceptible presence to the disciples by preparing a delicious meal full of flavor.

Today's gospel reading from John makes use of many of the same elements we heard last week in Luke's account. Breakfast on the beach, check. Bread and fish, check. Failure to recognize, check. And the insistence that Jesus is tangibly, touchably, bodily raised, check. But John's account is also chockablock with other pieces of the story that were not included earlier. We'll get to these.

The part of today's scripture that interests me most is Jesus' encounter with Peter. This is now the fourth time that Jesus has shown up since his resurrection.¹ In the first, he comes to Mary Magdalene weeping in the garden, and assuages her grief. In the second, Jesus shows up behind locked doors to tell his disciples, "Peace be with you," and then sends them out "as the Father sent me." In the third, he reprises his appearance to Thomas, who had been AWOL when he entered the upper room.

Each time, they are surprised that the person they're speaking to is Jesus. As we said last week, there must either be something significantly different about his appearance, or the disciples' vision is clouded by their expectations of what it's possible to see, just the same as our expectations condition what we see.

But now, however much time has elapsed, and Simon Peter says. "I'm going fishing." What do you suppose is the tone of this? Is he going fishing because, when the world turns upside down, fishing is what is familiar? Because even in the wake of loss he still had to feed his family?

What about that whole business about being *sent*? Has he given up in despair so soon? Or is his understanding of being sent more like our

¹ John says "third time" because he doesn't count Mary. Hmm.

modern understanding than we realize? Going out into the world we already live in, doing our jobs, looking for opportunities to be about God's work in the world? We don't know.

And of course, all night on the water he and the other six are getting skunked, until a mysterious figure shows up on the shore and tells them to put their net on the other side of the boat. "Boys, you're not catching too much are you?" "Nuh uh." "You know what they say about doing the same thing and expecting different results, yeah? Why don't you try something new?" And then they suddenly have so many fish that they can't lift the net into the boat.

Now I admittedly don't know anything about seine netting, but if they've really been fishing all night it seems a little odd that they wouldn't have tried this before. But we all get into our ruts, church people included, and we like to do things the way we've always done them, and then, weirdly enough, even the good results we used to get from doing things the same way eventually come to naught. So they try something new, something simple, and, bam, 153 fish. Which disciple do you suppose had to sit there and count them all?

Anyway, as I said, we're talking about Peter. When Peter hears that Jesus is the one shouting directions from the beach, he puts on his outer garment and casts himself, *throws* himself into the water. Again, the tone or context is a little fuzzy. Is he trying to get to Jesus as quickly as possible, or trying to hide? Let's be generous and assume he is anxious to see his Lord and Savior. Clearly they haven't yet had a chance to talk through Peter's ignominious denial on the night of Jesus' arrest. No, I don't know why he's down to his Speedo in the first place. Maybe he's only got his Sunday clothes and he's trying to keep them from wearing out.

And why on earth does he put ON his clothes in order to jump into the water? That I cannot answer, my friends. It's just the way it happened. Unless, like Adam and Eve in the first garden, the ultimate sign of shame is to want not to be naked in front of God. That is pretty relatable. The desire for the earth to swallow you up, never to be seen again. There is no pain quite like feeling you've betrayed yourself and your own values.

But when the time comes for Jesus finally to address this shame, he never once mentions its source. Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan notes that “It would have been natural for Jesus to refer to Peter’s spectacular failure, to ask for an apology, or at least to refer to the denial. . . . What happens instead is grace, the pure, unconditional acceptance and love of God in Jesus Christ, and Peter’s rebirth, restoration, redemption—salvation in charcoaled fish and a piece of toast.”²

Christ’s forgiveness has already been freely offered by the time he asks his question; it’s important to see that his forgiveness does not hinge on the answer. And then he asks the question three times—three times for each time Peter denied ever even meeting Jesus: “Do you love me? Do you love me even more than your very best friends?” I used to think this was kind of a dirty trick.

But Jesus is not setting up a popularity contest: Do you like me better than you like Andrew? In fact, quite the contrary. He is reminding us that following him often means being out of step with the status quo. It means claiming the values of love and forgiveness and mercy when those values are not popular. He is reminding us that our service to others transcends “popularity” and often requires us to reach out to folks we don’t even like very well. And that it might come with a cost.

Because of course Simon Peter does love Jesus; his weakness, his desire to save his own skin matches our own. And do you think Jesus didn’t know about these weaknesses when he called Peter, called us, in the first place? Of course he did. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He has called us and taught us and sent us out into the world, and challenged us to stop thinking in terms of scarcity, and our own limitations. To stop letting our expectations condition what we see.

Jesus says, “I came so that you may have life and have it abundantly.” So start thinking in terms of plentitude, what you can do rather than what you can’t or have failed to do. Look at all these fish, for example! The net so full that they can’t haul it into the boat. With God’s help, a fisherman becomes a shepherd. With God’s help, we might do things we never dreamed possible.

² “Windblown,” *The Christian Century* (May 2006).

Jesus, the consummate host, once again produces a meal from what had been next to nothing. And this feast is not a perfunctory event but grilled fish and bread, full of flavor and meaning. Just a simple delicious meal shared with friends. And so as we too continue to enjoy real bread at the table throughout these Great 50 Days of Easter, chewy and tangible, let's remember the abundance that is everywhere ours. Let it nourish us to service beyond limitation. Amen.