

“Fish, Eat, Love” GPPC 5-5-19
Psalm 30, John 21:1-19

Have you ever read one of those books or seen one of those movies that has several different stories going on at once, but at the end, they all converge to create a main point? Ever read or seen one of those? I think that may be what’s going on in John 21:1-19.

Scholars often call this section of John’s gospel an “epilogue.” And some scholars believe someone besides John or maybe several people besides John wrote it. But, no matter who actually wrote this chapter, as is typical of John’s writing, there’s a good bit of symbolism in the story.

Jesus has been crucified and resurrected. Early on Easter morning Mary Magdalene has encountered the resurrected Lord outside the tomb. That evening he appears to the other disciples. And then a week later he even comes back again not only to see the disciples but especially to encourage the faith of Thomas.

This morning Jesus reveals himself to the disciples yet again, this time while they’re going about their daily routine, while they’re fishing.

Jeff Paschal

They start out night fishing. Occasionally that's a good time to go, you know. But they fish all night, and catch nothing. And just after the sun comes up they see somebody standing on the beach. It's Jesus; they just don't know it yet. Is he there to comfort them? Nope. He says, "Hey boys, haven't caught any fish, have you?"

Can you believe it? It sounds like Jesus is talking trash, doesn't it? I imagine him with a little grin and a laugh. "Hey boys, ain't got anything, have you?"

"No," they say, maybe with lips stuck out and heads hung low.

"Cast your net over the right side. You'll catch some," says Jesus, the divine fishing guide.

Sure enough, they catch so many fish they can't haul them all in. And now they figure out they're dealing with Jesus, because, as scholars note, they've seen this out of control abundance before—Jesus turning water into wine, feeding five thousand, and all the other signs of abundance that come from him. (Gail R. O'Day and Susan E. Hulen, *John*, 201.)

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And as another Bible expert points out, “. . . never in the Gospels do the disciples catch a fish without Jesus’ help.” (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI*, 1071.)

Do we see the symbolism so far? It’s like the manna God rained down on Israel so that everybody had enough to eat. It’s like coming to a church potluck supper and somehow or another there’s enough for everyone. It’s like a world not focused on “survival of the fittest” but upon sharing so that, as the song says, there’s enough for everyone. That’s why we write those letters to our elected representatives. Because there really *is* enough for everyone. We just need to share from God’s overflowing abundance, the abundance we have received, the abundance we see in Christ our Lord.

In the presence of Jesus there is overflowing abundance. There’s more than enough for everyone. And when people share out of their abundance, they are able to discern the resurrected Jesus so much better.

So these disciples come ashore dragging their overflowing net of fish. And wouldn’t you know it? (Forehead slap.) There just happens to be a charcoal fire already burning there on the beach. You Bible students

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out there, where did we last hear about a charcoal fire in this gospel?

Anybody remember? It was back in chapter 18 when Peter was standing near it keeping warm after denying Jesus.

Now there's another charcoal fire with fish and bread on it. Jesus says, "Bring some of the fish you just caught." And Simon Peter hauls the net of fish over, 153 fish. Why that number? Bible experts have lots of theories, but we don't know for sure.

We just know what happens next. Jesus offers an invitation. "Come and have breakfast." And by now the disciples know who Jesus is. He comes and takes the bread and the fish and gives them to the disciples, just as on Holy Communion Sundays Christ comes and feeds us with the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. And that's not all.

A pastor tells this story. An elderly man in his church came to talk with him. This man wasn't a refined theologian but he was one of those devoted, salt of the earth types. "Preacher," he said, "I want you to correct my thinking."

"How's that?" said the pastor.

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"Last week, during communion, I had a strange feeling, a funny notion, and I want you to set me straight about it."

"What happened?"

"It was when the little pieces of bread were being passed around. You had said something about this being a feast for God's family, and when I took the bread I began to think that we weren't the only ones here. I felt that my mother and father were here, too. In my mind I saw my brother, Sam, and my grandparents, and all those who've gone before me. Preacher, I know all those people are dead and gone, and I'll see them in heaven someday, but I couldn't get them out of my mind. I felt they were right there at the table last Sunday with us. It was a good feeling, preacher, but I know I need you to straighten me out."

"No, I don't need to straighten you out," said the pastor. "What you felt was true." (Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 64.)

When we come together for worship and Holy Communion we commune not just with each other, not just with the living God but also with all the saints who've gone before us in faith. It is a good feeling, isn't it? And it is true.

Jeff Paschal

Jesus and his disciples finish breakfast, and we move to the end of the story, the place where the other stories converge.

Jesus has a conversation with Simon Peter. Maybe we remember Simon Peter from earlier in the gospel. Jesus has given Simon a nickname that means Rock. Simon is the Rock of the church. Simon promises never to abandon Jesus. Simon draws his sword and slashes off the ear of a slave when the authorities close in on Jesus. But then when Jesus is taken into custody, Simon denies being his disciple. He denies Jesus three times. So much for the rock.

And you know how his conversation with the resurrected Jesus goes. “Do you love me?” asks Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. And each time the response is similar. “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” And the response of Jesus is similar each time as well. “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.” After three times, Peter is feeling hurt, but not as hurt as Jesus felt on the cross.

What’s going on here? The traditional interpretation is that because Peter betrayed Jesus three times, he is allowed to show his remorse and

Jeff Paschal

love for him three times as a sign of full reconciliation. That makes sense, right?

But notice how Jesus responds each time. He doesn't say, "I forgive you," though that's implicit here. No. Each time he responds by giving Peter a task, a ministry actually. It's as though Jesus is saying, "I hear your *words* of love, Peter. Now show me with your *actions* of love. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."

In fact, Jesus continues and says, "When you were young, you used to put on your belt and go wherever you wished. But when you get old, you'll stretch out your hands and somebody will fasten a belt around you and take you where you don't want to go. Follow me."

And here is where all the stories converge to a scalpel-sharp point, isn't it? Peter and the disciples enjoy the abundance Jesus provides. They recognize the resurrected Christ as they eat the abundance together in a holy communion, a feast cooked over a charcoal fire, even the fire itself now repurposed. And despite their weaknesses and betrayals, they are reconciled with the resurrected Christ. Reconciled not merely with forgiveness but reconciled to follow even when it is hard, even when

Jeff Paschal

their own crucifixions loom, even when they are taken where they do not wish to go. “Follow me,” says Jesus.

I have only preached this story once before in 29 years of ministry, I suppose because it seems out of place for the joyful Easter season. Yet it is our story too, isn't it? Fish. Eat. Love. Abundance given.

Abundance received. Abundance responded to as we take up our cross and follow Christ with love. There is nothing here of the spiritual customer mentality that characterizes so much of the church in our age. Nothing about being a consumer demanding to have her wants met. No. This is the story of all would be *disciples*, followers of Christ. Fish. Eat. Love.

This is our intern Sarah's story too, of course. Sarah, when you were young you went where you pleased. But as you grow old, who knows where you will be taken? What difficult ministries lie ahead? Do you walk into that hospital room where there is so much pain and anger? As you take part in clinical pastoral education do you risk sharing with your chaplain colleagues what you are really feeling, instead of

Jeff Paschal

something on the surface? Yes, we believe you will do all those things and more as you follow God's challenging call.

And you may be taken where you do not want to go, but that, of course, is where the blessing lies. In doing the hard things. Speaking the difficult truth in love. Being persistent in following Christ, even when you do not feel like it. This is your story, Sarah.

And it is our story too. The harder our call, the more likely it is to be the genuine call of Christ, instead of our ego or our laziness speaking.

Where is God calling you today? Me today? What hard, but blessed ministry might God be calling you and me to, not because God hates us but because God loves us and wants us to grow?

Cast over there. Haul those fish in. Come eat breakfast. Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Follow me. Follow. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal