

“Come and Have Breakfast”

John 21:1-19

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So they returned to where, for them, it all started: along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Seven of the remaining eleven disciples resumed their lives as fishermen: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John (the sons of Zebedee), and two more who are not named. Perhaps they were Philip and Andrew, who were from one of the fishing villages along the shore. It has been at least a week since Christ has been raised from the dead, but it has not been many weeks. He has not yet ascended into heaven, and the day of Pentecost has not yet arrived. We are in that period of 40 days immediately following Christ’s resurrection, a period about which the Gospels give us only tantalizing bits and pieces.

These seven disciples seem to have returned to their old, familiar lives. They were fishermen before; they are fishermen again. John says they were fishing in the Sea of Tiberias; as I’ve said before, that’s simply another name for the Sea of Galilee. The seven disciples are out fishing through the night, because that was the best time to catch fish. They fished *all night* – and caught not a single one.

I get the sense there was some discouragement and despair among this group. They lacked direction; they lacked purpose. They didn’t know what to do with themselves. Jesus had interrupted their lives, calling them to follow him. They had left their nets behind; they had followed him for nearly three years; then his life had come to a very climactic and tragic end. They all have memories of what they did that night. Simon Peter had lied about his relationship with Jesus, not just once, not just twice, but three times. All the other disciples had abandoned Jesus and fled. The next morning, he was hoisted up on two beams of wood, beaten and bloody, and publicly executed. They all bear some responsibility for that. He came back, alive from the dead, two mornings later, and there was a tremendous amount of joy at his rising ... but *then* what? They still have their painful memories of what had happened before that. They are going to have to live with those memories the rest of their lives.

And what about Jesus? He had returned, but he wasn’t with them now in the same way he had been before. He keeps appearing and disappearing. He’s no longer accompanying them on all their travels; he’s no longer teaching them in parables; he seems to have a different purpose now.

So they did what they knew how to do. They went fishing. Just like old times ... sort of.

Dawn rises over the calm waters. Empty-handed, the disciples row their boat back towards shore. A man is standing there. They don’t recognize him. “Children,” he calls, “you don’t have any fish, do you?” Sadly, they reply: “No.” The man calls back: “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” As if they hadn’t tried that before. But they do as the man says – and, surprise,

there's a whole *ton* of fish over there on that side. A memory flashes in the disciples' minds, a memory of when something like this happened before, another time when they had spent all night in the boats, catching nothing, and someone had told them to try one more time, letting the net down into the deep water. Simon Peter had objected: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing." (Luke 5:5) But he had done as he had been instructed, and suddenly there had been so many fish that the net was beginning to break. That had happened before ... and now it was happening again. *Déjà vu*. One of them, the one known as the "beloved disciple" (maybe John himself), realizes: "It is the Lord!"

The mood in the boat shifts dramatically. Discouragement and despair give way to excitement and joy. Such is the way of things, when people truly encounter the risen Christ. Simon Peter is so excited that he leaps into the water and starts swimming towards shore. Before he takes the plunge he takes a moment puts on his outer garment. He had evidently been wearing only his tunic, his "underwear," so to speak. It's hard to swim fully clothed, but evidently he wanted to present himself respectably and reverently before his master. His master. The one whom he had denied.

Jesus invites the disciples to have breakfast with him on the shore. He has prepared a meal; there's already a charcoal fire, with fish cooking on it, and bread. No doubt this would have recalled to the disciples' minds other times when they shared loves and fishes with Jesus. Jesus invites them to put more fish onto the fire, some of those fish they had caught. John tells us that there were 153 fish in the net. 153, precisely. Not "about 150." Not "dozens and dozens." Not "a large catch." 153 fish. No more, no less. Did somebody actually *count* them all? Or is the number symbolic? Is there some significance to the number? There has been a lot of speculation about this over the centuries. In the fourth century, Jerome said it corresponded to the 153 different kinds of fish that were known at the time, so he interpreted it to be a metaphor for the whole totality of the Christian mission, that is, the idea that Christianity would eventually reach all the different groups of people throughout the entire world. Those of you who like math would enjoy Augustine's interpretation; he realized that the number 153 is the sum of the numbers 1 through 17, and the number 17 could represent the Ten Commandments plus the seven gifts of the Spirit. Another interpretation says you could take 153 dots and make an equilateral triangle out of them, with one dot in the top row and 17 dots on the bottom row, with the result that each side of the triangle would have 17 dots; so 153 is a numerical symbol for perfection, representing the fullness of the church. Cyril of Alexandria suggested a different approach; he breaks the number down into 100 and 50 and 3, with 100 representing the fullness of the Gentiles, 50 representing the remnant of Israel, and 3 representing the holy Trinity. There have been *many* other suggestions as well. The truth of the matter is we really don't know ... but there are a *lot* of possibilities!

After the disciples have eaten with Jesus, Jesus turns to Simon Peter, in what is one of the most tender moments in the entire Bible. Jesus asks him: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" We're not quite sure what the word "these" refers to. Is it all the fishing paraphernalia lying around them? Is it the other disciples? Is Jesus asking Simon Peter if he loves Jesus more than he loves fishing? Or more than he loves the other disciples? Or more than the other disciples love Jesus? Any of those might be possibilities. But let's not get stuck there. Simon Peter replies: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus then replies: "Feed my lambs." Then Jesus asks him again: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon Peter repeats his previous answer: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says to him: "Tend my sheep." Then Jesus asks him a third time: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" John tells us that Simon Peter's feelings were hurt that Jesus asked him the same question a third time. But there's more going on here than just the repetition of the same question three times in succession.

You will remember that there were several different words for “love” in the Greek language. They have somewhat different meanings. This does not show up in most English translations; you need someone to help you see the nuances. Back up to the beginning. Jesus asks Simon Peter: “Do you love me?” The verb is *agape* love, a very special kind of affection, a uniquely Christian kind of love, like the deep love that God has for us. But when Simon Peter responds, when he says “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” he doesn’t use the verb for *agape* love. He used the verb for *philia* love, “brotherly” love, the special connection that exists between close friends who share common interests and values. Peter *changed the verb*. Jesus repeats his question: “Do you love me?” *Agape* love? Simon Peter responds: “You know that I love you” – *philia* love. It is as if Simon Peter doesn’t believe that he’s *capable* of offering Jesus *agape* love. After all, he did deny Jesus three times. Jesus asks the question the third time, but this time he changes the verb to match what Simon Peter has been saying: “Do you love me?” – *philia* love? Simon Peter’s feelings are hurt, not just because Jesus asked three times, but because Jesus seems to have lowered his hopes and expectations for Simon Peter. *Philia* love, not *agape* love.

But what this does is it gives Simon Peter a *third* opportunity to offer his love to Jesus. He had denied Jesus three times; now Jesus is giving him an opportunity to make up for it, three times. When you do something that hurts somebody, you need to make up for it. When you hurt somebody more than once, you may need to make up for it more than once. Jesus gave Simon Peter the opportunity to make up for *all three times* he denied Jesus – regardless of which verb Simon Peter chooses to use.

So Simon Peter responds: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Which verb does he use? *Philia*, or *agape*? Maybe you are hoping for *agape* love. Maybe you will be disappointed. Because Simon Peter can still only offer Jesus *philia* love. *But Jesus loves him anyway*. Sometimes Jesus’ love for us is greater than the love we feel for Jesus. Maybe it’s often that way. Simon Peter is still only human. He can only muster up *philia* love for Jesus. But Jesus never stops loving him, with *agape* love.

Jesus concludes the exchange by telling Simon Peter, “Feed my sheep.” The instructions were, in order: “Feed my lambs”; “tend my sheep”; and “feed my sheep.” That is *precisely* what Simon Peter will spend the next 35 years of his life doing, beginning on the day of Pentecost, a few weeks later, when he will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. His long career would bring *many* people to Jesus, and help *firmly* establish the church of Jesus Christ throughout the world. But Simon Peter’s ministry would end in tragedy, and Jesus could see that coming: “Very truly, I tell you,” he says to Simon Peter, “when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” That’s a reference to Simon Peter’s death, the death of a martyr, condemned to death by Emperor Nero. He was crucified, like Jesus, with hands outstretched ... except he did not feel worthy of being crucified in the same manner as Jesus, so he asked to be crucified upside-down.

But that is all in the future. 35 years in the future. At the very beginning of their relationship, Jesus had said to Simon Peter, “Follow me.” Now, after all that has happened, Jesus repeats the call: “Follow me.” Leave those fishing nets behind; this time, for good. Jesus has more work for you to do.

The same is true for us. Whatever our relationship with Jesus has been in the past, no matter how many times we may have failed Jesus, turned aside from Jesus, denied Jesus, hurt Jesus, Jesus keeps coming back into our lives, inviting us to enjoy a sacred meal with him, inviting us to follow him.

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