

Lessons from the Beach

John 21:1-19

Third Sunday of Easter

April 18, 2010

- † What draws people to the beach? For some people it's the solitude of it, the vastness of the space, the sounds of waves, sea birds, wind, and the smell of the air. For teens here in Whitefish, City Beach is a place to gather with friends and to see and be seen. Each year Tom and I go to a beach on the Oregon coast that borders one side of a spit that stretches far out into a bay. There seals, pelicans, and other shore animals take turns in the shifting sandbars and tides. (We go in part so our dog Snappy, who is mostly blind and now deaf, can run and run and run without colliding with anything.)
- † For the disciples in today's scripture, the return to the beach along the Seat of Tiberias is a return to what they know. After all the events in Jerusalem, they aren't sure what to do next. So they go to a familiar place and a routine activity. They've gone back to their old way of being and making a living, and nothing has changed.
- † Or has it? For after going back to the way things used to be, now it doesn't seem to work anymore. They have gone into the old familiar boat, together but alone with their thoughts. I imagine they wonder if all the events of the past few days have even happened as they remember them? Could it have been just a dream?
- † They've been out all night, and they have caught nothing. The sea is silent, the water flat and dark, and there is no catch of fish. Remember that these

companions are not in a boat just for fun, but to put food on the table, to pay the taxes of Rome's demand, to stay alive. All night on the water and nothing to show for it—it was cause for alarm and fear.

- † And that is when they hear him. They don't see him, but they hear someone calling out to them across the water, guessing that they have caught no fish and making suggestions about what to do next. Their reactions must have been mixed—on one hand, who is this stranger thinking he can tell them how to do their business better? On the other hand, they long for someone to tell them what is in store for them after all that they have seen and heard and known.
- † All of a sudden the water begins to churn with fish—so many that they can't catch them all. And then they remember—it's déjà vu again—the boats, the nets, the stranger calling out to them, the abundance of fish. “It is the Lord!” says the beloved disciple, and suddenly pandemonium breaks loose.
- † The disciples scramble to the beach where there is a charcoal fire with fish on it, and bread, and Jesus, urging them to come and have breakfast. And they do, memories flooding back from familiar times that they ate together—on a hillside with bread and fish and five thousand hungry people, in an upper room for what they thought would be their last meal together.
- † Instead, this is the first meal of their resurrection life as a community with the risen Christ in their midst. And what a welcome change it is from the failures of the past night—momentous, too, and not without a little conflict. And this wonderfully ordinary but important experience has a lot to teach those first disciples and us as well.
- † The first lesson to be taken from this story is the need, often, for obedience. Now obedience is an uncommon word in our post-modern vocabulary. In a culture of individual rights and self-focus, we don't want to be obedient to

anybody but ourselves. But remember that even though the disciples thought they had fishing all figured out, they needed to hear a word from Jesus, even though it didn't make sense at first.

- † And sometimes what God asks of us doesn't make sense, at least according to the world's wisdom. But often our lives don't make much sense either, especially when we keep on doing the same things we've always done and expect a different outcome, thinking that "if God is God then God will produce a different result."
- † What if God is asking us to do a new thing, something that God wants, and not what we want?
- † The second lesson is that God provides us with the resources that we need. Of course we'd love it if when our proverbial nets were empty, God would fill them to overflowing with fish that we could sell and turn into all the things we've ever wanted. But that's not how it works, is it? Some churches might tell you that it is how it works if only you have enough faith, but those proponents of the prosperity gospel have lots of members with foreclosed homes these days.
- † But notice that Jesus does provide the disciples not just with spiritual and emotional food, but delicious fresh fish, too. He wants us to have what we need to live—food, shelter, clothing, good health. And he has a plan for how this is supposed to happen in and through him. It has something to do with his command to "feed my sheep."
- † The third lesson that comes from this wonderful story is that God doesn't give up. I like to think that if the risen Jesus appeared to me after being crucified, dead, and buried, that I'd recognize him—that I'd get it. But maybe not. This is not the first time Jesus has appeared to the disciples—it's not even the second, but instead it's the third time. Isn't it a good thing for

those of us who struggle with failure in relationships, work, body, mind, faith, whatever—that God never gives up on God’s people?

- † Sometimes it really does help to dig deeply in the scriptures, and this is one of those times. There is a beautiful reversal in something as simple as the kind of fire that Jesus cooks the fish over. The Greek word for it is “*anthracian*,” which is specifically a charcoal fire, and it is found only two times in scripture. The first time it appears, Peter warms himself over “anthracian,” a charcoal fire, in the courtyard where he denies Jesus three times.
- † Now it is this same kind of fire where he finds himself warmed by Jesus. God never gives up on God’s people, and the risen Christ calls us to come and be warmed by his presence. But that’s not all there is to it.
- † For the fourth lesson is that God gives us direction. The disciples were floundering that night and that morning. You’d think they would know what to do—after all, Jesus has already given them the great commission—to spread the good news to all the nations—but they aren’t sure about that. And we’re not sure about what God wants us to do either.
- † But although we may not always be able to hear God’s voice, God does provide direction, during the storms and in peaceful times. We may not like what God says for us, but God does give us direction—right here in this scripture.
- † Finally, God doesn’t want us to simply talk about love, fishing, and healing and feeding, but to do it. At the end of the breakfast, Jesus pulls Peter aside and says, “Do you love me?” If you love me, then feed my sheep. If you love me, tend my lambs. Three times he and Peter go over this lesson—the three times parallel Peter’s three denials of Jesus—he gets three tries to get it right this time.

- † You see, the real work of people of faith is not just what we say, but what we do—failures and all. Note that Jesus doesn't say "If you love me, then feed my sheep that you get along with." He doesn't say, "If you love me, then feed my lambs that will appreciate it and say 'thank you' afterwards. Jesus says "feed and tend all my sheep, even the ones that aren't particularly lovable." And we don't much like that part, because there are some sheep that we would rather have stay lost and get what they deserve.
- † Let's face it--we'd rather not believe that we are meant to love the people we'd rather not love. Some of us may not even know whether we believe it at all. We make Jesus fit our needs, we develop the gospel according to ME, and that's where we'd like to dwell.
- † Nevertheless, God continues to beckon to us, to guide us, to never give up on us. And we come together to help each other hear, know, believe, and act—by the power of God's spirit.
- † Why do people go to the beach? This winter I was privileged to go to Hawaii and to journey to the island of Moloka'i. That island, though beautiful and wilder than some of the other islands more frequented by tourists, has a troubled past. In the late 19th century, people with Hansen's disease, otherwise known as leprosy, were sent as virtual prisoners to the island.
- † Brought to the Hawaiian islands by ships from abroad, Hansen's disease spread rampantly through the population of native Hawaiians, whose immune systems were unable to combat it. In the early years of the colony on Moloka'i, Hansen's patients were flung over the side of the ship that transported them, and they either drowned or had to swim to shore, where their fate was equally uncertain. Conditions in the colony were deplorable beyond belief.

- † But Christian priests and nuns, lead by Father Damian and Mother Marianne, defied the government and the church to bring compassion and mercy to the colony. After years of struggle and hardship, healing and hope were brought to its people. Remnants of it still exist, and some Hansen’s patients still live there, even though modern medicine has found a cure for the disease.
- † On the way home, I read a novel about the colony and its history, titled simply, Moloka’i. The book chronicles the life of a little girl taken from her family when she develops the disease. As a teenager, she chafes under the confines of the community and finds herself returning again and again to the beach, where she plunges into the surf. Only there, on the beach and in the water, does she feel cleansed, more human, more whole.
- † I imagine it was like that for the disciples on the beach and in the sea of Tiberias. I know that’s how I feel when I go to the beach, too. Next time you go to the beach, think of this story. Ask yourself how God is beckoning you, what new thing God is asking you to try, how God is providing for your needs.
- † Then ask yourself how God wants you to love—in words, in action—to love God, yourself, and your neighbor? How does God call you to feed his sheep, even the unlovely ones?
- † Finally, let’s close with another story, a true story. It happened in the late 1800s and was told by an evangelist named Henry Moorehouse, who made several trips to this new America to preach. On one of those occasions, he was walking through a poor area of town, where he saw a little boy leaving a dairy with a large pitcher of milk. The boy tripped and fell on the stairs; the pitcher broke and milk went everywhere. Henry Moorehouse went to the boy and found him unhurt, but very distraught. He kept on saying over and

over again, “My mamma will whip me. My mamma will whip me.”

So the evangelist took the boy to a store down the street and got a new pitcher, filled it to the top, then walked the boy all the way to his front yard. He asked the boy, “Will your mamma whip you now?” A wide smile spread across the boy’s tear-stained face, and he said, “No, sir, ’cause this is a lot better pitcher than we had before.”

† The message for this third Sunday of Easter reminds us that the risen Christ gives us the miracle of abundant resurrection life—a better life than we’ve had before, even when the circumstances of our situation belie it. Won’t you learn these lessons from the beach—well--and pass them on? Amen.

Sources:

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