

## **AS JESUS LOVES, GO AND DO LIKEWISE**

**John 21:1-19**

**Preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday, April 14, 2013**

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

The Gospels report that for each of the disciples, it took some time before the joy of that first Easter morning could finally sink in. The disciples' initial reaction to the news "He is risen" was a combination of fear and doubt. That's why Jesus came to them twice in the Upper Room, to personally confirm his resurrection but to also empower them to take on a deeper faith and practice. Even so, they still apparently 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 suddenly announced, "I'm going fishing." Can you picture the scene? They're all sitting around, bored and frustrated 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 frustrated 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 finally shrugged their shoulders, "Why not?" Then 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...you'd love to be able to loaf around wondering what you should be doing next but that's not your luxury.

On the other hand, maybe the disciples weren't always just lounging about 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 understandably demanding their long lost fathers' attention. At the same time maybe their spontaneous fishing expedition wasn't for pleasure, they still had to make a living to feed their families, so back they went to what they knew best, fishing.

But on a deeper level, was Peter being mystically drawn back to the sea where he first heard Jesus say, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men?" It's possible there were 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 friend and Lord and be reenergized just 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 unconsciously setting the stage for one of those rare "Déjà vu all over again" moments.

Hours later at early dawn, returning to shore with nothing to show for, they noticed standing on the beach in the early light a shadowy figure calling out, “Children, have you have no fish?” You’d think at least one of them would’ve recognized Jesus, but none did. “No,” they shouted in reply. “Then cast your net over the right side of your boat.” Apparently none of them even wondered, “Didn’t something like this happen before?” Maybe they were too tired and distracted. But they did what they were told and in short order they found themselves unable to haul in their nets because there were just too many fish to handle.

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

Once on shore they found Jesus tending a charcoal fire preparing fish and bread. “Come and have breakfast.”

This simple, wonderful 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.

So there they sat early that morning, sharing their catch and rekindling their friendships. But what completes the “Church metaphor” is the conversation Jesus had with Peter.

It doesn’t say Jesus took Peter aside so what was said was said 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,” but 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? Or, could it be by asking Peter, “Do you love me,” three times, Jesus was gently undoing Peter’s three Good Friday denials, because every time Peter said, “Yes,” Jesus gave Peter the awesome responsibility to feed and tend his sheep. In effect, Jesus was saying to Peter, “all is forgiven and forgotten; now, get back to work.”

But there’s an equally valid reason why Jesus asked the same question three times. In the original Greek Jesus was asking Peter, “Do you love me?” using the Greek word *agape* which is 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 perfect love. The Greek word Peter used for love was *philia* (brotherly love), the love of an intimate friend. Peter knew Jesus was asking him for something more than he could give. In other words, Peter couldn’t love Jesus the way Jesus loved Peter.

Can any of us? And yet despite Peter's obvious limitations, 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, "Peter, in your younger days, you could be foot loose and fancy free but the days are soon coming Peter, when you'll love me with all your heart and lay down your life in a martyr's death." So, maybe Peter's love at that moment was inadequate, but in time, by the grace of God, it would grow beyond his imagination.

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

While Jesus grilled breakfast for his disciples they could remember again what it was like before Good Friday always being with their Lord and each other. They also realized the only reason they were friends with each other was Jesus. He alone gathered and kept them together through thick and thin, and as always he was still feeding and nurturing them.

What completes the scene is Jesus' frank question to Peter. "Do you love me more than these? Even when Peter couldn't love Jesus with equal devotion, Jesus understood Peter was giving the best he could for now, but in God's time Peter's ability to love like Jesus would grow and mature as he tended the flock Jesus entrusted to his care.

It's such a lovely, heartfelt scene. The rising sun, the cold morning, the charcoal 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 then inviting them to feed and shepherd his ever growing flock.

But something else was happening. Jesus was passing the baton. He knew his time with his disciples was short. Soon they'd be on their own but, at the same time, never alone to carry on Jesus' ministry to the world God so loved. Think about that. Despite all their past failures plainly recorded in the Gospels their bickering, their doubts and fears, even 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 and I are being asked the same question. Jesus, speaking your name, is still asking, "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."