

Gone Fishing

John 21: 15-19

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How many fisher folk do we have in the congregation this morning? Which do you prefer, fresh water or salt water fishing? What is the favorite kind of fish you like to hook? Everyone who likes to fish has a fishing story to tell about themselves or someone else. Down where I came from in Tidewater, Virginia, we did mostly salt water fishing and there was a man in our church who loved fishing better than just about anything else. On several occasions he invited me to go fishing with him and he taught me how to jig for strippers, otherwise known as rock fish. You drop your line over the side of the boat with a light weight sinker and let it hit the bottom. Then you jig, bounce it up and down on the bottom until hopefully a great big rock fish swims by, thinks the bait is a minnow and bites down. Then it's a battle between you and the fish to see who's going to win.

In the days of Jesus, fishing in the Sea of Galilee was a different proposition. The fish were rather small and their mouths were even smaller. Fishing with hooks and bait was impossible. The only way to catch these fish was with a net. In fact, that's what Peter and his brother were doing when Jesus called them to be His disciples. He told them, "Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). Now three years later Peter and many of Jesus's disciples were back up north at the Sea of Galilee. That was not surprising. When Jesus was resurrected, the angel who greeted the women at the tomb had told them to tell His disciples, especially Peter, "He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you" (Mark 16:7). So Peter and the other disciples made the trip back to the north. After all, it was right there beside the Sea of Galilee where they had first met Jesus. Perhaps that was where they would meet Him once again. In the meantime why not do something they all enjoyed. Peter said, "I'm going fishing," and according to the verses preceding those which were read this morning, that's precisely what happened. The rest of the disciples jumped in the boat and off they went fishing.

Unfortunately, the fishing was lousy. Peter and his fellow disciples toiled all night putting out the nets and then pulling them back into the boat, but not one fish did they catch. Then around dawn they were hailed by a stranger on the shoreline. He called out to them, "Friends have you any fish?" "No," they replied. "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some," the stranger said.

Immediately the net became full of fish and Peter knew that the stranger was no stranger at all. He was the Lord. Wrapping himself in his outer garment, Peter swam to shore followed by the others in the boat. They found a fire with fish and bread cooking in the coals and an invitation to have breakfast. After a hearty meal bolstered by some of the fish they had caught, it was time to get down to business. The resurrected Lord had appeared so that He might have a word with Peter, the leader of the disciples, the one who would decide not only his own future but the futures of those who had gone fishing with him the night before.

This is what transpired during their conversation. Jesus addressed Peter, perhaps pulling him aside from the other disciples. Using his birth name, not the name by which he had come to be known, Jesus asked, "Simon son of John, do you truly love Me more than these?" In response, Peter said, "Yes, Lord, You know I love you." Then Jesus replied, "Feed my lambs." Then a second time Jesus asked him the same question adding one additional word, "Simon, son of John, do you 'truly' love me?" Again Peter responded, "Yes, Lord, You know I love You." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." Finally, a third time Jesus asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was now becoming agitated, a bit embarrassed and hurt. He blurted out, "Lord, You know all things; You know I love you." Jesus replied, "Feed my sheep." Then He said to Peter, "When you were young, you took care of yourself and went anywhere you wished. But in the future you will not even be given the freedom to dress yourself and you will be led to a place where you do not want to go." It was a prophecy about Peter's future martyrdom in Rome. Then Jesus added this one final admonition, "Follow me!"

Why all this drama? Why repeat three times over, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me? The answer to this question, not only applies to Peter, but also to you and me. Like Peter we too are Jesus' disciples and this morning we need to know and understand why this question was asked not once, not twice, but three times. There are several possibilities. Let me share them with you.

The first one involves a choice. Perhaps pointing to all of the fishing gear—the boat, the net, the great catch of fish—Jesus was asking, "Do you love me more than all this stuff and what it represents? Are you tired of being My disciple? Would you rather return to being a fisherman? Years ago, a friend of mine was intrigued by the fact that the Scriptures say that 153 fish were caught in the net that was lowered over the side of the boat. So he did a little research, and this is what he discovered. 153 fish when sold would generate just about enough money to get back into the fishing business. Jesus was giving Peter a choice between two very real and clear alternatives. It's the same kind of choice that He gives to us.

Do you really love me, or are the cares and concerns of this world so enticing that you have decided to choose them instead? When I think of all the young people throughout America who grew up in church and then abandoned church attendance and more importantly Christianity itself, I can't help but conclude that they decided to say goodbye to Jesus and follow their own desires. The same could be said for that multitude of individuals who are nothing more than a name on a church roll. They once attended, were even active in the ministries of the churches they attended and then they just disappeared. It's all too easy to say, especially as we grow older, "Jesus I've put in my time at church. See you in heaven."

Here's a second reason why Jesus asked Peter three times as to whether or not he loved Him. The Greek language is more precise than English. Where we have one word to express a thought or idea, they have several. Take, for example, the word "love." In English it covers a multitude of affectionate feelings from loving our pets to our favorite flavor of ice cream. In the Greek language the word "love" has at least four different meanings describing four different ways in which we express our affection for someone or something. Two of those are used in the passage of Scripture that we are examining today. When Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" He used the Greek word "agape." "Agape" describes the kind of love that is sacrificial, caring for someone so much that you are willing to sacrifice your own well-being on their behalf. But when Peter responded to Jesus, saying, "You know I love you," he used another word, the Greek word "philiōs." "Philiōs" is friendship love, the kind of love that you have for a special companion. He was saying, "I love you brother, but not sacrificially. In fact, Peter could never bring himself to say, "Jesus, I love you so much that I am willing to give myself sacrificially to you, to do or be what you desire of me. So finally, when Jesus asked Peter the third time, "Do you love me?" He used the same word that Peter had used, "philiōs."

How about you? What kind of love do you have for Jesus? Is He just your friend or is He something more? If loving Him means taking care of His sheep, are you willing to join Him in sacrificially giving of yourself to care for them? Jesus said that He was the good shepherd. Are you willing to be His assistant shepherd, watching over the sheep and the little lambs that He has entrusted into your care? One of the reasons that I am so proud to serve as the interim pastor of this church is that we have a lot of shepherds. This past Monday I was over at the Bedford Christian Ministries completing a repair project. I had the opportunity to greet a number of our members arriving to assist those coming for food and financial assistance. That's what it means to feed the flock of the Lord.

In the early 1900's there was a terrible accident on the Thames River near London, England. The Princess Alice, an excursion boat filled with vacationers, hit another ship in the fog and sank. Nearly 600 people lost their lives. That night there were two ferrymen, men who rowed people across the river in their small boats, who heard the cries of those who were drowning. One of the ferrymen said, "I'm tired. No one can see anything in this fog. I'm going home." The other ferryman bravely rowed out into the darkness in search of survivors. At the inquest the judge questioned both ferrymen. The first one, the one who had gone home said, "Sir, the shame will never leave me till I die." The second one said, "I rowed to the wreck and packed as many women and children in my boat as it would hold. And when it was so full that it was about to sink, I rowed for shore with this cry upon my lips, "O GOD, FOR A BIGGER BOAT."