



THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
MAY 5, 2019
JOHN 21: 1-19
"FOLLOWING THE FISH"

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

- A father and son went fishing one day. While they were out on the boat, the boy was overcome by the wonder of the world around him.
- He asked his father, “How does this boat float?” The father replied, “Don’t rightly know, son.”
- A little while later, the boy asked his father, “How do fish breathe under water?” Once again, the father replied, “Don’t rightly know, son.”
- Later, the boy asked, “Why is the sky blue?” Again, the father replied, “Don’t rightly know, son.”
- Finally, the boy asked his father, “Dad, do you mind me asking you all these questions?” The father replied, “Not at all. You don’t ask questions, you never learn nothin.”
- Recently, I read that one of the characteristics of highly intelligent people is that they are innately curious. So, let’s all pretend we’re highly intelligently for about fifteen minutes and be curious about this odd passage in scripture.
- This is the Third Sunday of Easter and, really, a story about a fishing expedition??!! Maybe we’ve missed the point all these centuries and we should be out by Lake Conneaut relaxing by the lake with a rod and reel and a cooler of cold ones....
- I don’t know how intelligent I am, but it has puzzled me forever why fish play such an important role in the post-Resurrection stories about Jesus.
- **Alleluia! Christ is risen!**
- Now let’s go fishing??!!
- All things being equal, there must be a significant spiritual import to this fish story.
- Reminds me of two guys, Frank and Bob who were out fishing one day. A funeral entourage passes by on the bridge near where they are fishing and Bob stands up in the boat, takes off his hat, places it over his heart, and bows his head in silent prayer.
- Frank says, “Wow, Bob, that’s really thoughtful of you.”

- Bob replies, “It’s the least I could do. I was married to her for thirty years.”
- At the top of my list of curious questions are these:
 - What is the significance of fish to our spiritual life?
 - Why 153 fish?
 - Why does Jesus ask Peter the same question three times?
 - And, if Jesus is about to recede fully into the spiritual world, why does he leave peter and us with the command to “Follow me?”
- So, let’s follow the fish.
- Three guys were fishing when they came upon a mermaid who offered each of them one wish. The first fisherman says, “Double my IQ.” So, the mermaid does and he starts reciting Shakespeare.
- The second fisherman says, “Triple my IQ.” And sure enough the mermaid does and he starts doing math problems he didn’t know existed.
- The third fisherman was so impressed he asks the mermaid to quadruple his IQ and the mermaid says, “Are you sure about this? It will change your whole life forever.”
- The fisherman says, “Yes” so the mermaid turns him into a woman.
- Now there’s a method to this madness.
- And, our illustration has to do with a very specific woman.
- We want to begin with this odd number 153.
- St. Augustine, likely the greatest teacher in the ancient Church and Luther’s spiritual father, states that we cannot understand scripture without understanding numbers.
- For him, 153 was significant because it is the sum of the first 17 whole numbers. Seventeen represents the combination of divine grace, that is the seven gifts of the holy spirit and the ten commandments.
 - On the last page of the bulletin you can see 153 as the 17th triangular number. Both sides and the base of the triangle are equally seventeen. With me so far?

- Now, we have a practice called isopsephy. Most importantly, isopsephy is the practice of adding up the number values of the letters in a word to form a single number.
- So, when the earliest followers of Jesus did this with the Greek name of one of the first disciples of Jesus, it added up to 153.
- And why did John feel it necessary to hide this name through this complicated process dealing with mathematical theory?
- Because this fish, pulled out of the depths of the unconscious, was and still is so terribly hard to swallow.
- Hard to swallow because the name of the disciple/Apostle is Mary Magdalene.
- Her name is hidden because it would have been impossible to swallow such a fish at the inception of the early church. Even though Mary is first at the tomb, recognizing Jesus in his post-Resurrection form, commanded by Jesus to go tell the other disciples that he is risen, the testimony of a woman was not admitted in court. Her word meant nothing. Further, the prayer of every Jewish man upon arising in the morning included thanking God that he was not born a woman. That a woman, a reformed prostitute, would be the great Apostle, first at the empty tomb, first to spread the news of the Resurrection would have been a scandal except to the most spiritually wise.
- And almost two thousand years later, we still experience great resistance to the full humanity and value of women. We seem to just be confronting the enormity of the violence, debasing, and exploitation of women. We are in the throes of watching women make enormous strides in the political, social and economic arenas....
- But what happens when a new awareness, a new consciousness arises from the sea of the great unknown? Two things: **the new is seen as inferior and there is great resistance.**
- Let's recall that the Jesus—**the great fish**—is put to death by the religious and political authorities. We could say Jesus is sentenced to death by the Pope and the Supreme Court. The new is already seen as a threat to the established power and the new is seen as inferior to the established power.
- **And so, there is great resistance.**

- Resistance creates suffering. Suffering occurs when our minds resist what is. The problem is our mind's resistance to life as it unfolds itself.
- And so, the author John disguises spiritual wisdom within the number 153. The disciple is the woman, Mary, and she is slowly being hauled out of the sea of the unconscious, to be seen when humanity is ready, as the paradigm of the disciple, the great fish to be swallowed.
- And what do we witness?
- There is now great upheaval as our culture works to assimilate the true value of the feminine, women in general, and the individual woman. The historically inferior woman.
- Just thirty-five years ago, I was teaching an honors high school English class, the connection with personality theory and success in a chosen career.
- After the class, the teacher, a woman who was nearing retirement, approached me looking sad. She explained that, since she was a child, she had wanted to be a research chemist—and she had the psychological makeup to be successful in that field—but she said, in her day there were only two professions a woman could go into—nursing and teaching. Enormous resistance for a woman going into any other career. And so she had become an English teacher.
- Closer to home, think of the enormous resistance to new ideas and new ways of being a faith community here at CLC. Even though new people are joining, attendance is up, Youth Ministry is happening, we have a social media presence in Pittsburgh, there have been upgrades to our facility and more on the way, a positive spirit among us. We're on the verge of a Counseling Ministry, a Community Carnival, a Contemporary Service. New ministries being formed. And yet some fought these changes tooth and nail.
- This is what happens. There are always people, when new fish are pulled from the spiritual waters, who want to throw them back. And it opposes the transformative pattern that Jesus is leaving us in the gospel of John:
 - Pull up the fish which is symbolic of bits of Christ, cook it up good, swallow it, digest it, and let it do its transformative work.

- One day, an inebriated ice fisherman drilled a hole in the ice, peered in, and a loud voice bellowed out, “There are no fish down there.”
- He walked several yards away, drilled another hole and peered into the hole when the same loud voice shouted, “There are no fish down there.”
- He then walked about fifty yards away, drilled another hole and again the voice boomed, “There are no fish down there.”
- He looked up and asked, “God, is that you?”
- “No, you idiot, it’s the rink manager.”
- In both spiritual and psychological disciplines, the sea is the great unknown. All the world—visible and invisible—where we are unaware—symbolizing all that we do not know as limited human beings.
- And fish are symbolic bits of knowledge—important knowledge—sacred knowledge—that are pulled up out of the sea at certain opportune moments for us to ingest. That then widen and deepen our horizons—increase our wisdom and well-being as people.
- As Carl Jung writes, “Fishing is an intuitive attempt to catch unconscious contents.”
- Connected to all this fishy material is the question: Why does Jesus ask Peter three times, “Do you love me?”
- Certainly, it is a parallel to the three times that Peter denies Jesus. A kind of spiritual corrective, if you will.
- But it is deeper than this.
- When Jesus asks peter, “Do you love me?” He uses the Greek verb form *agape*. This is Divine love. The highest form of love. The love that God has for us and that we are asked to have for God.
- Peter answers him with a different Greek verb for love, *phileo*, which suggests warm friendship or tender affection.

- It would be as if Deb asks me, “Do you love me?”
 - And I respond, “Yeah, I really like you.”
 - Deb asks again, “Do you love me?”
 - And I say, “Yes, you’re a really good friend.”
 - **Do you love me?**
 - “Yeah, I guess so.”
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- Jesus, about to fully recede into the invisible, spiritual world is letting peter and us know that there is way to continue to follow him when he is no longer visible to us.
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- But we are going to need to love the holy, the divine, the spiritual fish more than everything else in life.
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- Jesus leaves us a process by which, individually and collectively, we are given the opportunity—again and again—to pull bits of Christ, bits of holy truth, expressions of love out of the great waters of the unknown. And if we pay attention—which is the meaning of word religion—paying careful attention—if we pay attention and don’t give into our natural resistance—we will have an ongoing way to deepen and broaden our wisdom as human beings and our ability to embrace divine truth.
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- This makes following the fish a pretty exciting journey in life.
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- Sermon song: **WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW** by Jackie DeShannon