

SERMON – Meeting Us Where We Are - John 21:1-19

Church of the Good Shepherd – May 4, 2025

John 21:1-19

Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 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 after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to 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 there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish 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, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared 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." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt 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. Very truly, I tell you, 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." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

Good morning, Good Shepherd! (*Introduction*)

When I first became a Christian, I started reading the Bible with a passion, participating in a four-year class my church offered called Disciple Bible Studies. By the time I got to Year Four, where we really dug into the Gospel of John, I remember approaching the last Gospel with some trepidation. I really like the action-packed Gospel of Mark, and loved the way Luke fleshed out Mark's gospel by interviewing people that Mark didn't include... and I just didn't think that John would measure up. Plus, it was just so different. Why did we even need it? And then I read it. I mean REALLY read it. And it became my favorite of all the gospel testimonies we have about the life and Good News of Christ.

As if the secret meeting with Nicodemus under the cover of night and glorious picture of Mary Magdalene in the garden with Jesus weren't enough, this epilogue of his gospel presents a magnificent portrait of the risen, flesh and blood Christ, full of juicy glimpses into the lives of his original followers; especially Peter.

If you read the chapter just before this, you'll see it ends with Jesus "sending" the disciples out, as His Father had sent him. Yet now we find seven of the disciples – including three of his closest disciples - just sort of hanging out together one evening near the Sea of Galilee. They have seen the risen Christ twice already, but they are still in a sort of waiting mode and no doubt mulling over their own inadequacies... not sure what comes next. Simon Peter, restless, suddenly announces "I'm going fishing" and his six brethren immediately respond, "we're going with you!" as if they were just waiting for SOMEone to suggest SOMETHing to do.

So, they fish all night. Fishing by night was a common practice in that time and place BTW. In fact, it continues to this day. Many species of fish are more active at night, and they were less likely to see the nets at night and be frightened away. It usually worked. But not that night. So, here they are, are exhausted, ready to head back, when this guy on shore hollers at them "Hey guys! You catch anything? No? Well, try throwing your net on the other side of the boat and for some odd reason they do it. Maybe they were too tired to argue with the know-it-all on the beach, or maybe they had a strange sense of déjà vu...

You see, this story is a callback to the first Call Story, found in Luke 5. You remember? Jesus was being chased by a crowd who'd been hearing about some of his miracles, and He gets to the shore and asks Simon if he could launch his fishing boat so that Jesus could teach the multitudes from that vantage point. In that story as well, Simon, John and James were exhausted after fishing all night, yet when Jesus finished his teaching he told Simon to throw his nets out for a catch. Peter reluctantly did as asked, and the nets came back so full that they began to tear and his boat and the boat of Zebedee began to sink under the weight. After they

finally made it back to shore, Simon Peter fell to his knees exclaiming “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” But Jesus responded with “Do not be afraid, from now on you will be fishers of men.” And the fishermen left everything behind and followed Jesus.

So, here we are, three years later, and this stranger on the shore is calling out to them to throw their nets out again. They weren’t fishing for men, and they weren’t doing such a great job fishing for fish! But like the last time, they do as asked, and this time they caught so many fish they couldn’t pull them on board. At that point the penny dropped for “the disciple that Jesus loved”. He exclaims “It’s the Lord!” and Peter grabbed his tunic, and jumped in the water to swim to shore. He wanted to be the first to greet his Lord – interesting aside: in Jewish law to offer a greeting was considered a religious act, and to perform a religious act a man must be clothed – thus he threw his tunic back on before leaping into the water.

They get to shore and discover that they’d caught 153 large fish. Why 153? Such a specific number that’s used in all translations. There are nearly as many hypotheses over that number as the number itself. My favorite was posited by the early church father, Jerome, who said there were 153 different kinds of fish, and that they represented the men of all nations... one day, all nations will be gathered together for Jesus Christ – and the net will not break.

So that was surprise #1. It was the Lord on the beach. Surprise #2 was that he already had breakfast ready for them. He asks them to bring a few of their newly caught fish, but then immediately invites them to join Him for breakfast. He didn’t *need* their fish. But He wanted them to participate.

But here’s the thing... he had been cooking the fish over a charcoal fire.... When was the last time we read about a charcoal fire? Well, Matthew, Mark and Luke all say that after Jesus was arrested, Peter stood outside the high priest’s court warming himself by a fire... but John 18:18 specifically says it was a charcoal fire. I have a feeling that Peter got to shore, smelled that fire and probably thought, once again, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.

The sense of smell can be both heart-warming and triggering. Now, I love the smell of wood smoke. We have a wood stove in our family room. In cold seasons, my husband will have that thing fired up all weekend, every weekend, and it is so comforting to me. And sometimes in the summer, when the sun hits the room just right, it warms it up just enough to bring out the smell of four decades of winter fires and instantly transports me to Christmas time and Colonial Williamsburg. So many happy memories for me... but not for Simon Peter. Can you imagine? Being so excited that Jesus was on shore, only to get there, dripping wet and be hit in the face by the smell of that charcoal fire... instantly transporting him back to the lowest point

of his life... the time he denied even knowing his Lord and Teacher. The time he failed Jesus and his own best intentions to follow Christ even to the grave.

That breakfast must have been awkward.

But this “last breakfast” transforms a moment of deprivation and insufficiency into a feast, with unexpected blessing made available for all. Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to redeem himself. The great English theologian, NT Wright, points out that a rather extraordinary thing that happens in the next part of this reading... Many translations do not pick it up, but it is very clear in the Greek:

You see, John uses two different words which are often just translated as “love” in English. When Jesus says “Simon, son of John, (side note: Jesus does NOT call him Peter, the name Christ himself gave him – a name that meant Rock) Instead, He reverts to Simon Peter’s birth name and asks, “do you love me.”

Here, John uses the **big** word “a’gape” the self-giving Love word, which is all about God and the all-encompassing love that Jesus had for His people. But Peter can’t bring himself to say that... yet. The nearest he can get to it is the friendship word, the “phile’o” word – so his actual response is more along the lines of “Yes, Lord. You know I’m your friend.” And Jesus responds with, “Feed my lambs.”

Again, Jesus asks Peter “Simon, son of John, do you *agape* me?” And Peter responds exactly the same way, “Yes Lord, you know I *philia* you.” This time, Jesus says “Feed my sheep.”

Now, at this point you might expect Jesus to say well, SIMON, you really messed up. I thought you were going to be faithful and a strong foundation, a Rock on which I would build My church, but apparently you aren’t. But he doesn’t – instead He ups the ante. Feed my lambs AND my sheep.

Because Jesus’ natural posture is not the wagging finger. Instead, Jesus offers open arms. Grace.

So, the third time he asks Simon Peter this important, redemptive question, He says “Simon, son of John, do you *philia* me?” and Peter is hurt. I mean, he’d seen Christ twice already and thankfully, Peter’s denials had never come up. Maybe he thought they could just go on, pretending it never happened...

But PETER hadn’t forgotten. PETER was still carrying the shame. And now it seemed like Jesus had deliberately set him up to remember that horrible night... first with the charcoal fire and calling him Simon, then asking the same question three times and now this last time He

dropped the intensity of the Love He was asking for to brotherly or friendship Love, rather than the all-encompassing *agape* love. I am sure it is likely that Jesus knew exactly what He was doing, but it wasn't to make Simon Peter *feel* bad. It was to free Peter from the shame he was carrying. Jesus knew that Peter would never be able to forgive himself and serve Christ freely if he didn't face what he'd done.

So, when Jesus adopted Peter's use of *philia*, I think He was saying "Okay, Peter, if that's where you are, that's where we'll start. Now – Tend my sheep." Christ's forgiveness is implicit in His responses. He still wants and expects Peter to care for his church!

Friends, that's how Jesus meets us all. It's how he met Saul on the road to Damascus – and he was "*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*". When we come to him, again and again, knowing perfectly well that we've messed up, we've got things wrong, that we failed to do what we promised to do – we may think to ourselves "well, He won't want anything to do with me now" but no, Jesus is **Right There** with us, saying, "okay, Deb, if that's where you are right now, let's start from there and move forward." Get out of the past and let go of your failures, because I already have.

And we know this is the case, because after this remarkable interview, he makes a prophecy of how Simon Peter will die, and then recommissions him with two simple words: Follow Me.

And Peter did. Position restored, he went on to become the first leader of Christ's church, resolute, rash, gentle, and firm. This flawed, very human, man could only become the true rock of Christ's church when he let go of his mistakes and accepted Christ's offer of redemption.

And, so it is with each of us.

My prayer for each of you is that whether you are in a season of *agape* or *philia* love for Christ, start from there and let Him move you forward.

Amen.