

“JESUS ALREADY HAS THE FISH”

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John 21:1-19, Acts 9:1-6

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Some time after the resurrected Jesus had first appeared to his disciples behind the locked doors of their hiding place, Peter and a number of the other disciples had returned to Galilee from Jerusalem. **I'm not sure what they were doing there.** Did Jesus tell them to return to Galilee or did they just find themselves drawn back to their homes, to the places where at least there was some modicum of familiarity after having been through the events of the recent past. And one day, perhaps to loosen some of the tension that had been building in their awkward uncertainty, Peter decides that he's going to go fishing. And no sooner does he say that than the other disciples join in.

Remember, many of Jesus' disciples were originally fishermen. But they must have been some of the worst fishermen that Galilee had ever seen because they fished all night and caught nothing. I don't think that the gospels ever record the disciples ever catching any fish, at least not without Jesus' help! And that's what happens here as well. As the day was breaking, Jesus called out the disciples from the beach. You haven't caught any fish, have you? Throw your nets to the right side of the boat and you will find some. Some?... Right! They caught so many fish that the disciples were unable to haul it in.

Where have we heard this before? The disciples remembered, this was how they met Jesus when he first called them. They didn't need anyone to tell them that it was Jesus on the beach. Peter, impulsive as ever, jumped into the water and swam to shore. When he reached the shore, Jesus was there, with a fire going, with fish on it and bread as well. He asked the disciples to bring some of the fish they had just caught. **But here's the strange thing. Jesus already has the fish.** The fish are already on the fire, cooking. Jesus doesn't need the fish the disciples have caught, he already has the fish.

And he takes the fish and the bread and he gives it to the disciples for them to eat. **Does that sound familiar?** Maybe there weren't 5,000 others around them eating fish and bread, but the disciples, I'm sure, got the point. **Maybe we get it too. But do we really? After all, what is the point?** Maybe the allusions to miracles of the past are meant to emphasize the claim that the risen Christ is the same Jesus who lived with the disciples and died on the cross. Maybe the point is to reinforce that with Jesus all things are possible.

But maybe there's another point that we might have been overlooking. Jesus already has the fish. It is essential for the disciples, and for us, to realize that Jesus is sufficient unto himself. He doesn't need the disciples to fish for him; in fact, the dependence is all one way. **The church is totally dependent on Jesus and not the other way around.** Some of the worst theology out there today fails to emphasize this truth. Have you ever heard someone say, God wants to bless you but won't because you haven't placed your trust in him? The Lord really wants to prosper you but can't because you're not willing to give your money to him first. Or, that there's too much sin in your life and you need to deal with that before God can do what he wants to do with your life.¹

Some of the most damaging beliefs about God revolve around this idea, that somehow Jesus needs the fish we bring to him before he can feed us. So, if we suffer, if our prayers aren't answered, if we're not

¹ Adapted from Peter Woods, I am listening. "You can never go home again."

prosperous, it's because we haven't gotten it right. If only we could get it right, then God would bless us without limit. **But this sort of heresy fails to notice that Jesus already has the fish. What Jesus wants to give us, the food that Jesus is prepared to feed us, isn't dependent upon whether we can get it to Jesus, he already has the fish.**

But there's a reason why this sort of thinking appeals to some. If you can prescribe what people need to do before Jesus will bless them, then you can set the terms by which people will be judged to be acceptable or not. If you can put conditions on what prerequisites must be met to receive God's blessing, then you get to be the gatekeepers of who is deserving of God's grace and who's not. **But we can't control the flow of grace because Jesus already has the fish and he will feed who he wants, when he wants, how he wants. When we come to accept this truth, then we can start to look at other stories in a fresh new way.** One of those stories is the story of the conversion of Paul. Paul was once known as Saul and was the fiercest opponent of the followers of Jesus. The story of his conversion on the road to Damascus is probably the most famous conversion story in history. But often, I think that it has been read somewhat out of context. Paul has been portrayed as this big, bad, bully, the one who represents power and authority, and he's out to get the followers of Jesus, the followers of The Way. We have to remember that the word Christianity wasn't in existence yet. Those who were disciples of Jesus were called the followers of The Way. And big, bad, bully Paul was out to gather them up and bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment. So it's Paul, representing power and authority, against the early church, weak and with no earthy authority of any kind.

But it's not that simple. Remember that Paul was a Jew. He was a Pharisee. Jews in that time were an oppressed people. They were a conquered people. They were just another small fragment of people who were subjected to the rule of the Roman Empire. The Romans were the real big, bad, bullies of the period. They were the ones who insisted that all people in the empire worship Caesar. They tolerated the Jews and their strange religious observances, but only under the condition that the Jews would also confess that Caesar was Lord. The Jewish faith was under threat by the pluralistic practices of the Roman Empire. More and more of the Jewish people were making compromises to adapt to life within the empire. Paul and some others would have been very concerned about this trend. And they were increasingly worried about another trend, a growing group of Jews who were saying that the Messiah had come, that this Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and that he had been crucified, but now was resurrected. People were hearing this message and what's worse, they were believing it. Paul, part of an already beleaguered faith community, could not tolerate the idea that other Jews were trying to undermine the historical faith of their own people with this upstart foolishness.

Paul, rather than being the big, bad, bully, out to squash any opposition to the empire, was really just a man trying to protect his own, his family, the small Jewish faith under siege in the pluralistic melting pot of the empire of his day. Paul knew his history, he remembered when Israel was taken captive by Babylon, how some of the people who remained in Israel did not stay pure but intermarried with the Canaanites. When the exiles returned from Babylon, they shunned these unclean people, who came to be known as Samaritans. Paul was trying to make sure that the upstarts understood that God's grace worked a certain way. You needed to get to a place through the observance of the laws, through ritual sacrifices and temple traditions, so that God could bless you, so that you would become acceptable to God. The people of The Way, these disciples of Jesus, were heretics, who were propagating false ideas, undermining the system of the law, the whole temple structure. This was a threat to the old ways, to the way it had always been done. It needed to be stopped, they needed to be stopped, if not by reason, then by whatever means necessary. **Paul was a Jew, but he could have been a Presbyterian.** In many ways we're like Paul, aren't we? We live as part of a small and growingly insignificant faith community within a diverse pluralistic society. Our numbers are shrinking as the age of our core members increase. Many of us rationalize how we practice our faith to embrace the

lordship of modern Caesars, be it wealth or privilege or security. Increasing numbers of our young people are willing to explore what they consider to be new and more relevant ways of connecting with the divine, call it 'spiritual but not religious.' Sometimes even within our church there are groups of people who want to do things in a very different way, who would propose ways of worship and ideas of inclusion that challenge our tradition and make us wonder whether we can survive all this conflict and contention.

So, like, Paul, we Presbyterians want to protect what little we have, we want to tell those who would challenge and threaten what's left that they are just accelerating the demise of this once great denomination. We're protecting our own, our family, our faith, the ability of God to bless us, the power of God to grant us God's grace, when we stand firm against those who would challenge the way things have been.

But Jesus already has the fish. Paul thought that he needed to protect and preserve the way to God and maybe we think that way as well. **But that's a position rooted in a notion of scarcity, that God's grace is limited to the level of faithfulness we bring to God.** But God is self-sufficient. Jesus already has the fish. **The church, yesterday, today and tomorrow, is totally dependent upon God, not the other way around.** There is no scarcity in God, only abundance. **There is only the abundance that feeds thousands from a handful of food, the abundance that can even give up everything on the cross for the sake of love, the abundance that walks through locked doors and shuttered hearts to announce peace, the abundance that when received in humility, can set us free and restore us to be the people we were always meant to be.**

Isn't that what happened to Peter? Peter had abandoned Jesus in his time of need. He had denied him three times when the pressure was on. And he could do nothing now to make up for his lack of faith and lack of courage. But the point is that it doesn't matter that Peter could do nothing to make up for it. That won't stop Jesus. He asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Each time, as hard as it is for Peter to hear Jesus question him, when he responds, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you," his answer sets him free just a little bit more. **And after the third time, it's clear that Jesus holds nothing but love for Peter and Peter gets the truth that when the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.**

Jesus takes the initiative, he always does. And when Jesus tells us that we are loved, we can be set free. We don't need to get it right before Jesus will get it right with us. We don't need to give to Jesus our money first so he will bless us 10 times or 100 times in return. **We give to Jesus because everything we have belongs to the Lord, not out of some reciprocal arrangement.** We don't have to be less of a sinner before Jesus will love us and work his grace in us. Jesus already has the fish. We are dependent upon him, not the other way around.

Its interesting that when Paul was transformed by his encounter with Jesus, **he came to realize that its not about who's worthy, but about how everyone is unworthy but is made to be worthy by the grace of God.** And he became someone who was willing to die for the very people he was persecuting. The church, not the institution that we have built it up to be, but the fellowship of disciples who would follow the way of Jesus, grew precisely through the inclusion of the people that Paul once fought so fervently to exclude.

I wonder if that isn't the same for us Presbyterians as well. Perhaps it's the very same people and the very same threats that we think will hurt the church, that will end up healing the church and growing the faith and deepening our understanding of the living God. **Perhaps it's time for us to let go of protecting God from those who we think don't have the right way or the right means, but to trust that God knows what God's doing, that God is self sufficient and that the church depends wholly upon God and not the other way around.**

There were exactly 153 fish caught in the disciple's net that morning. Some people have sought to understand the significance of that number. Some have said that 153 represent the exact number of different species of fish that live in the Sea of Galilee. A friend of mine, a minister in Calgary, wrote a book called, *Fishing Tips, How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith*. In that book he gives 9 tips about how to facilitate a healthy, curious congregation. Why 9? Because he simply added the three numbers in 153, $1+5+3$, which is 9.

What's important is not the number, but the fact that it was more than they could haul in. Jesus didn't need the fish from the disciples to feed them, **but the catch symbolized what was possible if the disciples would receive what Jesus had to offer and then go and share that good news with the world.** Peter, having been restored, won't be going fishing again, except as he goes to fish for people.

The good news is that because of the abundance that there is in Jesus, those who follow him must be a people of hope and expectation. **Peter and the disciples lived in what might be called a time of liminality.** Liminality refers to a time of transition, when a process has been started but the outcome is still uncertain. Jesus sends the disciples into the world to feed his sheep but the outcome wasn't certain for Peter and the rest. **But they trusted the one who had the fish.**

We also live in a time of liminality. We are finding our way, hopefully on the other side of the pandemic, maybe not fully out yet, but on our way. What will the church look like, what will the Presbyterian Church in Canada look like? How will we obey the command of Jesus to feed his sheep? Who exactly are the sheep?

Rather than seeing our situation as Christians in this diverse and complex society as being perilous and precarious, as a people who trust in the abundance of Jesus, the one who already has the fish, **may we embrace the opportunities before us and the people God continues to bring into our company.**

Jesus already has the fish and he will feed any who will receive him.

Thanks be to God, Amen!