

Sermon 4.10.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Third Sunday of Easter, Year C

Acts 9:1-20 | Revelation 5:11-14 | **John 21:1-19**

There are a lot of ways to write a sermon, but one of the first things I do every week is read all the scripture passages for that Sunday and pay attention to what jumps out at me.

Which phrases stick with me, which characters I'm drawn to, which words seem powerful or significant or confusing, and then I pray and think and reflect about *why* they got my attention.

When I read today's Gospel passage, there were two phrases that jumped out at me immediately. The first one was pretty useless when it came to writing this morning's sermon, but I just couldn't help it – it was the first thing I noticed, and I've been thinking about it all week, and maybe it caught your attention too. So here's my big question: *why in the world was Simon Peter naked while fishing?* It's kind of weird. I've been fishing many times, with many different people, but at no time did anyone say, "Hey, you know what would make fishing even better? Doing it naked!" But for some reason, that's what Peter did.

After he saw the resurrected Jesus, he decided to go fishing, and a few of his friends came with him. At some point Peter decided that he wouldn't wear clothes while he was fishing, which probably made things kind of awkward for his friends, since they were all stuck out on one small boat together. And when Peter saw Jesus walking down the beach, he got so excited that he yelled, then put on his clothes, and *then* jumped into the ocean and swam to go meet Jesus.

I tried really hard, but I just couldn't come up with any kind of sermon based on the fact that Simon Peter was naked while fishing. Maybe it's a metaphor for the end times – quick,

Jesus is coming, put on pants! I have no clue why Peter acted this way, or why he put on his clothes *just* so he could jump into the ocean. But this detail of the story made me laugh and it brought me joy, and my daughter was born this week, and the world this morning seems full of laughter and joy. And perhaps it's good for us to remember that even the earliest disciples were real-life people, people who were sometimes goofy and strange, who often got it wrong the first time *and* the second time, but who had a deep, deep desire and passion to follow Jesus.

Thankfully, every time I read this story, I was drawn to another phrase. Just two words: charcoal fire. Charcoal fire is only mentioned twice in the entire New Testament, and the words are right there in verse nine: "When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread." (John 21:9)

What's so important about a charcoal fire? Well, this story, where Jesus meets the disciples on the beach and shares breakfast with them, this story where Jesus asks Peter the same question three times, it only appears in the Gospel of John. The other Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke – they don't have this story, or anything close to it. The Gospel of John was written much later than the other three, and it has a lot of stories about Jesus that we don't find anywhere else in the New Testament.

When the Gospel of John was being written, there were multiple competing ideas about Jesus and who he was and what he accomplished. One of the popular ideas was a school of thought that would later be known as *Gnosticism*. It taught that the spiritual realm was good, while the physical, material world was evil and should be rejected. And as a result, some Christians had come to believe that the physical world didn't matter, that Jesus wasn't fully

human, and that his resurrection on Easter was a spiritual or metaphorical resurrection, and *not* a physical one.

The Gospel of John rejects this idea. That's why John is the only Gospel that has the story about Thomas doubting, the story we heard in worship last week, where the resurrected Jesus invited Thomas to see the holes in his hands where they were nailed to the cross, to touch his side where it was pierced by a spear – so that Thomas could see and know that Jesus was really, truly, physically, literally resurrected from the dead. This is why this morning's reading is full of physical details. Jesus walking along a beach. Sitting around a fire. Making breakfast, handing bread to the disciples, eating fish. He was really, truly, physically, literally resurrected from the dead.

Not a spirit, not a metaphor. An actual resurrected Jesus, sitting around a charcoal fire.

And he wasn't sitting there alone. Peter, the man who liked to fish while naked, and swim while fully clothed, he was sitting there with Jesus around the charcoal fire. And for Peter, it was awful. Because the only other time that the words 'charcoal fire' are mentioned in the New Testament was just a few chapters earlier. It had happened just a few days before, when Jesus had been arrested and was on his way to the cross. It was cold out, and Peter was warming himself around a charcoal fire. (John 18:18) As he stood there around the fire, watching what was happening to Jesus, he was asked *three times* if he was one of Jesus' disciples. And out of fear, Peter denied being a follower of Jesus not just once, but three times.

He had been carrying around the shame of what he had done for days. When he stood around that charcoal fire and denied being a follower of Jesus, he had disowned the person he loved the most and betrayed the very core of his identity. Peter felt ashamed and humiliated,

and that's probably why he went fishing. He was a fisherman before Jesus called him, after all, so he went back to what was familiar. For a while he had a special relationship with Jesus, he was a beloved disciple, but then he had ruined all of that as he warmed himself around the charcoal fire. Might as well go fishing.

But now he's sitting around a fire again, with the very person he betrayed. And something amazing happens. After they were done eating breakfast, Jesus turned to Peter and asked him a new question: Peter, do you love me? (v. 15) He asked Peter the same question three times. Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you *love me*? It was a chance for redemption, for Peter to right the three wrong answers he had given just a few days earlier, to reclaim the identity he had betrayed around that fire, to publicly proclaim his love for Jesus. Jesus was offering him forgiveness and a new start, there around the charcoal fire.

And each time Peter said "yes" to Jesus' question, Jesus gave him a simple response: If you love me, then feed my sheep. Jesus draws a direct line from loving him to serving others. Instead of saying that this physical, material world is something to be rejected, in exchange for some spiritual realm that we have to obtain, instead Jesus tells Peter – and us – that this world is something to be cared for. That the people who fill this world are to be loved. This was why Jesus came to the world. It was why he became human, why he walked on this earth, why he willingly offered his life on the cross, and rose again. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16) Jesus came to love this world – including you – and he died to save and forgive this world – including you.

“Feed my sheep” he said. Earlier, Jesus told his disciples that he was the good shepherd. He said, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” (John 10:11-18) Jesus came to call everyone to himself, so that *everyone* could know God’s love and grace and forgiveness. And now he’s telling Peter to get in the game, to be a part of Jesus’ work.

If you love me, feed my sheep. Show others my love. Care for people. Follow me.

We’ve all sat around charcoal fires. These are the places and times when we have denied Jesus, and denied being one of his followers. Sometimes we’ve done it out loud. Sometimes we’ve done it because there are so many people in our world who give Christianity and Jesus a bad name, and we don’t want to be associated with certain people or practices or beliefs. All of us, we have denied Jesus through our actions, hurting ourselves or others, doing things we know are wrong and not in line with God’s will.

Like Peter, we’ve been quiet about our faith, for fear of sticking out or attracting attention. It’s easy, living where we do, to try to make faith just an inward, private thing and to hide it away rather than talk about it or live it. Often, we settle for a lukewarm life of faith that never calls us out of our comfort zone. We ignore opportunities to talk to people about Jesus, to pray for people in need, to say “yes, I am a follower of Jesus.” Instead, too often, we are tempted to keep our mouths shut, to ignore the injustice and wrong in this world, to deny who and *whose* we are.

But like Peter, in just a few minutes we’ll sit around a new fire with Jesus, when we share a holy meal at God’s table, a meal of bread and wine, where we are forgiven and given a new start.

And after this meal, Jesus invites you to follow him. Not just to know him, but to *follow* him. Not just to *believe*, but to *live* in faith. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?"

And if our answer is yes, then our call is simple:

"Feed my sheep." "Follow me." Amen.