

"The Great Catch!"

John 21:1-14

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Most commentators and biblical scholars regard our scripture text as an addendum or epilogue to John's gospel, that the original ending had ACTUALLY concluded with vv. 30 and 31 of chapter 20, where the author tells us: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name-* end of gospel. But just when you think that the account of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection from the perspective of the Beloved Disciple is over, you suddenly begin reading about an entirely NEW resurrection appearance of Christ which, like so many of the accounts in John, is not found in any of the OTHER gospels either. The style is certainly very similar to the first twenty chapters and there is nothing to lead us to conclude that it was NOT written by John.

We are told in our account that this is the THIRD appearance Jesus makes to his disciples following his resurrection from the dead. The FIRST was on Easter evening, when the disciples minus Thomas had locked themselves up in the upper room, the doors and windows shut for fear of the Jews. And His SECOND appearance a week later in that SAME upper room but THIS time for the purpose of comforting Thomas who had not been present the first time. Now, we have a group of disciples, seven of them, no longer in Jerusalem but in Galilee to the north. For Peter and Thomas (and notice how Thomas is now mentioned second to Peter), James and John, Nathaniel and two other unnamed disciples, Galilee was home. After all the high drama they had experienced in Jerusalem, a trip back to familiar surroundings to see old friends and to enjoy their once familiar vocation seemed like the perfect antidote. Getting into one of the old fishing boats they all knew so well, they loaded up their nets and gear and headed out for their favorite spot, a place they had always known would yield fish.

The dragnet they used was a hundred yards or more long and it was made up of a triple net attached along its whole length to one cord. Lowering it into the water, they stretched out its full length and then rowed all around the outside of it to beat the fish into it. The fish would swim through the wide meshes of the two outer nets but when they reached the middle, they would get more and more entangled by their very efforts to disentangle themselves. Then they would haul in the net with its catch by pulling the cord which would draw it together. This they did again and again throughout the night but with no success.

Tired and discouraged as the dawn began to break, they decided it was finally time to pack it in. Their discouragement, however, had to have been far more than not catching fish, more than having toiled all through the night and with nothing to show for all their labor. They had to have been discouraged over the way things had turned out for them, that their lives were not proceeding down the nice neat path they had originally envisioned. You see, Jesus's kingdom was far different, far more radical than their OWN safe ideas of a kingdom. During their time together, he had appealed to and even surrounded himself with strange and even

DESPISED persons that the disciples themselves hadn't much use for. Following his crucifixion, he had returned to them but now he was GONE and they did not know where he was or if he would come back. Furthermore, there was still much about him and his teachings that they did not understand. So long as Jesus had been with them, everything was all right but now he was absent. They were leaderless, directionless, like a ship without a rudder. It had to have been an hour of DECISION for them. What would they do- remain fishers of fish or go on to become "fishers of men?"

Suddenly, standing on the shore appeared an interested spectator. How long he had been there or why they didn't know. Yelling out to them, he inquired, "Friends, have you caught anything?" "No," they replied. Then, the stranger instructed them to take their nets and cast them to the right, on the OTHER side of the boat, a strange bit of instruction for if there was no fish on the left side, you wouldn't expect any there to be any on the right side either. Since they felt they had nothing left to lose, they decided to give it one more attempt. Before they knew it, something astounding began to happen. Hauling in their nets, they discovered it to be SO full of fish that they could hardly pull it in without fear of tearing the nets or capsizing the boat. It was then that John, the beloved disciple, realized that the stranger on the shore was none other than Jesus himself.

Though John is the first to recognize Jesus from the boat, Peter is the first to get to him. Wrapping his garment about him, he dove into the sea and swam to shore, the rest returning in the boat towing the huge catch of fish behind them. What they found was that it was INDEED their Lord and that he had not only prepared a charcoal fire but that he had also laid fish upon the hot coals, making breakfast for them. When they emptied the nets, they discovered they had netted 153 large fish and THE NET WAS NOT EVEN TORN!

Well, what's going on here? How does it offer encouragement to US this morning? Well, one of the reasons John adds this epilogue to his gospel is to once again demonstrate for the Early Church the continuing faithfulness of Christ to his followers. As Jesus had earlier come to calm the fears and deal with the doubts of his disciples- in the garden and then at the upper room, so does he here. He had promised them that he would never leave them alone, that he would be present to them in all their JOYS and all their sorrows, in their SUCCESSES and all their failures, in moments of GREAT FAITH and in times of unbelief. He had said that NOTHING would ever separate them from his love and care, but they would not fully realize this for a few more weeks, until the day of Pentecost. Then, when his Spirit was poured upon his people, he would no longer have to make these appearances for his Spirit would abide upon and even dwell within them. On that day, they would discover his personal presence in a NEW way and they would never fear again. Christ would then make their HEARTS his new home!

This too is a promise each of US shares this morning. As Jesus was so quick to calm their hearts and reassure them with his presence and guidance, so does Jesus assure US that in the midst of OUR greatest and deepest needs, he too is present to US. If WE feel rejected and alone, we can always call out to him and know that he is there. If we are betrayed in a friendship (and certainly no one understood betrayal better than Christ), he stands by our side. If we have suffered the loss of a loved one, our despair is all the introduction he needs to be

present to us and minister to our wounds. And since the Church was born on the day of Pentecost and by virtue of the new birth we are God's children, Christ's Spirit is likewise resident within US. OUR heart is now Christ's new home and we experience his care and his love in a most intimate way.

A SECOND reason for this additional chapter is that he wants to remind his disciples of their original call to become his Apostles and that their mission is to go into ALL the world and not just to those places they considered safe and secure. Jesus had originally taken them from their trades as fishermen to become "fishers of men," catching PEOPLE for the kingdom of God. In a parable, he had once taught them that "the Kingdom of God is like a net let down into the sea, where fish of every kind were caught in it. When it was full, it was dragged ashore." Here Christ is saying to them, "You failed to catch much fish in Israel but on the OTHER side--in the Gentile world around Israel and BEYOND--your nets will be FULL." He is reminding them of his OWN example, that he was all about going to the "other side" whether it was traveling to the "other side of the lake" where the pagans and the demoniacs resided, where all those who are considered strange or afflicted or dangerous dwelt, or to the "other side of the tracks" where people who may be of a lower economic station or different race or ethnic background live.

John makes a point of saying that when they hauled the nets ashore, they counted 153 fish in them and that the net was not torn. There has been much speculation as to the meaning of 153 since numbers figure so prominently in his gospel. For instance, Jerome, an Early Church Father, wrote in one of his commentaries that the number 153 represented the total number of the different kinds of fish in the world, thus symbolizing for him the fullness of the Church. Others point out that 153 is the sum of all the numbers from one to seventeen, thereby suggesting that it is the sum of ten- the number of the Law, and seven- the number of the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit. On the other hand, as Freud once said, sometimes a cigar may be nothing more than a cigar, meaning that perhaps that 153 just happened to be the actual number of fish caught. WHATEVER its significance, it still is a great number.

However, when John adds the point that despite the great number, the net was not broken, it seems obvious that he's referring here to the UNITY of the Church, that it remains strong and unbroken despite the great numbers and different kinds of persons brought into it. The net that bound them together two thousand years ago is the same net that binds US together. Like those early followers of Christ, we TOO are persons from DIFFERENT backgrounds and DIFFERENT races and DIFFERENT occupations. Yet we share a COMMON life bound together by a COMMON message for a COMMON mission with the help of a COMMON Spirit all the while filled with an UNCOMMON love. The Church is in theory the one place where ALL people should feel welcomed and at home REGARDLESS of what their color or social or economic status or even their sexual orientation happens to be. If people are "lost" and feel the need for a home, if they yearn for a place to be accepted and cared for, then our church family here, just like every other church, is the place for them to come. If Christ HIMSELF welcomes that person through these front doors, then who are WE to say NO! Christ has given us a mission and a message for the outcasts among us, and that is to welcome them so that they are outcasts no longer- whether it is a single mother on welfare or one struggling with personal addictions or

someone down on his luck, just trying to get his life together once again. As Jesus, who had NOWHERE to lay his head, loved us and gave US a home, so are we commanded to love those that our own culture would avoid or fear or despise. The church is called to be a haven and home for rejects and castaways, and it is this tolerance and patience and love that will testify to the reality of Jesus Christ in our midst.

And we are not ordered to merely OPEN our doors to them, but we are to “FISH” for them, that is, to search for them and make such persons the highest object of our love and concern. This does not mean that once our service of worship is over, our work is now done here for another week. Rather, it DOES mean that after the benediction is given and the postlude is played, we are then sent out to LOOK for opportunities to minister in our Lord’s name- and there are certainly opportunities all around us if only we would open our eyes to them instead of closing them.

One afternoon not too many years ago, I received a call from a woman, inquiring whether our congregation allowed gays and lesbians to worship with them. She explained that she and her wife were both teachers and members of another congregation, but it had recently closed and they were looking for a NEW church home. They had tried a number of other churches but each time, they were explicitly told that they would be allowed to come and sit in the pews with everyone else on Sunday mornings, but due to their sexual orientation, they could never get involved in the life of their church family and CERTAINLY NEVER become members.

After one rejection after another, someone suggested MY name, that they had heard that I had a policy of opening our doors to EVERYONE, REGARDLESS of one’s spiritual level or theological understanding, regardless of his or her past history or even sexual orientation- that if someone was hungry for acceptance and looking for a church family to be a part of, they were always MORE than welcomed there. I told her that this was so and that if she and her wife WERE to come, they would see that there were no second-class citizens HERE. The following Sunday, she and her wife showed up to worship with us and following the service, Rose and I took them both out to lunch to introduce ourselves to them and learn more about who THEY were. Both were persons of deep faith who had grown up in the church and made Christ an integral part of their relationship as well. Well, they NEVER STOPPED coming, eventually joining and becoming two of the most faithful members we had- and NOT ONCE did their sexual orientation ever become an issue.

At one point, she shared how she had just been diagnosed with cancer and the following week, she would be undergoing an operation for it. Rose and I made a point of being there and sitting with her family throughout the entire procedure. Days later, after she had been sent home from the hospital, members of the church dropped off dinners for her and her mate until she had returned to full strength. She never stopped thanking us for that. Then one day, she told me that an opportunity had opened to become a principal in a school in another part of the state. She had applied and was accepted which meant they would have to sell their home and move from the area; she wanted me to hear that from her first. However, before they left, she sent me one of the most beautiful notes I have ever received. It said that the two of them were so grateful to our church, that they had found a TRUE spiritual home there- one that had shown

love and acceptance to them when so many other churches would not. They would never forget and we would always be in their heart for that.

Friends, the message John has for US this morning is the same one HE had learned from JESUS HIMSELF, that there are no second-class citizens in his kingdom and that ALL are welcomed because we are all accepted on the very same basis- the need for grace. Christianity was once described as “one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread” and that is a perfect description of who and what we are about- we’re ALL beggars looking for bread and Christ becomes for us the main meal who sustains us. When someone comes into our lives, rather than focusing on the differences between us in how we look or who we love, we need to focus in on that which we share in common- that we’re all lost and blind and hungry and broken, looking for love and acceptance, that is of course, until we met Jesus in and through his Body, the Church. With Christ in our lives, he becomes the great common denominator that binds us together and makes us all one IN SPITE OF OUR MANY DIFFERENCES!

And this same kind of radical acceptance is what defines our MISSION as well. For as “fishers of men” OURSELVES, he sends us out into the world to go to those same difficult and disturbing places he HIMSELF frequently went- to the “other side” as John says. HE CALLS US TO COMFORT THE LOST AND LONELY even as he dried the tears of a forlorn widow in a forgotten outpost called Nain. HE CALLS US TO LIFT UP THE WEAK AND THE POWERLESS even as he conferred dignity on a woman who was not only a Samaritan but a SINFUL Samaritan woman at that. HE CALLS US TO TEND TO THE SICK AND SUFFERING even as he healed the affliction of a hopeless leper, the greatest outcast in the ancient world. HE CALLS US TO EMBRACE MISFITS AND UNDERDOGS just as he welcomed prostitutes and tax collectors, demoniacs and even the “heathen” gentiles. HE BIDS US TO FOLLOW HIM INTO THOSE PLACES THAT ARE NOT SO PLEASANT AND NOT SO DESIRABLE- like hospitals and drug rehabs, nursing homes and community jails; into places NOT so safe and clean as many of the homes and tenements, streets and back alleys of our inner cities. Jesus welcomed ALL people to himself, never ONCE refusing any one to come near, loving them whether they were lepers or prostitutes, the demon-possessed or a sinful Samaritan woman and welcoming them with open arms. THESE, in turn, were to become the stones with which he was going to build his church. He loved them because he knew that the day was near when HE would be just as despised and rejected as they were, that upon that cross, he would become every bit a leper, a prostitute, a homosexual, an AIDS sufferer, an outcast HIMSELF- rejected and despised just as THEY were. And if we make this place a safe, welcoming haven for ALL who are looking for love and acceptance; if we open MORE than the doors of this building but the doors of OUR HEARTS to them--even as Christ opened his heart to US and took US in--then he promises us a catch SO LARGE that it will exceed our wildest dreams and in a net that will NEVER break. Let us pray...

*Gracious Father, you have provided us with all the tools with which to fish- you have given us the “good news” of Jesus Christ to share, your Holy Spirit to help us spread it, and your own grace and love to keep us from getting tired and discouraged when the way becomes difficult. Help us in the task you have set before us knowing that if we are faithful in going to the “other side,” the catch will INDEED be great and the harvest full. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*