

Fishing and Feeding **John 21:1-21**

People will often tell me that they feel like God has told them something they are supposed to do, but be frustrated because he hasn't been very clear about it. Maybe that's happened to you, too. It's more like a glimmer of a message than a full blown inner-office memo. Maybe it's been word or a turn in a different and unexpected direction, or just a stirring inside of you. And then you are left to ponder and puzzle your way through what this message might mean; how you are supposed to be obedient and do what God has given you to do when you're not really sure what it is to begin with. I myself have thought on more than one occasion that it wouldn't kill God to be a bit more forthright in his communications if he thinks it's important.

What do you suppose went on in Peter's mind that morning, once the dishes were done and the fish and boats were dealt with and Jesus had gone on his way, and Peter was left alone to ponder what Jesus had said to him? *Feed my sheep, Peter. Feed my sheep.* Now, what on earth did he mean by that? Jesus had once called himself the great shepherd, and hinted that all people were his sheep, not just his disciples, and Jesus had just fed them all bread and fish – so maybe you put that all together and assume that Peter was supposed to go around feeding everyone and telling them it was from Jesus? Was he going to be in the miraculous feeding business now? Or was it a 'feed the hungry' message? On the other hand, Jesus had an unsettling habit of not being literal – if he wasn't supposed to feed them with fish and bread, what was he supposed to feed them with? What, exactly, was Jesus telling him to do?

Thankfully, Peter eventually worked it out. What Jesus was telling him that morning at the side of Lake Tiberius, or Galilee as it is usually called, was how to be the Church. The common interpretation of the story says that it was Jesus' way of restoring Peter's relationship with him after Peter denied him three times, but it was more than that. It was a very simple, shorthand directive about what it meant to be the community of faith. *Feed my sheep.* Nurture the sheep that are already in the fold, bring in more sheep so that they can be fed, too. The two primary tasks of the church: nurture and evangelism.

But Jesus could have pulled Peter aside in the upper room and told him that, couldn't he? Or if the message was one that needed to be delivered in Galilee he could have just met the guys after they got in from fishing and had that conversation with him. As Peter thought about what Jesus had said to him and what it meant, his thoughts must have gone back to the events that had led up to it, the failed fishing trip. Again, Jesus' unsettling habit of not coming right out and saying what he meant or wanted you to do, but letting you wrestle your way through the stories he told and the encounters he had with you to find the message in it. Was all that business about the fish part of the same message, somehow?

Whether out of the comfort of habit, or aimlessness or simply because it was what he knew how to do and he didn't know what else to do, Peter had announced one night that he was going fishing, and the others jumped at the chance. The point here apparently

wasn't their motivation, but their fruitlessness. They had decided to go fishing, and their efforts resulted in empty nets. But when Jesus told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat the nets came back loaded, almost to the point of breaking. Maybe that's where that contemporary expression of great abundance came from: They came back with a boatload of fish.

What Peter probably figured out in time is that Jesus was telling them some of the things he would need to know to do the job he was giving him. Broad hints about the sorts of roadblocks they would encounter in the Church, important things they would need to continually remind themselves of.

Like about initiative. When Peter and the guys went out fishing on their own, they came up with nothing. Their nets were empty. It makes me think back to the scripture reading from Acts last week where the Pharisee, Gamaliel, recommend that the Sanhedrin leave the disciples alone, because if their mission was from God, they wouldn't be able to stop them anyway, but if they were nothing more than human efforts and ideas, they would come to nothing. They would fall apart on their own.

When the Church acts on its own initiative its nets are going to come back empty. I've known churches that decided to build a daycare or a family life center with the idea that it would help grow the church, but for some of them their plans backfired. They've ended up with crushing debt or a logistical nightmare, looking after new facilities, but the church hasn't grown. It hasn't turned a languishing church into a vibrant church. Even if we come up with great ideas like doing mission work or starting a new ministry to an underserved population, if it is our idea and not God's, our nets will come back empty.

It was only when Jesus told them to try the other side of the boat that they became fruitful. It's only when we are listening to God, and doing what God directs us to do, that we will be successful. It seems like a no-brainer, but sometimes we forget it. Our direction comes from God. Our mission is to do God's mission. We need to be a 'doing' church, but unless we are a listening church first our efforts won't amount to much.

The other roadblock this story suggests that the Church needs to be on the lookout for is fear. Now, nowhere in this story is fear mentioned, I'll admit it. But John writes that when the disciples pulled their nets in from the right side of the boat, the nets came back in loaded to the gills, *but they did not break*. Isn't that what drives us as a church sometimes - the fear that 'it' will break? That the church is fragile and we have to be very careful with it? We are afraid of trying something new, for fear that it won't go over well, it will be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. We are afraid of breaking with tradition, or habit or custom. Or conversely, sometimes we are afraid that, if we don't do what everyone else is doing, we will be left behind. We are afraid of doing the church in, aren't we? We've somehow gotten it into our heads that this is frail and delicate, and if we aren't very, very careful our nets will tear apart; the church will fall apart.

And again, I suppose we could break it, destroy it, if what we do we do on our own initiative. If the great ideas or bold new ideas are ours, and not God's then we could do

great damage to the church, or just give it a good limp; take the wind out of its sails. You and I have seen it happen. But being the church isn't about survival. Safety and self-preservation are never the focus of the church; they should never be our ultimate concern. If the idea, however fanciful or sensible, comes from God, our nets will never break. In fact, just the opposite will happen.

Last fall when Gradye Parsons preached at our Presbytery meeting he told a story about a little landlocked church that was led, I believe, by a lay minister. The church desperately needed the land next to it for parking, but the owner of the property wouldn't budge, wouldn't sell it to them, at least not at a price they could afford. So their minister, at God's prompting, decided they needed to pray, and pray hard, as a congregation. Pray for a parking lot. And so they did. And guess what? Out of the blue the minister gets a call from the owner of the lot next door who, out of the blue, has had a sudden and complete change of heart. The property was theirs.

It's an amazing story, isn't it? But even if we can agree that it is amazing, why do we find it remarkable? Why aren't there hundreds of stories like that out there, so commonplace in our experience that it's hardly even worth telling? Bold churches everywhere, listening to God's leading, certain of God's ability to act in amazing ways, praying faithfully and fervently for God to do what is certainly impossible, unless of course, it is what God wants. Booming churches, bursting at the seams, not just in numbers, but in depth of faith and grace. Isn't that the whole point of the story of Peter and the disciples? If the church faithfully listens to God and is obedient to God, no matter how outlandish or unreasonable his direction might seem to us, our efforts will always meet with 'success'. Our nets will come back full to the brim. God deals in abundance, not adequacy, right?

Maybe there were a couple of cautionary elements to this story, but it is really a story about the power and bounty of the God. It is about what the Church will be and do if the people can manage to keep themselves from wresting it from God's hands. Ultimately, it is an invitation to a life of excitement and joy. And while this is a story about the Church, the community of faith, those same points carry over into your life as well. God will do incredible, amazing things in your life if you will just trust him, listen to him, and obey him. There's no need to fear. We will not break.