

Over the last few weeks, we've been looking at fish tales from the Four Gospels. Two stories were from Matthew and we looked at one each from the Gospel's of Luke and Mark. Today we hear a story from the Fourth Gospel: John which tells us a final fish story where the resurrected Lord of Heaven and Earth is grilling fish and toasting bread for his disciples. [John 21:1-17]

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A few weeks ago, I pointed out how 3 of the 4 gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – agree that Jesus' first 4 disciples were fishermen; that in order to follow him, these men had to drop their nets to become 'fishers of men' ... and of women. (The Gospels, especially around the crucifixion and resurrection, make it clear that there were several women in Jesus' entourage.)

The Gospel of John is unique and, as our reading reveals, John's gospel ends where the others begin: at the water's edge with disciples who have 'Gone Fishing.' Today's reading describes a post-resurrection event; something the disciples experience *after* Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

None-the-less, there is a strong correlation between John 21 and Luke 5:1-11 (the passage we focused on in the first week of this series). Like Luke 5, Simon-Peter is the most prominent disciple in John 21. And, like Luke, after Jesus invites the fishermen to cast their empty nets into the sea, there's an abundant catch of fish.

But let me remind you how Simon-Peter responded to Jesus in Luke 5. Though he was reluctant to drop his nets in deep water, the unexpected and abundant catch of fish provokes a confession. Luke 5:8 tells us: "When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinner!'" But rather than leave, "Jesus said to Simon, 'Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people.'" (v. 10) So Jesus brushes past Simon-Peter's self-confession and invites him to be a disciple.

Think about that. Many of us feel, deep down, feel like Simon-Peter! That God can't possibly use us because of the mess we've made of our lives, or the doubts we harbor, or whatever excuse we make for not being 'good enough'. But Jesus seems to say: "Yeah, whatever. I know

what you've done, but it's what I want you to do *now* that's critical." As one preacher phrases it, Jesus knows the stupidest, creepiest, ugliest stuff we've ever done, ... and still wants us to follow him; to learn from him how we can love and serve and bless the world.

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Isn't that something we need to hear? That whatever our failures, whatever our fears, whatever our faithlessness, we're not disqualified from being in relationship with God. Indeed, God wants to make use of us. I think that's something many of us need to hear again and again.

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I don't recall where I read this, but there was a study conducted that uncovered 3 things people most want to hear. Now, if we look what our culture promotes, I don't think we'd guess what the study found. Given what our culture promotes, we'd have to guess that the top 3 things anyone wants to hear are:

1. You've won! (As in the lottery, because our culture tells us that getting and spending money on what we want is a key marker of our value.)
2. You are so hot! (Doesn't it seem that in our image conscious culture one of the things we'd most want to hear is how sexually attractive we are?)
3. You're the top dog! (Culture encourages us to focus on obtaining status and prestige; and usually without worrying about those beneath us.)

So, it seems that positive words about money, attractiveness, and status might be among the top 3 things people most want to hear spoken to them. But, here's what the researchers actually found, and you can easily guess the first:

1. I love you.
2. I forgive you.
3. Dinner's ready.

Each of these three statements is a major part of John's story. Let's look...

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1.) **I love you.** As Easter approaches, it's fair to say that many struggle with the doctrine or idea of Jesus' physical resurrection. One question that I hear from doubters is if I really believe in Jesus'

bodily resurrection? (If you know someone who struggles, or you yourself struggle with this question I recommend *Surprised By Hope* by NT Wright. A terrific book!) But I hasten to point out that when we survey the Gospels, the writers themselves seem to struggle as they tell us several *different* resurrection stories. In fact, Matt. 28:16-17 goes so far as to say that even those who are in the presence of the resurrected Jesus *STILL* doubt: "Now the 11 disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they *saw* him, they worshipped him, but some doubted."

At the core what the NT affirms about the resurrection is this: "In Jesus' resurrection God declares: 'This is how much I love you! Not even death is stronger than my love.'"

If you have not the slightest hope that love is more powerful than death, I'd agree that would place one on the outside of scriptural Christianity. But if you look inside yourself and find the remotest suspicion that there's a force more powerful than death, then you have the beginnings of Easter faith; and that's a faith worth nourishing!

The apostle Paul affirms the contours of Easter faith in Romans 8:38-39 when he writes: "I am convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers, or height or depth or anything else in all creation." In other words 'love wins!' God's love always wins over death, despair, and evil.

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2.) **I forgive you.** Most biblical scholars agree that Jesus' three questions to Simon-Peter in vv. 15-17 are an act by which Jesus absolves him of guilt for the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus after Jesus was arrested.

But here's something our English translations miss. The first two times that Jesus asks Simon, "Do you love me?" the Greek work for love is *agape*. But when Peter responds the first two times, he uses the word *philia*. But the third time Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" the Greek word he uses is *philia*. And Peter again uses the word *philia* in reply.

Of the several Greek words we translate as 'love', *agape* is the most substantial, deepest, and committed type of love. But *Philia* describes the type of love we have for relatives; a love we have out of obligation. It is not as substantial or committed as *agape*. So maybe you can see now, why Peter was sad when Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" Because it became clear to both Peter and Jesus, that Peter could not tell Jesus he loved him (*agape*) with the level of commitment Jesus was asking for, even now! After the resurrection...

But here's the thing... in changing the words in his question to Peter, Jesus finds a way to meet Peter where Peter is at. And that's an act of forgiveness in itself. Jesus is saying I forgive you for not begin able to do what I'm asking of you, for not going as far as I am asking you and loving me with *agape* love. But, if *philia* is what you can do... that will do... (I find this moving.)

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3.) **Dinner's ready.** Of the things that Christians do when we gather, eating is the most important. Communion, potlucks, lunch after worship... So even this detail; that Jesus was grilling fish and toasting bread, is not incidental to this story. That detail reminds us that God yearns, like a mother hen, to feed us and sustain us, both spiritually and physically. And that speaks again to the great and death-defying love that God has for us. After the very worst we can do to Jesus in nailing him to a cross, God raises Jesus so that he can feed us... This is why scripture encourages us to be reconciled with those we are struggling to love and to forgive BEFORE we come to the table

I love you, I forgive you, dinner's ready... This is why the church exists: to equip disciples who say these words to each other so that they can go into all the world declaring the Gospel: God loves you, God forgives you, Dinners Ready so let's eat! **Amen.**