

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - May 5, 2019 - “Reminders to Follow” Psalm 30 and John 21: 1-19

During a fishing trip with the other disciples, we learn that Simon Peter is naked. We're not told why, but I offer this theory. In those days, fishing was an incredibly physical, messy, and smelly business. So while the disciples had thus far caught no fish, they had still exerted plenty of effort. The nets that they cast were very large and heavy. And each time that they pulled one of those nets back in, water from the net would drench their outer garments and pool on and around their sandals on the deck floor.

After hours of this, the disciples are tired. Having fished all night, they are sweaty. Their clothes are wet. They smell like the sea. Understandably, their top priorities are to clean up, to dry off, and get something to eat. But, unlike us, they do not have the luxury of a closet filled with other options. So before returning to the shore, Peter removes his garments, rings them out by hand, and hangs them up to dry. Better to do this in the company of friends than in the presence of strangers on the shore.

Still, the timing of Jesus' appearance, with Peter in no position to welcome him, is meant to make us laugh. If you recall, Peter is the one who previously stepped

out of a boat to meet Jesus on the water before growing scared and sinking. He is the one who rebuked Jesus, saying that he would be spared the death that he foretold. And he is the one who said that he would join Jesus even in death before quickly denying him three times. On the outside, Peter seems so confident, bold, and self-assured. But, while he may be outspoken, his words and his actions do not always align.

That evening, it had been Peter's idea to go fishing. And now, the disciples' collective efforts have yielded no fish. That is, until a man they do not recognize calls to them from the shoreline and instructs them to cast the net on the other side of the boat. Surely, they've done this many times before. It's not as if the stranger has offered some new, radical strategy. But, at this point, they have nothing to lose. So they do as the stranger suggests. Immediately, they are rewarded with so many fish that the net strains under the weight.

The result is not merely a good haul. This take is miraculous, and as the men struggle to pull the fish in, the so-called beloved disciple recognizes that it is Jesus who had instructed them. Peter, ever eager to show his commitment, quickly dresses and launches himself into the water in an effort to swim to Jesus and be the first to greet him. By the time that he emerges at the shore, Peter is sopping wet once again.

His heart is in the right place. He wants to be with Jesus. But, his flaws remain. Once again, he has made a hasty decision.

For me, the timing of Jesus' arrival is packed with meaning. Disrobed, Peter is physically vulnerable. And soon, Jesus will demonstrate that Peter is spiritually vulnerable as well. At times, Jesus arrives right on cue, as we are worshipping together in this sanctuary filled with soaring music. But, that's not the only way that he makes himself known. The Lord also greets us when our guard is down and we least expect him. Amid the daily rhythms of our lives, his appearance remains possible - even likely.

When the disciples reach the shore, they join Jesus at a fire. For breakfast, he serves them fish and bread. As these men have done so many times before, they share a meal together. You may recall that Jesus' first miracle in John's Gospel involved turning water to wine, permitting a wedding celebration to continue, uninterrupted. And now, John's Gospel closes with an abundant catch of fish, with table fellowship, and with the building of more, beloved community. On this occasion, the breakfast conversation is emotional and deeply personal. In keeping with Peter's three Holy Week denials, Jesus now asks him the same pointed question on three successive occasions. "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Friends, have you ever asked someone this question? “Do you love me?” It is at once a test of devotion and a display of vulnerability, as the speaker seeks reassurance. At first glance, the recipient has the upper hand, with the power to either reassure or to crush. Just imagine a particularly heated conversation among spouses. One partner might say, “Do you love me?” In response, the other may offer a hug, a kiss, and words designed to reconnect. Or, alternatively, one’s partner may offer a blank stare, or an eye roll, or harsh words implying that a separation is imminent.

Even so, this question, “Do you love me?,” makes the recipient vulnerable, as well. This is because the question forces a response. And if the answer is “yes,” then proof of one’s stated affections will soon be expected. “Do you love me?” asks Jesus. “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” responds Peter. If this is true, Jesus says, then “feed my lambs.” “Do you love me?” Jesus asks a second time. And again, Peter responds, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” In response, Jesus tells him, “tend my sheep.” A third time, Jesus addresses Peter saying, “Do you love me?” At this point, Peter is hurt. He says, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” And one last time Jesus says, “feed my sheep.”

In all, this marks the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples following the resurrection. And here, we find a demonstration of Jesus’ exceptional patience.

Despite the disciples denials and rejections, Jesus appears to them repeatedly. He does not scold or lecture them. He does not suggest that they are no longer worthy for the work ahead. Instead, he restores and renews them. And despite their shortcomings, he reminds them that God still has a plan for them.

Having forgiven Peter's betrayal, Jesus now offers him even more responsibility. And we soon realize that Jesus' instructions to feed and tend his sheep are the words that shall commission Peter to service among the spiritual flock. Remarkably, all of this is accomplished in one, brief conversation.

Today, Jesus may not walk among us in person. But, he remains with us in spirit. And at a moment when we least expect it, he may draw near and extend signs of hospitality and abundance. In response, there will be many opportunities to demonstrate the depth of our love for him. But, they always look the same. "Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep. Come and follow me." May all thanks be to the God of patience, forgiveness, and abundance. Amen.