

Christ Caring For People through People

A sermon taken from John 21. 1-19, and preached on April 18, 2010 at
Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina
by Dr. Ken Carter.

John tells the story of Jesus, the events leading to his arrest, suffering, death, and resurrection with depth and detail, excitement and enthusiasm. The book ends with today's passage. It is not anti-climax; it is an opening into the future, it insists that Easter is not a day; it is a way of life, not an ending but a beginning. The resurrection, recorded in John, spills over into a series of scenes----Thomas insisting that unless he see the wounds, he will not believe; Jesus giving the frightened gathering of disciples the gift of his peace, an unsuccessful night of fishing, followed by an unexpected encounter with a stranger at breakfast, a penetrating conversation about what is expected now that everything has changed.

I want to reflect on this passage in very simple ways, ways that capture the humanity of the disciples, the urgency of Jesus, the implications for us. I want to do this by focusing on a few key words and phrases. After Jesus had appeared to the disciples, they had gone back to the Sea of Galilee, sometimes called Tiberias. Peter said, **I am going fishing.**

Now this is not like our saying, "let's go up to the mountains, a couple of hours west of here, and find a stream". It is like saying, "*I give up.*" They are taking up their former occupation, having seemingly failed at being students of the master teacher, they are going back to doing what they had been doing before. They are saying "*I give up.*" ***Do you ever feel like giving up?*** This thing with Jesus had been astonishing, life-transforming, but...what next, what now?

They were going to go back to what they were doing before they met Jesus. That is the tragic shape of many Christian lives. We have a powerful experience, it has a beginning and an ending, it is intense, it burns brightly for a time, and then...the flame dies out.

And when something ends, we simply go back to what we had been doing before. We fall back into old habits. Peter says, **I am going fishing.** Peter says, "*I give up.*" ***Do you ever feel like giving up?***

They go fishing, and they fish all night, and what do you think they catch? Nothing. Verse three reads, **that night they caught nothing.** You can feel the frustration building in the story, you can sense the disappointment, even the failure. **They caught nothing.**

Have you ever been there? Have you ever worked hard, really hard toward some goal, in some project, and in the end, there is nothing to show for it?

They caught nothing. The disciples were at the point of giving up. The disciples were frustrated. They must have sensed that they were failures.

Have you ever been in that boat with the disciples? It can be a low place in life, in the spiritual life. At that moment, if we have ears to hear, Jesus speaks. **Here**, he says, **throw your nets on the other side, and you'll catch some fish.**

Sometimes we do get stuck in our routines. Albert Einstein once defined insanity as *"doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result."* Maybe we are working too hard. Maybe we are blaming other people. Maybe we are not listening to God. Maybe we think we can do it ourselves. **Throw your nets on the other side, and you'll catch some fish.**

They listen to Jesus. They have a miraculous catch. They drag it all to shore. There are 153 large fish. The scholars have spilled a lot of ink over the centuries about the meaning of 153. I could give you four or five theories, but in the end who knows? John also tells us that, although there were so many, the net was not torn. The Greek word for torn is schism—there were no schisms, this was a word used throughout the gospel, signifying that none are lost, all are together.

Then they share a meal with Jesus. He takes the bread and the fish, and this all seems familiar to them. They recall a boy with loaves and fishes and a great crowd. Maybe it occurs to them that if the Lord could make it all work out that day, he could do it again. They remember farther back, when the prophet from Nazareth told them they could fish for men and women. That day they eat the meal with the risen Jesus.

Then Jesus asks the questions of Peter, three times, an echo of the questions after his arrest, the three denials, three times he asks, **Simon, do you love me? Simon, do you love me? Simon, do you love me? If you love me, Jesus says, feed my sheep.** Note that Jesus speaks to him not as Peter (the rock) but as Simon, his name before he met the Lord who had come to the lakeshore three years earlier. The three-fold *q* and *a* echoes his teaching at the Passover meal: **I give you a new commandment: Love one another, as I have loved you.** Jesus is calling his disciples into mission. Jesus is saying, **as the Father has sent me, so I send you. Love one another, as I have loved you. Feed my sheep.**

In the unfolding drama of the gospel this is of course no match for what happened a chapter or two earlier---betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, resurrection. Those were very public events and John goes into great detail---more than a third of the Gospel of John, the last eight chapters, focuses on the last few days of Jesus' life.

And what is true in scripture is true for us. At times church is there for everyone to see, and it is glorious. But the church is sometimes hidden. We have moved from the very public scenes of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter to the hidden conversations that have to do with....

Clarity---who am I?

With Conviction--what am I going to do?

With Call-- who am I going to follow?

Jesus asks, "*Do you love me?*"

There will be times in the Christian life that are like Easter Sunday. Bells and brass and flowers and celebration, enthusiasm and power and glory. And there will be times in the Christian life when we wonder: was this all worth it? What did it all mean? And yes, there will be times when we fish all night and catch nothing. In these times, the one on one conversations make all the difference.

It is appropriate today that we acknowledge the profound gift of the Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministers are Christians who sense a call to listen, support, stand alongside another person in need. Stephen Ministers are trained in Christian care giving; they are not therapists, and they are not pastors. Stephen Ministry relationships are confidential, and so they are never public, they are hidden, quiet, but nevertheless they are profound.

Bill Jeffries and I had the common experiences of helping to begin Stephen Ministries almost twenty years ago, he was serving at First Methodist in Gastonia and I was serving at Christ Methodist in Greensboro. He spoke at our first banquet, for our Stephen Ministers, during one of those years. The time flies!

I remember the very first group of Stephen Ministers who were trained at Christ Church. There were 18 men and women, and it was a risk for all of us---the investment of time, money, energy. Maybe no one would ask for help? Maybe the church would not embrace it? Maybe it would be misunderstood? Maybe it would be a waste of time?

We trained the Stephen Ministers, we matched them with persons going through challenging transitions----a marital separation, the loss of employment, a chronic illness. The Stephen Ministers came together for supervision. And I remember one of the comments that evening, from a woman named Ginny, who had done most everything in that congregation. She said, "this is what I always wanted to do in the church!"

Stephen Ministry has been defined as "Christ caring for people through people." She had heard the call of Jesus: **feed my sheep.**

The Good Shepherd's earthly ministry is coming to a conclusion and he is commissioning the disciples---and Peter is the representative---to continue all that he has done. A close reader of scripture will catch the significance of Peter as a minister; from the beginning, God has used imperfect men (and women) as leaders and servants in the church.

And so we gather this morning to listen for the voice of Jesus—this is conversation that becomes prayer; to eat the meal with Jesus—this is worship that becomes communion; to discover how we might follow Jesus--- this is service that is finally our response to his question, "**Do you love me? Feed my sheep.**"

Ken Callahan has been a close friend over the years; he served on the staff of a large church in Dallas, then taught at Emory, and now helps congregations to be more effective in mission. He remembers being in one of those churches, a church with a glorious past, but a church that had been on something of a downward slide for some time. They made the decision to gather, some of the leaders, in the sanctuary, to pray. "In the center wall of the chancel of that sanctuary there was a remarkable stained glass window, with Christ, standing at the door, knocking. You can visualize the picture, the window, the biblical image. In the culture of an earlier time, Callahan realized, there was an understanding, an assumption:

Christ stands the door, knocking, hoping someone will hear his voice, come to the door, and open the door and invite Christ in to their lives.

It dawned on Callahan, as they were praying that morning, as the sunlight was streaming through the window in a remarkable way, that in our time, another biblical image was possible, was helpful:

Christ stands at the door, knocking, hoping someone will hear the knock, and come to the door, and open the door so Christ can invite them out into his life in mission." (*Twelve Keys to An Effective Church*).

Jesus lives, and dies, and is raised from death so that we might live with him and be a part of his life, so that we might be Easter people, people of prayer, people who break bread with him, people who join in his mission in the world.

After the glory of Easter, in the quietness, the question persists, the question of the forgiven sinner, Peter, the question of you and me.

Jesus asks, **Do you love me?** And we respond...

*Source: Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*.