

“Do you love me more than these?”
John 21:1-22

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’”

We begin this Sunday in the dark. Seven disciples have gathered at the Sea of Tiberias—a number that indicates fullness, a number that suggests the whole church was present. In the aftermath of Jesus’ death, Peter says, almost with resignation, “I am going fishing” and the other six follow him to the boat which was an early symbol for the church. In fact, the place where you are sitting right now is called the nave and takes its name from the Latin root *navis* for ship. Moreover, according to New Testament professor Sandra Schneiders, “By the time this Gospel was written, the use of the image of fishing for the pastoral ministry of the church was common.” This is not simply a story about the life of seven mediocre fishermen; it is the story of the life of the church in the time after the resurrection. It is our story. With Easter a curious memory, we have gone fishing—gone back to doing what we do to survive. It is the only thing we know how to do, though it is not by chance that in all four Gospels, the disciples never catch a single fish without Jesus’ help. This morning will be no exception. On our own in the dark without him, we can catch nothing.

But just after daybreak, John writes, Jesus shows up. Light and dark are never idle details in John’s Gospel. He is on the beach and we are in the boat, in the church, but we have no idea who he is. Remember how Mary thought Jesus was a gardener until he chose to “show himself” (*orphthe*)? Now he calls out to us and we do not even recognize his voice. Sunday after Sunday we are told to listen for God’s word but the words are like the words of a stranger.

Almost as if to chide us in our failure at fishing for people he says, “Nothing caught?” “Nothing,” we reply. Without him, the church can do nothing: we are like branches without a

vine. He then addresses us, instructs us, even commands us: “Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” This is no godly technique—not a strategy for institutional growth or survival or success. The point is not how the church does what it does but with whom and by whose word and under whose authority do we do what we do. He addresses us, even though we have no idea who he is, and as we enact his word beyond the confines of the boat, the institutional church, into our nets swim a multitude of creatures that are literally dying to be caught by his love. That multitude swirls around this boat still!

Then perhaps because of such great success or perhaps because Jesus chooses to show himself, the Beloved Disciple says to Peter, “It is the Lord!” These are the same words used by Christians in the early church to confess their faith in the Risen Lord. A good number of them died as they said them. Simon Peter jumps into the water—some think he is coming to Jesus through the waters of baptism as we each one have done--while the other six manage to *drag* the enormous catch through the same water to Jesus. It is what bringing a congregation to faith sometimes feels like given the forces pulling each of us in every other direction.

Once ashore, we see a charcoal fire—a detail last mentioned in the courtyard of the High Priest where Peter warmed himself even as he denied Jesus three times. Jesus asks Peter to bring him some of the fish. Never one for a timid gesture when he can be bold, he goes to the boat and hauls the whole catch ashore—one hundred fifty three large fish. Can you imagine a Sunday with one hundred and fifty three excited new lives on board? Hmmm, maybe they were here last Sunday! The odd number is a bit of a mystery (a Googling member tells me that 153 were the number of known species of fish at the time, meaning *all* the fish in *all* the world), but the next detail is not: though there were so many, the net was not torn. The church was not divided.

Jesus then invites the entire church to a meal. We respond, even though we both know him and do not know him. Nevertheless, like the Beloved Disciple, we confess inwardly our faith in him: “we know it is the Lord” and at this meal, in the breaking of bread, we come to believe the stranger is Jesus, is the one who was crucified, dead and buried but is inextricably alive. It is a belief marked not by certainty; rather like Mary’s belief that the gardener who called her name was her living Lord, it is belief marked by astonishment.

We would do well to pause in the story and trace the life of the early church over our own in the wake of the resurrection: their hearing of his voice, their obedience in response to his address (not knowing it was he), their trust of the apostolic witness which is now the witness of Scripture, their plunging into the waters of baptism, all these impossible possibilities leading them, as many here have been led, to recognize the stranger on the shore, in the breaking of bread, as their living Lord. Are these not the means of grace we have been given, from the beginning of the post-resurrection church until now, means given to those who must believe without seeing, means of proclaiming not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, to the end that our children and our children’s children may come to know him and to live, in this death-dealing world, as though death has no dominion?

But this is only the beginning! Once breakfast is over, Jesus zeroes in on Peter, the one who is to lead the post-resurrection community, the community that now can only believe without seeing. Ironically, Jesus speaks to the one who did see him and yet who denied that he ever knew him. I am convinced that those who lead the community of faith are the most vulnerable to doubt and guilt so that they may know the urgency of hearing a word of grace pronounced over the broken pieces of a human life. “Simon son of John,” Jesus asks, “do you love me [*agapas me*] more than these?” We have rehearsed this before, but it is well worth doing

again. In Greek, agape is the self-giving, self-emptying love of God, a love not dependent on affection. Will you give your life to me, he asks, more than to these? We do not know who or what these were and I think this also is not by chance. It allows us to consider what we do give our lives to, you and I, without excusing ourselves from Jesus' question: what or who takes our time, our emotion, our energy; what or who is given our gifts, our resources, our devotion, even our worship? Do you love me, will you give yourself to me more than these? To put it bluntly, Jesus might as well have asked, "Will you die for me?" Will you die to yourself and live to me? Do you agape me?

In response Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you [*philo se*]." Philia is the love between friends or more formally, "a preferential bond based on mutual attraction." To put it honestly, Peter could have said, "Yes, I really like you Jesus and I will 'friend' you forever." Again Jesus asks if Peter *agapas me* and again Peter responds, *Philo se*. He withholds himself, as we withhold ourselves, our minds, our hearts, our spirits, our strength because, well, there are other things we care about, other causes. A third time Jesus asks of Peter only the love he is able to give: *Phileis me?* Jesus asks. *Philo se*, Peter insists. But Jesus goes on to tell Peter he *will* love him by dying for him: he will lay down his life for his friend. *Agape!* Then Jesus says simply "Follow me!"

In this time when there are so many things asking for a piece of us, he comes to us as the stranger the world would have us fear, the outcast the world would have us hate, the weak the world would have us revile, the poor the world would have us despise. He who is alive comes to us in "the least of these". Agape me in these, he commands us after breakfast: tend them, feed them, lay down your life for these.

But the conversation is not over. After Peter has a moment to think, he does just what we

do when the question placed before our lives is asking a bit too much of us. “What about him?” Peter asks as if to say, “Are you asking him to give you his life, to commit everything to you, or are you asking more of me?” Jesus looks at Peter with the laser eyes of the light of the world and says, “I am not talking to him. I am talking to you. You follow me.”

As we commit ourselves anew to the ministry and mission of this congregation through the pledges we make today to a future that is yet to be imagined, I pray more and more that his living presence will be made manifest here among us, among those of us who have hauled ourselves and our children out of bed and into the nave to listen for his word calling to us, even though we may not know it is Jesus. *Agape me?* He asks each one of us. “Will you give me your life?” he asks. But the question is also a question placed before this congregation. *Agape me?* By God’s grace, may we together live for him: feed his lambs; tend his sheep; feed his sheep, follow him! Thanks be to God!