

Three Reflections on John 21
By Ellen Willams Hensle, 5/4/2025

Introduction: We are about to read most of chapter 21 of the Gospel of John. This chapter is considered an epilogue to the book – we’ve already had one ending, which we read in chapter 20 last week, and now John is back to tie up some loose ends and to drive home his work’s central themes. He tells us about one final resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples, in an extended scene with three interlocking vignettes. As we read John’s epilogue this morning, we are going to try something a bit different: we’ll consider each of these “scenes within a scene” on its own, and then we’ll pause for silent reflection on how Jesus’s final interaction with his disciples connects to our own discipleship today. I’ll read the whole story first and then we’ll go back to each part to unpack a bit and reflect.

I. What do you do when you’re overwhelmed? As I was pondering that question this week, I remembered a moment from my early twenties when I had this powerful urge to *go home*. I was sitting in the pew in my church in West Philly, just feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders. I don’t really remember the specifics of what was wrong that day, but back then I was working two jobs and wondering whether I was going to continue pursuing a call to ministry or try to find a more straightforward career path. Though I don’t remember the specifics, I do remember the emotion, quite acutely: sitting in that pew feeling tired and sad and anxious, all I wanted to do was go home. I even took out my phone during worship and started looking at trains from 30th Street to Harrisburg.

My guess is that’s what the disciples are doing by the sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee, in this story. For a while, the disciples were in Jerusalem, in the south, the place where they had their last meal with Jesus, where they watched him suffer and die, and where he appeared to them in his resurrected body the first two times. But Galilee, in the north, is where the disciples were from. And I imagine that in their confusion and sadness and overwhelm after Jesus died – even as they had seen the risen Lord and begun to understand that his death was not the end of his ministry – I imagine that after everything they had been through there was something inside them that just wanted to *go home*. So they made the 115 mile or so trek from Jerusalem back to Galilee. And then they went fishing.

There’s something about working with your hands when you’re grieving, too, isn’t there? When we did our congregational art project about navigating anxious times a few months back, you all mentioned that: chopping vegetables for soup, making art, cleaning the house – having our bodies and brains work together on something besides what we’re worried about helps us move through our grief or anxiety to get to a different headspace. And so the disciples, fishermen by trade, did what they knew how to do: they got in a boat, rowed away from the shore, and cast their nets into the sea, hoping to catch something.

Which for a while, they didn’t. I wonder if that made them frustrated, or if they were just caught up in the repetitive motion of dragging their nets. But John tells us that they keep coming up empty – until Jesus shows up. They don’t recognize him at first. Not until after Jesus correctly notes that they have caught nothing and instructs them to cast their nets to the right side of the boat. Suddenly they have more fish than the seven of them can haul in. Only then does the Beloved Disciple – a mysterious unnamed character who shows up in the second half of John’s gospel and who is commonly associated with the gospel writer himself – only when they have hauled in a boat full of fish does the Beloved Disciple recognize Jesus.

Abundance: that has always been Jesus’s hallmark. From his very first miracle in John’s Gospel, Jesus has produced abundance. Jesus begins his ministry in John by turning water into wine, and not just enough wine to last the party – overflowing quantities of it, jars and jars of it, and of the highest quality too. On another day by the sea of Galilee, he multiplies five barley loaves and two fish into enough food to feed a crowd of five thousand people. Later, in so many words, Jesus affirms that he came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. And so it makes sense that a boat overflowing with fish would be the disciples’ sign that the man standing on the shoreline isn’t any old heckler, but their risen Lord and Savior, their teacher, their friend.

And so we pause to consider: When have you recognized God’s presence with you through an abundance of grace? And where in your life or in your community do you recognize the need for God’s healing mercy, that life may be experienced more abundantly? Let’s take a moment to give thanks and to pray for God to come and bring wholeness.

II. The disciples are of course excited to see Jesus. Peter is so excited that he gathers up his clothes and jumps into the sea. I’m not convinced that swimming was actually faster, but if we know anything about Simon Peter, it’s that he was an enthusiastic sort of guy. Anyway, when the disciples all get to shore, they unload the boat and count up the fish: 153 of them. Some scholars have posited that 153 is symbolic, possibly correlating with the number of fish species documented by

zoologists in the ancient world. Others think it's meant as a measure of that abundance we talked about, or as a way of "authenticating the witness," saying, see, look, this really happened, why else would we give such a specific number?

In any event, Jesus tells the disciples to come and have breakfast. He has already been making it ready for them over a charcoal fire. A simple meal: bread and fish. But then again, on that day when Jesus fed five thousand people, what did they share but bread and fish? In addition to remembering that miraculous meal, I imagine the disciple's minds were also taken back to their final meal with Jesus, when he took off his robe and washed their feet, the master taking the job of a slave, caring for his followers' bodies with intimacy and tenderness.

At that meal, he gave them a new commandment: to love one another as he has loved them. As he has loved them – with great affection, with a willingness to sacrifice, with attention to their bodies as well as their souls. Now Jesus and the disciples are eating together again, sitting around the fire to share a meal that Jesus has cooked for them. He is once again providing for them, attending to both their spiritual need for encouragement, and to their physical need for breakfast after a long night's work.

In a few minutes, we will come together here at Christ's table. Though we will be sharing not bread and fish today, but bread and cup, and not enough to quiet any rumbling tummies – coffee hour is coming, I promise – we remember Jesus's meal on the beach with his disciples. Like them, we come to Christ's table to encounter our risen Lord. We come to Christ's table to give thanks for all the ways that God provides for both our material and our spiritual needs. And we, like the disciples, remember Jesus's commandment to love one another as he has loved us, full of grace and attentive to the needs of those around us.

And so we pause to give thanks for God's provision throughout our lives. And as we give thanks, we lift up our own unmet needs, and the unmet needs of our community. How might God be calling us to use our resources to meet the needs of others, like the disciples sharing the fish they had caught as part of their breakfast with Jesus? Let's take a moment for silent reflection.

III. Oh Peter. Well, Simon, really. He was given the name Peter by Jesus, way back in John chapter 1. Peter means "rock" in Greek. Peter is supposed to be the rock on which Jesus will build his church. But ever since the night of Jesus's crucifixion, Simon Peter hasn't been acting much like a rock. At the same meal where Jesus washed the disciples' feet, Peter promised Jesus, "I will lay down my life for you!" But just a few hours later, standing before a charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard, Peter not only failed to muster sacrificial heroics, he denied any association with Jesus. And he denied knowing him not once but three times. From that dark night around a charcoal fire to this breakfast around a charcoal fire, Peter hasn't said a word. Which is pretty surprising if you've been following Peter – he usually has plenty to say.

But Jesus is not ready to give up on Simon whom he named Peter just yet. When breakfast is over, he pulls Simon aside to have a one-on-one conversation with him. Calling Simon by his birth name, Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter says yes. "Feed my lambs," Jesus responds. Then they have the conversation twice more. "Do you love me?" Yes – tend my sheep. "Do you love me?" Yes – feed my sheep. By the end Simon Peter is annoyed – come on, Jesus, I said yes three times! But Jesus is giving Peter an opportunity for reconciliation: for each denial, an opportunity to affirm that he loves Jesus. And with each affirmation, a reminder of his call: Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls Simon Peter, his follower, to share in the work of caring for his flock, God's people. Feed. Tend. Give care, body and soul. Love, as I have loved you.

This conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter reminds us that God is always inviting us into reconciliation. God doesn't want to leave us in our shame and our brokenness – Jesus seeks out an opportunity to bring Peter back into the fold, to reaffirm Peter's relationship to his Lord and his role within the community. Peter's journey isn't over because he made a bad decision out of fear and then doubled down on it. Through Jesus's promise of forgiveness, Peter has the opportunity to make amends. And his shame is transformed into joy.

The font reminds us of God's promise of forgiveness – we are washed clean in the waters of baptism and set free for abundant new life. And once again, Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved us: with a love that seeks reconciliation, with a love that offers forgiveness, with a love that creates opportunities to address hurts and move forward together, as a united community of faith.

And so we pause to consider: are there relationships in your life where you either need to ask for or extend forgiveness? What would healing in that relationship look like? Ask God for the inspiration to take a next step toward reconciliation.