

The First Presbyterian Church in Germantown
Sermon Preached
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by
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Learning By Repetition

Psalm 30
John 21:1-19

There was a priest who loved to fish. One year there was a problem every time he had a chance to go fishing. Either the weather was bad or it was a Sunday when he had to work. All year he was unable to go. The last week of fishing season had arrived and the weather was bad all week until Sunday, when it was a beautiful day. The priest could not resist, so he called a fellow priest claiming to be very sick and asked if his colleague could lead the worship service that day. So off the priest went for a day of fishing, to a spot over a hundred miles away so he would not run into anyone he knew.

An angel seeing the priest playing hooky went to God and said "You're not going to let him get away with this are you?" God agreed something should be done.

The priest was not fishing very long before he hooked a rather large fish. For 45 minutes the priest and fish tugged and wrestled with each other. Finally after fighting the mighty fish, the priest won the battle and was able to reel in a record setting 25 pound wide-mouth bass.

Seeing this, the confused the angel asked God, "What are you doing? Why did you let him catch that fish?" God replied "Think about it, who's he going to tell?"

Fishermen are known for being able to tell good stories often with a bit of fabrication and exaggeration. And for that reason people usually look suspiciously on a fisherman's tales.

How do you think people reacted to the tale of Simon Peter and the other disciples when they returned from their fishing trip claiming to have had breakfast with a risen Jesus? Don't you imagine that folks just shook their heads and said, "Fishermen! Can't believe a word they say!" But what a story this is that Marc just read for us from John's gospel. Needless to say, the disciples were just as surprised as everyone else that they saw Jesus. That's the last thing they expected that night when they headed out to fish.

Let's look at this story again because this last chapter in the fourth gospel is

quite a fascinating tale. Our lesson for the day takes place soon after the resurrection. It is another example of how the disciples struggled with the news that Christ had risen from the dead. Rather than being out on the highways and byways of Judea telling the good news that the Lord had risen, the disciples are sitting around sulking, depressed that this one whom they had entrusted their lives for the last three years is no longer with them. So Peter, decides to return to what he knows best, and announces, "I'm going fishing." Great idea Peter, and the others decide to join him. Out they go but even the fishing was bad. As though they weren't discouraged enough, they fished all night, and they caught nothing.

It reminds me of another fishing story: A visitor to a small town watched an old man fishing quietly in a shallow stream. For a half hour there was no sign of activity. Finally the visitor walked over and said, "It doesn't look as though there are any fish in this stream." "Nope," said the old fellow, "there ain't." "Then what's the point of fishing here?" the visitor said. "The point," replied the old man, "is to show my wife I have no time to peel potatoes."

What was the point of Jesus' disciples going out fishing that night? Well, most of the disciples were originally fishermen. So they thought they would do something familiar . . . something to get their minds off of Jesus . . . something that would give them some pleasure. It appeared that was just not to be and as the sun begins to rise, they head back to the shore tired, hungry and even more disheartened.

Then they hear a voice calling to them from the shore. It is Jesus, but they don't realize it is their old friend. And he inquires of these beleaguered men, "Have you caught any fish?" The disciples, simply and probably pitifully reply, "No." And the voice immediately calls back, "Then cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some fish."

We aren't told what the reaction of the fishermen was to this request, but I can only imagine that they shook their heads in disbelief. After all, they were fishermen. They knew how to fish. They had been doing this for years before taking a hiatus the last three years to be with Jesus.

Can't you just hear them? "Cast our net to the right side of the boat? You've got to be kidding. We've never done it that way before. We've always fished out of the left side of the boat, never the right! This is the way we have always fished around here. Why, soon you will have people fishing out of the back of the boat and the front of the boat, and who knows what will happen. Next thing you know, we will even have women fishing on the boats, then we will have to put on clothes instead of fishing naked. No, no, no. The only right way to fish is out of the left side of the boat. We've got rules here."

I'm sure they were reluctant to follow the suggestion. After all it was going to take them out of their comfort zones. They wouldn't want that? WE don't like to do that . . . to go out of our comfort zones . . . do we? But for some reason the disciples

did as he advised and when they did, the net became so full of fish they could hardly bring it in. At that point one of the disciples, most likely John, cried out, "It is the Lord!"

As soon as Simon Peter heard this, he jumped into the water and swam toward shore. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish. When they reached shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus then invited them to have breakfast with him. And when he took the bread and gave it to them, if there was ever a doubt that this truly was Jesus, they now knew for sure this was their friend and Lord.

Let me pause here and say again how fascinating I find this story, and that is because of the repetition of the story because of things that had previously taken place being repeated in this story, beginning with the disciples fishing all night and not catching any fish.

Jesus takes the disciples and us right back to the beginning, to when he first met them . . . by the sea . . . when once before they had been fishing all night and could catch nothing. That time, as this time, he told them to cast their nets out again, that time into deeper waters. And when they did, their nets became so full that they began to tear. It was then that these simple fishermen obeyed his call to "Follow me," and they became his disciples.

Both times, Jesus challenged them to leave their comfort zones and try something new . . . to trust him and do what they would not have done before. And both times they were rewarded for trusting and obeying him . . . for risking failure.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we too are challenged to move out of our comfort zones. When Jesus calls us, we are being asked to head out into deep waters, to get out of our comfort zones, to let down our nets on the other side of the boat, to have confidence that he is leading us into something greater than the lives we used to know and we need to trust and obey and be willing to risk. In our gospel story, Jesus is reminding the first disciples of their need to follow him without counting the cost . . . and reminding us as well.

Another bit of repetition in this story . . . or a repeated incident . . . is when they came to shore and had Jesus invite them to share a meal with them. Something similar happened maybe a week or two earlier in an upper room as they celebrated Passover together. And that evening, just as Jesus did this morning by the shore of the sea, he took bread and gave it to them. When he did that during their last meal together before his crucifixion, he said to them, "Whenever you eat this do this in remembrance of me." Do you think they were remembering that night when again he shared bread with them . . . shared a meal with them on this day? I do. And I believe that they remembered just how very much he loved them, for that is what he told them that night when he was arrested.

Let us return to our story, for the gospel writer tells us that after breakfast Jesus turned to Simon Peter and asked, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," Peter answered, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus asked, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." And a third time Jesus asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" John tells us that Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Talk about repetition! Three times Jesus asks Simon Peter if he loved him. Three times Simon Peter assures him that he does and three times Jesus commands his disciple to take care of the sheep. Three times this exchange happened in a very short span. Remind you of anything . . . of something that happened three times not very long before this conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter?

It too happened by a charcoal fire, the only other time in the Bible that a charcoal fire is mentioned. Just a few chapters earlier in John's gospel we are told about this same Simon Peter who was warming himself by a charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard when three times he denied that he even knew Jesus. So here is Peter, now facing Jesus, the one who he had just denied even knowing three times maybe a week earlier. Don't you think he was probably a bit embarrassed and ashamed. If anyone were ever in need of forgiveness, it would be Peter.

And Jesus, repeating his behavior throughout his ministry, did what he always did and that is he showed his gracious mercy on Peter, obviously forgiving his friend for his betrayal. Instead of scolding Peter, Jesus tells him to go out and do ministry, the same ministry that he told his disciples to do during their three years together: Feed my sheep . . . tend to their needs . . . take care of them.

And then the passage ends in the same way that Jesus began his ministry with these friends, by asking them . . . inviting them . . . calling them . . . saying, "Follow me."

There is a lot of repetition in this story . . . repetition that is meant to teach the disciples . . . and to teach us. I know I have told you the story before of the minister who went to his first church after completing seminary. On his first Sunday to lead worship he was nervous, and so were the people in the church. He had worked on his sermon for days in the hopes that it would touch people's hearts. In the end the sermon probably wasn't judged as great, but it was good and everyone told him so and thanked him.

The next week, the minister preached the same sermon. Some people wondered about it, but decided that he was probably still nervous, and besides, he was still busy unpacking and just getting settled in. He probably didn't have time to work on another sermon. They allowed him to use the sermon twice and thanked him

again.

The following week he preached the same sermon again. This time, people were talking to each other. They didn't quite understand what was going on. But, still, it was a good sermon, so they thanked him.

It was when he preached the same sermon again on the fourth Sunday, that the members of the Session gathered together after worship. They decided that they were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but also decided that if he did it again they would confront him.

Sure enough, he preached the same sermon again the following week. So the Clerk of Session told him that the elders wanted to meet with him right away. They all gathered and the Clerk looked at the young minister and said, "We've heard the same sermon five weeks in a row, now. Don't you think it's time to write another sermon?" "Well," said the minister, "when you do what I told you to do in that sermon, I'll start on another one."

There is nothing wrong with repetition. We learn through repetition. These disciples learned from repetition, for following that early morning with their Lord, and the reminders of all that had gone on during their ministry with him, these men were no longer discouraged, but they were determined. So determined that they left their comfort zones, remembering all the promises of Jesus and they trusted him and obeyed, following the call to continue the ministry they had all begun together, remembering that they were forgiven people empowered by a risen Lord.

The message for us this morning is the same. From the repetition of this story . . . from the repetition of what we read in the gospels . . . from the repetition of what we hear each Sunday as preached from this pulpit, we are continually reminded to look for and recognize Jesus in our lives. We are told not to doubt that the risen Lord is with us . . . calling us . . . instructing us to live, not according to the rules of this world, but according to the will of our God. We are continually challenged to move out of our comfort zones . . . to risk . . . and to follow the counter-cultural teachings of Jesus.

We are also repeatedly reminded that we are a forgiven people, even if we, like Peter have denied knowing Jesus through the living of our lives. We are still loved by Jesus and time after time we are invited to come to the table that he has prepared for us as we celebrate the sacrament of communion.

And over and over again Jesus is calling to us, "Follow me," and then instructing us to continue the ministry that he started here on earth. We hear this call, but how we would much rather retreat into our comfort zones and ignore the challenge of Jesus to grow and to follow. Let me just be satisfied with saying, "I love you. Let somebody else feed your lambs." But the words of Jesus keep coming at us: "Feed my lambs." . . . "Tend my sheep." . . . "Feed my sheep." . . . "Feed the

hungry.” . . . “Give drink to the thirsty.” . . . “Welcome the stranger.” . . . “Clothe the naked.” . . . “Take care of the sick.” . . . “Visit the prisoner.” . . . “Give to the poor.” . . . “Love one another.” . . . The list goes on and on. We hear these things repeatedly.

Will we respond faithfully? Will we make excuses like, “Oh, Jesus doesn’t mean that I have to do these things. He was telling this to his disciples, not to me.” Will we finally recognize Jesus in our lives . . . speaking directly to us . . . challenging us to trust and obey?

May we learn from repetition and begin to follow, relying on assurances that we know are ours . . . that we are loved . . . we are forgiven . . . and that God is with us even to the end of the age.

Thanks be to God. Amen.