

There's an old story about a priest whose sermons were very, very long. His sermons would just go on and on and on. One Sunday, after the service, as he was shaking hands at the door, one of the old matriarchs came up to him and said, "That was quite a unique sermon Father. I've never in my life heard a sermon quite like it. It had so many wonderful stopping places."

The 21st chapter of the Gospel according to St. John always reminds me of that story. John wraps up the 20th chapter very nicely. We read the conclusion of the 20th chapter last week: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

John seems to wrap up his Gospel very nicely with these words. It's a good conclusion. But then, just when you think the Gospel According to John is over, you hit Chapter 21. Chapter 21 is almost like a P.S. tacked on to the end. Scholars even argue about whether it was part of the original Gospel or whether it was tacked on a little later.

John 21 starts out in a strange way. Peter and James and John and Thomas and Nathaniel and 2 other disciples decide to go fishing. And when I read this, it kind of makes me want to say, "Huh?" Fishing, at the end of the Gospels? It really seems out of place. In the other 3 Gospels, the disciples are always pictured fishing before they meet Jesus. But after his resurrection? After they have received the Holy Spirit? After they have been given the authority in to forgive sins?

It seems very strange. Why were they out fishing?

Perhaps they were out on the Lake of Galilee for recreation. Maybe they were going back to their old way of life as a sort of brief vacation. I think of my old friend and mentor Bill Nix. Bill was the rector of St. Stephen's here in Lubbock, then at St. Andrew's in Amarillo. Whenever Bill was in priest mode, he was very cultured, and urbane, and scholarly. But when Bill needed to relax, he would drive to the family ranch near Canadian. He would get out of his suit, put on his cowboy boots, get on a horse, and herd cattle. That was a therapeutic activity for Bill.

Perhaps that's what the disciples are doing, engaging in a little therapeutic fishing.

But there is another possibility. I imagine that there might have been a darker reason why the disciples are out fishing on the lake. I suspect that the disciples are out on that lake because they didn't know what else to do. I suspect that the disciples had absolutely no idea about what they should do with the rest of their lives. And so they're in neutral. They're hanging out. They're fishing because they have nothing better to do.

And their fishing isn't even successful. All night they cast their nets, but they don't catch a single fish.

But then at daybreak, someone yells from the shore, "Hey, have you guys caught anything?" They answer, "No." And the man on the shore says, "Try fishing on the right side of the boat." And all of a sudden they net 153 fish.

It is then that the Beloved Disciple recognizes the Man on the shore. He says, "It is the Lord!" And Peter gets so excited that he puts on his clothes and jumps in the water and heads for shore. Peter is full of mixed emotions. He wants to greet Jesus with respect, and so he puts his clothes on. But he apparently wants to greet Jesus immediately, and so he jumps in the water and swims, instead of waiting for the boat to get to shore.

And when they get to the shore, Jesus already has a fire going, and fish on the grill. Jesus says, "Come and have breakfast." And so they sit down together to eat. Jesus feeds his disciples. They share a meal of bread and fresh fish.

Then, after breakfast, as they're sitting on the shore, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Simon son of John, do you love me?". Peter had denied Jesus three times. Early on Good Friday morning, Peter had denied being one of Jesus' disciples. Then Peter had denied that he even knew Jesus. And the third time, he even cursed, and denied Jesus with an oath. Peter messed up big time.

With the exception of Judas' betrayal, it's hard to imagine anything worse than what Peter did. To proclaim in public, to curse and to swear that "I don't know this man Jesus." It's hard to do much worse than this.

Yet in John 21, we have this wonderful scene of Jesus giving Peter three chances to undo his denial. Peter denied Jesus three times. Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to proclaim his love three times. "Simeon bar Jonah; Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Peter had turned away from Jesus and denied him three times. But the risen Christ comes to Peter and gives him the chance to affirm him three times. Peter messed up. Peter broke his relationship with Jesus. And consequently, Peter is adrift.

Peter is adrift both literally and figuratively. Without Jesus he's out in a boat on the surface of the lake. He has nothing better to do. He's drifting around, but he's not catching any fish. His life is also drifting. He's not moving forward. He tries to go backwards, but it doesn't work. He is basically a broken man.

But Jesus comes and puts things back together again. Jesus comes and offers reconciliation. Jesus comes and offers forgiveness. And Jesus gives Peter direction. Jesus gives Peter a mission: feed my lambs, feed my sheep, and follow me.

Peter is adrift. Peter's own efforts are fruitless, or at least fish-less.

But then the Risen Christ intervenes and does three things.

Jesus speaks.
Jesus feeds.
And Jesus sends.

Jesus speaks his word to his disciples. Jesus feeds them. And Jesus sends them out on a mission.

The same pattern is repeated in our lesson from Acts. Paul was more than adrift than Peter ever was. Paul was going 180° in the wrong direction. Paul was Public Enemy #1 for the early church.

But Jesus intervenes.
Jesus speaks.
Jesus feeds.
And Jesus sends.

Jesus speaks. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Jesus feeds. Through the ministry of Jesus' body, the church, through Ananias, Paul is baptized and then fed, and the food gives him strength.

And Jesus sends. Paul is sent to be the instrument who is chosen to proclaim the name of Jesus before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.

For both Peter and Paul, Jesus speaks, Jesus feeds, and Jesus sends.

Of course, that pattern should not seem unusual to us. Because Jesus does the same thing for us.

When we gather for worship, that same three-fold pattern occurs.

Jesus speaks to us. Jesus feeds us. Jesus sends us forth.

We may be adrift in the world. Our nets may be empty. We may not be sure about what direction our lives should take. We may even be going 180° in the wrong direction. But Jesus seeks us out. Jesus finds us. Jesus comes to us where we are.

Sunday after Sunday, Jesus speaks to us through the words of Holy Scripture.

Sunday after Sunday, Jesus feeds us at his table with his own body and blood.

Sunday after Sunday, Jesus sends us forth to feed others, to proclaim the Good News of his Resurrection, to be his hands at work in the world around us.

Jesus comes to us saying "My children, listen to my voice. My children, come and have breakfast. My children, go forth and tend my sheep."

May we have the grace to hear his voice in the midst of all the voices of the world.

May we have the grace to come to his table and be fed and strengthened.

And may we have the grace to take his love into the world.