

Strength to Cast the Nets Out

By: Keith Holste

April 14, 2013. Pastor Keith preaches on the balance we should seek, between caring for one another in the church and reaching out to the world, in discussing the gospel story of the risen Jesus commissioning Peter and the other disciples.

*** Transcript ***

We continue to focus on this story of Jesus with these disciples, and I'd like to begin with what one person has written as what Peter's initial thoughts might have been. So this is a rewrite from Peter's point of view:

"There was nothing else to do, so I went back to fishing. We knew he was alive. We'd seen him, and then he went away without leaving instructions. So I said let's go back to fishing, and the others agree. I mean, we had to feed ourselves somehow. You can't just exist on fresh air and memories. You need something more than that. So we went back to fishing, and we caught nothing. I wondered if we'd lost our touch, or if (I hesitate to say this) it was some kind of punishment from God that now we couldn't catch fish.

"Then in the morning, somebody shouted out to us that our nets were on the wrong side. 'What does he know?' I grunted. But to please the others I hauled in the nets on the left side and threw them out on the right side. And when the net began to strain, I had this funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. I had grunted, 'What does he know?' But now I knew who he was, and knew that he knew everything.

"When we got back to the shore, he didn't give me or us a scolding. He just said, 'Would you like some breakfast?' And then he fed us. I only realized why he had fed us when, in a private moment, he looked me straight in the face three times and said, 'Do you love me, Peter?' The first time I was embarrassed. The second time I was annoyed. And the third time I was convinced. 'Yes, I love you. You know I do.' 'Then feed my lambs.' And, 'Feed my lambs.' And, 'Feed my sheep.' Then I realized that he had fed us so that we could feed others. And that he loved us so that we could love others in the same way he had loved us."

Well this little written reflection reminds us of what state the disciples were in after the resurrection of Jesus. They couldn't really see him much. He appeared now and then, but he didn't go around with them constantly. And so they were kind of on their own. And so what do you do now? They'd been with him for three years, given up their regular life to be with him. And now they're on their own. "So what do we do now?" That's that question that the disciples had to wrestle with, those first weeks after Easter. And according to today's lesson, they go back to what they knew best: they went back to fishing. They went back to catch fish to take to market to make a living. They thought they would have to do that again.

But then some things began to make a difference. Jesus showed up and commissioned them, we could say. Part of what's going on today is a kind of commissioning to Peter. And the Holy Spirit enters on Pentecost to start the church and bring things in a whole new direction. So before very long, they didn't lack for anything to do. They had plenty to do. But in every generation down to our own time, the question after Easter can always be like Peter's: in the light of the fact that Jesus rose from the dead,

what are we to do now? What's our job to do now? How does that leave us? What are we supposed to be doing? How do we live out the power of the resurrection in our time? What direction do we take, given the realities of our day?

Well our story today of Jesus with these disciples really has two parts, and each part has its own point. The first part is Peter and the disciples fishing and they are sighted by Jesus. He sees them and tells them to change their nets to the other side of the boat. And so they have some difficulty, but they do that: they pull the nets up on one side, put them down on the other side — and they now catch many, many fish, so many they can barely haul it in.

In all of the gospels, when it talks about catching fish like this it's not really as concerned about fish as it is about people. And these are images that the gospel writers use to think about how we go out and gather people for the kingdom of God. And it's normally talking about the church growing in numbers, and the fish are kind of the symbol for that. The other gospels usually have these stories at the beginning — in the beginning Jesus chooses the disciples, and then they have the catches of fish. But John places it way at the end. And there are other stories about catching fish. There's a story about catching so many fish, and some are bad and some are good and who makes the determination, and the idea is that God is the one who judges, not humans. But they're always talking really about people, even though fish are the image.

Well in these other stories too, the catch comes after the frustration of catching nothing. Jesus says "do this" and then they catch many fish. And there's a lesson here for us, because sometimes we think it's all up to us — that if we evangelize the movement out some way that we'll think of all this stuff to do to spread the kingdom of God. But often the ideas we think of don't go so well. They may have come from the marketing world or somewhere else, just be a hunch, and they don't function very well as a vehicle for carrying the gospel.

We notice in this story though that when Jesus gives the command and tells what to do with the net, then there is a great catch of fish. And it reminds us that our work and spreading the word is done as we are informed by the word of Jesus. We don't just go in a vacuum to strategize how best to spread the word of God. We want to do it with the guidance of Jesus. And so we've studied from his word, which he's given us in scripture. The past few years we've used a method called Dwelling in the Word, where we look at a passage of scripture before we start a meeting or before we start an endeavor, and repeat it, during if it's a long-term endeavor, to say, "What's the word teaching us here? What do we hear from the word of God that we can bring to this task that we are about?" We get our word from Jesus. So we are more likely to do the fishing, in say the case of evangelism that he would want, than if we were just on our own, left to our own brains.

The other point of this story is that Jesus calls them to shore and invites them then to have a breakfast with him. That's the other part. Now we've talked about evangelism. In this other part now, he comes and he talks with them. Especially Peter. And first there is the forgiveness. Peter's forgiven the three times because he had denied the Lord three times. And he asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And Peter says, "Lord, you know that I do." And then he says to him, "Feed my lambs." Again, "Feed my lambs." And then, "Feed my sheep." We might say this is the other part of the work of the church. Instead of the evangelizing part of the church, this is the nurturing part of the church. It's the work of caring and taking care of one another. As Jesus commissions that to Peter, it's commissioned to all of us: to take care of one another and the church of our time too.

So we have two different parts of the story here, but each one represents what we do in the church, no

matter what century we're in, no matter what year we are in. We asked the question like Peter: "What do we do now?" But we know that we're called to go to the world, to be evangelists as they catch the great catch of fish, and we know that we're to be spreading the word out in the world. We also know that we take care of one another as we are called to feed the lambs and feed the sheep. We are to help one another grow in faith and in faithful living.

So these two main tasks — whether we're under duress because of politics as they were in those times (that is, an emperor and a government), or politics of the day, or a time of secularism as we might find ourselves entering now — we're reaching out to other people in the caring for one another. Both tasks continue, no matter what the environment of the time. Well sometimes it seems like these two compete with each other, and if we have limited resources or a budget that's only so big, we say well, the main task of the church is to be reaching out, so we need to put our resources over there. And some others say well, the task of the church is to nurture one another, to grow in the the word, to help one another. And so we have sometimes these two kind of ideas competing with one another in the church. But we could call this a polarity: two things that kind of seem to resist one another, but yet they're of the same organization. And I think modern practices would show us polarity is a good thing. Polarity brings a dynamic, instead of just having a thing here and a thing here if there's some tension between them, and it brings a liveliness to the situation. And so we have those discussions. And as we have those discussions it means that we sharpen our ideas and figure out exactly why am I motivated in this way. Yes, we do need to care for one another. Yes, we do need to reach out to the world. Is one more important? Or how do we balance these two things out? That polarity is good for us, and there are lots of polarities in the church. This is one of them, and it could be a good thing and strengthen us, because we need both of these things, as our Lord shows us.

This story has some other key factors, just outside of these two points, that help us learn to be Christians after the resurrection. One is a reminder that we're all like Peter. That is, we're all sinful. We all have something to confess to the Lord. We've all denied our Lord in our own way. We've given up on the Lord, given up on God, shied away from being represented as one of Jesus' people in a certain situation. We've shied away from being fully identified with Jesus, sometime. We've gone another behavior, another path. Yet it is Jesus who reaches out to us, like he did to Peter, and says, "Do you love me?" knowing that we really love him. He knows what our answer will be, but yet he asks us, because he wants us to say, "Yes Lord. I denied you, but I do love you." And he receives us back and brings us back into the fellowship, into the fold. We, who could have been cast off, are given responsibility to cast out the net and to be evangelists and to be on his side. So, we're like Peter. But we're invited back in and given even responsibility within the great church of God.

At the end of the reading Jesus predicts that Peter will be led off to die someday. This is what happens, as he is crucified in Rome at the end of his life. And we think of that phrase again that he tells Peter: "Peter, feed my lambs." We think about what lambs are used for in the religious world. They were for sacrifices. And we remember even when Jesus was baptized, John the Baptist said, "Behold, the Lamb of God," because he knew he would be sacrificed. He would be the sacrificial lamb for all of us. Well, as Peter here is strengthened for his living sacrificially, all of us are really lambs of God, and we are therefore called to live sacrificially. We pray, not so literally as it was for Peter that we actually have to give up our life. But he calls us to be in service. And it's not easy to love. Our love in the Christian sense is sacrificial love, giving of the self. Our life may be harder because we're choosing to love someone else. That's living with sacrificial love. That's being one of the lambs.

Doing these things is not easy. Jesus knew it firsthand. The disciples knew it firsthand. Being a follower of Jesus isn't easy. The good word of Jesus, when you're evangelizing, isn't always received

with joy. Loving others, inside the church or outside the church, isn't always an easy task to do either. It takes something to give us strength to do this, something to sustain us, something to be, to give us strength to cast the nets out, and to be caretaking other people that Jesus wants us to do. And for that he does give us a meal. He had the fish and bread for the disciples. To us he gives the meal of bread and wine, which he also gave to them on Maundy Thursday. He gives us the meal to have, again and again, because we know each time as we come back to receive this meal, we haven't lived as we should have before the Lord at all times. He receives us back to this meal to say: I include you. You are included in. You're in the fellowship. Go out and do it again this week, and cast nets and love other people and do the things that I called the disciples to do. Do them and come back, be re-included in the group and do it again. We are made at one as we come together for the meal, and equipped to go out to serve. So it's always fair to ask this question: what do we do now that Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended? The main priorities that Jesus lays out for those people, he lays out for us. They still apply: to be creative in reaching out with the word, and to live with love, caring for one another. These will always be part of the answer. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2013, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Keith Holste, John 21:1-19