

“Breakfast on the Beach”

May 3, 2020

John 21

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie Osterhoudt

Prayer for Understanding:

Lord God, good shepherd, by the leading of your Spirit, help us to listen for and to your voice and follow in your paths all the days of our lives. If we say we love you, teach us and guide us as we seek to demonstrate that love. Amen.

If you look closely, John’s gospel appears to end twice. In the first ending, Jesus appears to his disciples as they cower behind lock doors in Jerusalem. He breathes new life into them and sends them forth in his name. That story in Chapter 20 of John’s gospel ends this way: “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.” Period. End of story. John makes it sound like the end, but as soon as he wrote the final period and was preparing to seal the letter, he had a few other thoughts he wanted to share. You know what that is like. You hang up the phone or hit the send button for your email on your computer and you think of something else you need to say.

Actually, biblical scholars are not sure who penned this second ending in John's gospel or exactly when it was added. They all do agree that it was probably added, not by the gospel writer, but by someone living in one of the early Christian communities. A congregation who wanted to comment on what the resurrection actually meant in terms of their discipleship – how they were supposed to respond to the good news of new life beyond the grave. Let's listen to this second ending of John's gospel.

Read John 21

Our story this morning occurs sometime after the first Easter, no one knows exactly when, but long enough for the disciples to have left the scene of the crucifixion in Jerusalem and journey home, to Galilee. Galilee was the place where it all began; where Jesus introduced himself to them as they were tending their nets by the sea. We are told that there are now only seven of them, which means they were already coming apart at the seams – some of them going in one direction while others went another way. These seven decide to return home and go fishing. The last time they saw the risen Jesus, he clearly instructs them to go out in his name to serve others and share the good news of the resurrection: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." So, where and how did they get side-tracked? For these seven followers of Jesus, they are sidetracked from engaging in the ministry to which Jesus has called them – they have returned home to go fishing instead of witnessing to the risen Jesus.

Fishing was their occupation; they do not fish for pleasure, but for a living. They fish, not with hook and line, but with big, heavy nets that smell of fish, hauling them out of the boat with hands that are calloused from years of casting and knotting and

straining against the ropes. So when, the seven decide to go fishing, it is a decision to return to their former way of life. Jesus' life on earth may have ended, but theirs have not, and they have to do something to survive. His command to go forth and serve in his name fades before the demands of everyday living.

So, they go fishing, each of them sunk in their own thoughts as they climb into the old familiar boat. Perhaps they were reminiscing about the day when Jesus first walked up to them as they were repairing their nets and spoke to them, inviting them to follow him. And there was the time when they were tossed by a storm and he commanded the waters to be still. And remember the day when they were miraculously able to feed 5000, not to mention themselves, by the lake with only meager, limited resources. Yes, the lake brought back familiar memories. All memories of the times when Jesus had been amazingly present in life giving/renewing ways.

They fish all night long. Time after time their nets come up empty. As the dark night enfolds them, despair increases. So now what? They cannot go forward, but they certainly cannot go back. All they can do is sit in the dark and watch the sky change color as the sun rises behind the hills. A holding pattern.

And that is precisely the moment they hear him - in the despair of night. They cannot see him yet, but they can hear him. Someone calling to them across the water, suggesting that they try the other side of the boat. And they do, try something different that is, and the water begins to churn with fish. It is *déjà vu*; the boat, the nets, the stranger calling to them. It is not the end after all but the end has led them back to the beginning.

“It’s the Lord!” They scramble for their oars and they arrive on the beach to discover that he has a fire blazing and fish roasting. “Come”, he says, “and have breakfast.” He is not serving supper this time. That was their last meal together before his arrest and crucifixion. This is the first meal of their new life together – a resurrection breakfast.

This story is full of clues for those times when we too are marooned on the sea in the middle of the night, afraid that we have come to the end of something without any idea how to begin again. In the first place, it is probably a good idea to pay attention to strangers who suggest a different way of doing or knowing or seeing. You might also just try rising early, at sunrise, and be silent for a time, listening for someone to call to you. He will, I assure you. You might also try looking a little harder into your nets, at the resources you do have – one moment they seem empty, the next minute you experience abundant resources.

Again, the story seems to end, but then there is more.

Jesus pulls Peter aside and asks Peter three times (perhaps echoing the three times Peter has denied knowing Jesus before his crucifixion; after all, Jesus is a man who believes in second chances), “Peter, do you love me?” This time Peter gets it right and he finds his voice: “Yes, Lord, of course I love you. What kind of question is that?” And three times Jesus instructs Peter to feed and care for all his sheep. You see it is not enough for us to simply proclaim Jesus to be our Lord and Savior with our lips. He calls us to embody that hope, grace, love and compassion through our service in his name, by

feeding and tending. As the writer of the book of James says: “Be doers of the word, not merely hearers.....

With the gift of new life comes responsibility. We cannot just go back to doing what we have always done; when the risen Christ enters our life, nothing can ever be the same. Our daily choices must be informed and shaped by our experience of the risen Lord. And the instruction to feed and tend is not just a metaphor for caring for people’s spiritual lives. Feeding and tending is providing for the basic survival of all of God’s people. That’s what a shepherd does.

This week I was reminded of an experience I had many years ago when I was serving as chaplain to one of our summer overnight camp programs up at Presbyterian Point on Kerr Lake. Several hundred elementary age children would come to summer camp each week during the summer months and some of those children were the recipients of scholarship money – their families needing the financial help in order to send their children to camp.

The counselors and I began to notice one of these children at breakfast each morning. He would come to the dining hall wearing an oversized overcoat, (even though the weather was stifling hot) stuffing it with as many boxes of cereal as he could carry.

When he returned to his cabin, he would hide those boxes of cereal under his bunk bed. The counselors asked me to gently pull him aside and ask about his behavior. So, the next morning I invited him to join me in the rocking chairs on the dining hall porch.

When I asked him why he was carrying so many boxes of cereal back to his cabin each

morning, more than he could ever possibly eat, he responded simply by telling me that he wanted to take them home to his younger brother. You see, they didn't have enough to eat, particularly in the summer months when they didn't receive the free school lunches. He feared that food would be scarce for him and his family. This fear of food scarcity is going to be with us for a while. Nearly 25% of all Americans are without employment and we are beginning to see long lines of folks lined up to receive food.

So, Christians, people who say we love Jesus, how will you and I tend and care for and feed all of God's children? How will the church of Jesus Christ, Peace Presbyterian Church, respond to the need for food in our communities. That is one of the issues our Mission Ministry Team is currently exploring. How does John's gospel finally end? By challenging us to put feet to our faith, proclaiming Jesus as our Lord not just with words but through our actions.