

***Going Fishing***

An Anglican Priest was walking along the white cliffs of Dover when he came upon two local men who were pulling another man ashore on the end of a rope. "That's what I like to see," said the priest, "a man helping his fellow man." As he was walking away, one of the locals said to the other, "well, he sure doesn't know the first thing about shark fishing!"

There are, of course, different types of fishing – and different types of bait! In today's Gospel reading – we find the Apostles fishing – with very little success. Fishing in the Sea of Galilee – or as it is called here –the Sea of Tiberius, would often take place at night – so that the catch could then be sold – fresh – first thing in the morning. By the way – you will undoubtedly run across different names for this large, fresh water, inland sea – fed by the Jordan River to the north, and running to the south of the lake as the continuation of the Jordan – that believe it or not ultimately becomes the Dead Sea. You will hear it called the Sea of Galilee, the Sea of Tiberius, Lake Tiberius, Sea of Chinneroth (in Joshua 12:3) and the Lake or Sea of Gennesaret. (Luke 5:1) Whatever the name – geographically and Biblically – this is the body of water that Jesus and the Apostles lived near and fished in.

It is unclear as to why the Apostles were out fishing, but the fact that they were fishermen by profession is a good reason that they would be out in the boat at the suggestion of Peter. Peter might have suggested going fishing because he was confused after seeing the Risen Lord Jesus several times before – and didn't know what to do next – except that they would receive the Holy Spirit, and forgive sins – as Jesus commanded in John chapter 20. Peter also had a family to support and most probably experienced a sense of failure over his sin when he denied the Lord three times. However, his leadership quality is quite evident, in that six other disciples went with him into the boat. They work all night fishing and come up empty.

This really is a familiar situation: one that we have seen before. In Luke 5:4-8 the Apostles are greeted by Jesus who tells them *"Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."* *Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."* *When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"*

Their lack of success without Jesus' aid and their great catch with His help gave them direction for their new lives. There is apparently nothing like going fishing with the Lord. Here again we are seeing Peter, feeling like a sinful man – seeking the Lord's forgiveness.

Isn't it incredible that in today's Gospel account we are told the names of the Apostles in the boat – the first two names are the "Deny-er" and the "Doubter?" Simon Peter and Thomas the twin are the first names given to us. Their presence reminds us of how much the disciples, just like us, truly needed the love and forgiveness that their risen Lord and Savior offered them. And isn't it remarkable that once again – Simon Peter is the first one out of the boat! Just like when he walked on the stormy sea – or lake – Peter got out of the boat to meet Jesus – and each time Jesus waited for him with a miracle.

So here are the Apostles after working all night and coming up empty – met by someone – quite a ways away on the shore, who calls them "children" and tells them to go back out and cast their net on the right side of the boat. We are not told whether or not they remembered the first time that Jesus told them to go

back out – but we do know that the results are the same – sort of. There is a difference this time! This time – Jesus is not in the boat – He is telling them to do it themselves – and to drop their nets off the right side of the boat. This is very important – and is often missed. You see, the Sea of Galilee is in the shape of an ancient harp – and you can verify this on any map. The Apostles were fishing off the top left hand or north western shore – north of Tiberius, near the place where Jesus preached His Sermon on the Mount, and ironically near the site of the feeding of the 5,000. This place is called Tabgha – meaning Seven Springs, and it is near the place where the fishermen were called to be Apostles. Tabgha is an area that the Apostles knew as close to home – and is significant in the life of the church. This northwestern and western shore were thought to be “Jewish” waters and when you would go onto the lake to fish you would point the boat north – fishing off the left side of the boat – the Jewish side of the boat. The eastern shore was where the Decapolis was, and on that shore Jesus drove the “legion” of demons into the swine. Swine – or pigs could not live near Jews and only have a place living in pagan Gentile lands. The right hand side of the boat – pointing north – would be considered Gentile waters – and the fish would be considered Gentile fish. Do you see the significance of the Risen Jesus directing the Apostles, preparing them for ministry, so that now, as fishers of men – they would catch the Gentiles into their nets? They took in quite a haul of fish! By the direction of Jesus Christ - the Kingdom of God now was open to everyone – Jew and Gentile!

When the Apostles headed for shore with their large catch, it was then that Peter recognized Jesus – and jumped from the boat toward his waiting Lord. The other Apostles brought the boat in and followed, arriving to find that Jesus had already prepared a fire and had cooked fish and bread. Fish and bread- the very same meal that fed 5,000 was awaiting the followers of Jesus. Fish and bread; a meal provided by Jesus – without the help of the Apostles – that had to have come from the same heavenly source as that famous multiplied meal.

Jesus greeted the Apostles and asked them to *“Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.”* So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.” (John 21:10-11) Is there something significant about the number 153? There have been debates over this for ages – but the fact remains that it was a large number – much larger than all of them could eat – and they were large fish. So why does the Apostle John use the number 153? Suffice it to say that this was an event that needed to be reported with detailed accuracy, and rather than reporting 150 or 200 fish – instead was reported as exactly 153 and meant that it was precisely as it happened – and the followers of Christ would need to hear the message associated with it – and then the message that immediately followed it.

We as Christians sometimes get the impression that we have got to do it all. How many of us imagine that God is waiting passively for us to initiate things. If we don't organize it, it won't get done! If we don't tell people the Good News of Jesus Christ- they won't hear it! If we don't change the world – it won't get changed. There is the train of thought that we need to be His hands. Well, may I suggest to you that God doesn't need our hands – after all - it was His hands that made the sun rise this morning. God does not need us to do anything for Him – as He is quite capable of creating a universe, but He welcomes the efforts of those that He loves and honors and blesses those efforts – for they glorify Him. Jesus doesn't need the Apostles fish – but He invites them to bring their catch alongside. He asks them to work alongside Him. As when this time Jesus told them to go out and cast the net and He was not in the boat – their efforts brought in the catch that He designed for them. And so it is in ministry – Jesus sends us out – to do the work He has given us to do – that He has designed for us to do - and He blesses us and guides us all the while.

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Yes, we are called to work hard for Him. Yes, we are supposed to be organized – and there is no excuse for laziness, sloppiness or half hearted effort in God’s Kingdom. If it is God’s work that we are doing – then we must do it with all of our might – and strive to do excellence in the process. That is what I believe this message is about. Jesus calls us to ministry in His Name – to come alongside Him and be fed. I am reminded of the adage: “Give a man a fish and he’ll eat for a day, but teach that man to fish and he’ll be fed for a lifetime”

While today’s Gospel message might end with the meal – the story doesn’t and the “message after” that I spoke about a few moments ago needs to be told. Remember the first time Jesus sent the Apostles out to cast their nets? Peter fell on his face and declared himself a sinner? Now the second time the Lord sent them out – Peter is burdened with the weight of his sin. Flash back to John 13 when Peter insists loudly and publicly that he will remain loyal to Jesus. He is not going to let Jesus down – and wants to follow Him wherever He goes. Peter said to Jesus *“Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”* In chapter 18 we see Peter try and fail in the Garden of Gethsemane. He draws his sword and cuts off the ear of Malchus – only to have Jesus restore the ear. Later in that chapter we see Peter, who followed Jesus, who is now in custody, to the courtyard, where he denied Jesus three times, just as the Lord had told him he would. It all began around a charcoal fire in the courtyard – as they gathered to stay warm. Peter left that courtyard cold and angry with himself, ashamed at what he had done to Jesus – and that Jesus knew.

True, Jesus had risen from the dead – and was alive, but so was the memory in Peter’s mind of what he had done. Here they are at the charcoal fire by the sea – and Jesus wants to reinstate Peter. Listen to these words from John 21:15-17 *“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time Jesus said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” Jesus said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”*

The first one out of the boat – the rock upon whom Christ foretold that He would build His church – had been forgiven, restored and renewed. This same sinner who humbled himself before the Lord Jesus Christ, would indeed, along with the others be filled with the Holy Spirit and power on the Day of Pentecost – just as Jesus had said in the upper room. This same Peter would be the one who Jesus called to boldly come alongside Him in ministry and address the crowds on the Day of Pentecost – sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As it says in the Second Chapter of Acts: *“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”* (Acts 2:41)

Jesus Christ invites you, today, to come alongside Him.

- He welcomes your efforts;
- He welcomes your ministry;
- He welcomes your witness of His love that others will see in you.

He wants you to come alongside Him – going fishing.