

A FISH STORY WHERE ‘THE BIG ONE’ DIDN’T GET AWAY

John 21:1-19

Have you heard about the time that English Ford showed up at church with both ears painfully blistered? After the service, I asked him, “What in the world happened to you?” English replied “I was lying on the couch yesterday watching a ball game on TV while Jane was ironing nearby. I was totally engrossed in the game when she left the room, leaving the iron near the telephone. The phone rang and with my eyes still on the TV, I grabbed the hot iron and put it to my ear.”

“But you’ve got two ears,” I said, “How did you burn the other one?” “Well,” English said, “I had no more than hung up when the guy called back.” Now there is a man with FOCUS.

In our scripture for today, John is describing the plight of Jesus’ disciples. It was a question of FOCUS and the disciples had lost theirs. They were tired and confused. They needed a break. Things had been so hard for them recently. They had seen their Master crucified on a cruel cross. It was the absolute low point of their existence. They had invested everything they had into following Jesus – including three years of their lives. When they saw him nailed on a cross between two thieves, it was as if everything they had worked for had become futile and meaningless. Who could know their pain and disillusionment.

Then, the women went to the tomb on the first day of the week, and found the stone rolled away and the body gone. Amazingly, Jesus was alive! And by now, each of them had seen him with their own eyes. Still it was a bit much for them to deal with mentally and emotionally. They believed it; they saw it! But it was still like they were characters in a dream. It was way too much, way too soon.

The disciples were still trying to sort all this out when Simon Peter said, “Let’s go fishing.” Let’s get out of this situation we just can’t deal with by doing something familiar and comfortable. An evening at sea should help them clear their heads and get focused again. It sounded like the perfect remedy for their stressed-out souls. They grabbed their net, untied their boat and launched out. Unfortunately, they fished all night without any success. That happens sometimes. No stress reduction there. The net was completely empty.

Then, just as dawn was breaking and they were ready to call it a night, they saw a stranger on the beach. “Any luck?” he called out to them. “Afraid not,”

they called back. "Cast the net on the other side of the boat," the stranger replied, "and you'll find some fish."

So they did, and this time their net was teeming with fish. Then the disciple John turned to Simon Peter and said, "It is the Lord." Who else could it be? Who else has dominion over both land and sea? Of course, it is the Lord! Always impulsive, Peter jumped into the water and headed toward shore, while the more reserved disciples sailed the boat in.

It was time for Jesus to CONFRONT his disciples about what lay ahead. That's why he was interrupting their fishing excursion. It was time for them to come to grips with what he needed them to do. He had given them time to assimilate some of the mind-boggling experiences they'd been through. But now it was time to get on with the work to which he had called them. It was time to wrap up this phase of their lives and to move ahead. They wanted to retreat to their nets, but he had bigger things in mind for them - and maybe for us. Sometimes Christ comes to us too, and confronts us in order to pull us from one dimension of life to another, perhaps, more important one.

An Australian storyteller tells a parable about a man who decided that life was too hard for him to bear. He ruled out suicide; instead, he bought a large corrugated iron tank and furnished it simply with the bare necessities of life. He hung a small cross on the wall to remind him of Jesus and to help him pray. There he lived a blameless, solitary life, but with one great problem. Every morning and every evening, a volley of bullets would rip through the walls of his tank. He learned to lie on the floor to avoid being shot. Still, the bullets ricocheted off the corrugated iron and the iron sustained several wounds. The walls were pierced with many holes that let in the wind and the daylight, and some water when the weather was wet. As he plugged up the holes, the man cursed the unknown marksman. Then he appealed to the police, but they were not helpful. And there was little he could do about the situation on his own.

Slowly he began to use the bullet holes for positive purposes. He would gaze out through one hole or another and watch the people passing by, the children flying kites, lovers walking hand in hand, the clouds in the sky, the flight of birds, flowers in bloom, the rising of the moon. And in observing these things he would forget himself and his problems.

At last the day came when the tank rusted and fell to pieces. He walked out of it with little regret. There was a man with a rifle standing outside.

“I suppose you will kill me now,” said the man who had come out of the tank. “But before you do, I would like to know one thing. Why have you been persecuting me?”

The other man laid his rifle down and smiled at him. “I am not your enemy,” he said, “I am your friend.” And the man who had come out of the tank saw that there were scars on the other man’s hands and feet. And these scars were shining like the sun.

Now, don’t get hung up on the thought of Jesus shooting a gun. It’s a parable. The point is that Christ comes to confront us when we would shrink back from our responsibilities. He comes to confront us when we would retreat to our comfort zone, as the disciples did, rather than march forward toward our destiny. Christ comes to confront us when we would sulk in the shadows rather than walk in the bright sunshine of service. The disciples simply want to go back to their boat. But Jesus comes to them. He confronts them. Their ministry is not over. Indeed, it is just beginning.

Next, Jesus offers the disciples a CHALLENGE – a challenge that will literally change their lives. The boat has been pulled up on shore. They’re sitting around a charcoal fire now. The disciples recognize their living Lord. But still they are disconcerted by the recent chain of events. While they are lost in their thoughts, the risen Christ takes some bread and breaks it and gives it to them. Then, the fish. Now he turns to Simon Peter and asks one of the best known questions in the whole Bible, “Simon Peter, do you love me?” Three times Christ asks Peter this question – could it be once for each time Peter denied him? “Lord, you know I love you,” Peter replies. And after each reply Jesus instructs Simon Peter to feed his lambs and his sheep. This is Christ’s way of focusing Simon Peter on his real mission in the world.

Now, go with me back to those earliest days when Jesus first recruited Andrew and Simon. He said then that he would make them fishers of men. Now, he is challenging them to continue that journey on which they first embarked. Not that their prior occupation as fishermen was unimportant, but from here on they would have a different kind of work - a ministry to others. That’s the kind of challenge that Jesus is still offering his disciples today.

Sociologist and evangelist Tony Campolo once spoke to a group and asked this question, “Is it a sin to own a BMW?” Then he asked, “If Jesus had fifty thousand dollars, would He buy a BMW or would he use the money to feed or

house the needy in the Third World?” Ouch! That’s a tough one. That’s the kind of question we would prefer not to think about. It’s a challenging question – even a disturbing one. People get crucified for asking questions like that. At least, Jesus did. One woman, however, was so struck by Campolo’s talk that she wrote his ministry a check for the same amount that she paid for her new custom drapes. Her gift built three houses in Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world.

It is so easy in an affluent society, even in the midst of a recession with 21% unemployment, for us to forget who we are and what Christ has called us to be. It is so easy for us to become so preoccupied with our work, with our family, with our own needs and problems that we forget our essential call to feed Christ’s sheep. There are needy people all around us – needy for things. But also needy for love and recognition and for a word of encouragement. Most of all, needy to know that God loves them. Who will share Christ’s love with them if we don’t? Jesus confronts his disciples and then he challenges them – just like he challenges you and me – to minister to his lambs and sheep.

Then Jesus does one thing more. He gives his disciples a CALL. It was the same call he gave them when they first became his disciples. Do you remember what that call was? “Follow me!” Now, this is the final instruction for them before Jesus leaves them. “Follow me!” (John 21:18-19) He is not sending them out into a hostile world alone. He goes ahead of them – like a commander leading his troops into battle; like an explorer leading his party into the unknown. He takes the first step and those who would be his disciples must follow him. Christian friends, that is what gives a Christ-like life its radiance and its joy.

Life has limited meaning, purpose or passion, if we try to go it alone. That’s what St. Augustine was trying to tell us when he used the image of a “God-shaped vacuum” in our lives. “God has made us for himself,” said Augustine, “and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.”

The risen Christ comes to each of us to CONFRONT us with how we are living our lives; to CHALLENGE us to focus not only on our own need, but also on the needs of others; and finally to CALL us with the same words he used with his disciples two thousand years ago: “Follow me”. Will you heed his summons? He confronts us in our comfort; and challenges us to dedicated discipleship. To quote Jesus himself, “he (she) who has ears, let him (her) hear.” (Matthew 11:15)

Amen.

