

Probing Questions

John 21:1-19

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

The Sea of Galilee is a beautiful place to be in the evening.

The sun slowly descends over the rolling hills to the west,
turning the waters of the lake to shimmering gold.

Across the lake to the east one can see the lengthening shadows of the Golan
Heights and the mountains of Moab.

A gentle breeze blows down through the Hula Valley from the north as the last of
the day's sunlight reflects on the snow-covered summit of majestic Mt. Hermon.

It is a beautiful scene, and the feeling one gets on the Sea of Galilee at sunset is
one of peaceful serenity...placid calm.

II

But on this particular evening, the disciples of Jesus were oblivious to the beauty
that surrounded them.

They did not notice the sunset...
they were unaware of the golden reflection on the water...
the beautiful mountains were as if they did not even exist.

The disciples of Jesus were mired in a post-Easter slump.

Their eyes were downcast...
their stare was vacant...
their perception was absent.

They had forgotten the joy of Easter morning,
the triumphant announcement of the empty tomb,

the new life of resurrection.

They were bored...
they were listless...
they did not know what to do with themselves.

They were like twelve year old boys with too much time on their hands.

"Whadda ya wanna do?" "I donno...whadda you wanna do?"

It was Peter who spoke what are perhaps the most mundane words in the gospels—"I'm going fishing."

The others said they would go with him.

It should not surprise us that this is what they did,
for in times of uncertainty and confusion people often return to what they
know best.

And what Peter and the others knew best was fishing.

But, as it turned out, their post-Easter frustration translated into fishing futility,
for the gospel writer tells us, "...*that night they caught nothing.*" (vs. 3)

They caught nothing.

How sad.

When things go bad, they really go bad.

If anything can go wrong, it will.

Now they can't even catch fish.

We feel sorry for Peter and the others.

But I can't help but wonder: how did Peter feel about it?

I don't think it bothered him in the least.

I don't think he really cared.

I don't even think he wanted to catch any fish.

I think he just wanted to throw the net out, pull it in...
 throw the net out, pull it in.
 throw it out, pull it in.

Catching fish meant sorting, cleaning, marketing—
 he wasn't interested in that today.

He just wanted to do something familiar and comforting,
 something that didn't require a major decision,
 a faith commitment,
 a life-altering involvement.

So Peter went fishing and caught nothing,
 and that was fine with him.

He had come full circle.

It had all started with him fishing that day when a stranger named Jesus called him
 away from his boat and nets.

Now perhaps it is Peter's instinct to return to that moment—
 to retrace his steps,
 to reenact the scene in which Jesus first called him to follow.

Perhaps he and the other disciples seek to remedy their state of disorientation by
 reverting to that old familiar activity with a predictable and tangible outcome.

So there is Peter...
 back where it all began...
 just fishing.

III

And what went through Peter's mind as he fished?

Perhaps he is remembering the great shame of his life,
how he failed his Master in his moment of greatest need.

For it was Peter who, in the Upper Room, had boasted,

*“Lord, why can I not follow you now?
I will lay down my life for you.”*

But then just hours later Peter fell into the trap of denial when questioned by a servant girl in the courtyard of the high priest's house.

The oaths, the curses, every swear word he had ever learned as a fisherman,
flowed like a torrent from his lips and the heat of denial burned like fire.

And so as he fishes, Peter remembers.

He remembers the crowing of the rooster...
and how he looked up to catch the eyes of Jesus across the courtyard.

He remembers the hot tears that flowed down his face as he wept bitterly.

He remembers his feelings of helplessness as Jesus was led away to his death.

He remembers his absence from the foot of the cross,
how he had run away, fearing for his life.

He had wanted to do something about it,
but he could not bring himself to do anything...
save cower in fear and hide.

He remembers how he did not believe the words of the women who came from the tomb on the morning of the resurrection.

"An idle tale" was what he said when told of the empty tomb,
and until the appearance of Jesus in the locked upper room,
he too believed that someone had stolen the body.

Peter remembers all of this during that long, lonely night of fishing.

IV

And then in the early morning mists the disciples spot a figure on the shore.

Floating across the water to them comes the sound of a vaguely familiar voice:
 “Friends, have you caught any fish?”

"No," they answer, not that it really matters to them.

So the voice calls again:

“Cast the net to the starboard side and you’ll make a catch.”

Now wait a minute.

What do you mean, try something different?

We fish from the port side, the way we learned.

That’s how it’s supposed to be done.

Well, what have we got to lose...?

Hey, why didn’t we think of the starboard side?

And suddenly there were so many fish that they were not able to pull in the net.

Then they knew: It was the Lord.

“When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.” (vs. 7)

I don't know about you, but I always get dressed up before I jump in a lake.

Most people don't.

It makes us wonder: why does Peter get dressed **before** he jumps in the water?

He knew that he was going to meet Jesus,
 and he was flustered enough about it that he jumped in the water,
 but not so flustered that he forgot to get dressed.

He wants to meet Jesus dressed. Why?

You are sitting around in your undershirt at home and the doorbell rings.

You look through the peep hole.

If it's a friend you throw open the door and say, "Come on in."

But if it's a stranger, you say, "Wait a minute," and go put a shirt on.

Could it be that Peter is swimming towards a stranger?

He wants to see Jesus again in the worst way,
but he also wants to meet him dressed with the proper social and spiritual
distance between them.

Contrast this with the scene in John 13, just a few days earlier.

Jesus lays aside his clothes to wash the feet of the disciples.

It is a scene of intimacy,
openness,
vulnerability.

But not this one.

Is it Jesus?

Yes, it is Jesus, but he's different now,
no longer bound by life or death,
risen from the grave,
Lord of the universe.

That's heavy, friends.

I'd put on my shirt too.

And Jesus, who knew what Peter and the others were feeling,

who knew that their brains were stunned,
 their emotions raw,
 their pulse rates running wild...
 who knew that this was the last time he would see them in this world...
 who did not want them to remember him in fear as some kind of ghost...
 spoke to them some of the most grace-filled words of invitation and
 acceptance ever spoken in the gospels:
 "Come and have breakfast."

V

"Come and have breakfast."

No matter the failures of Peter and the others,
 Jesus still holds forth the invitation...
 to friendship,
 to fellowship,
 to a relationship of love and forgiveness.

No matter his sins, Jesus still wants Peter to be the Rock of his church.

Jesus saw the possibility of what Peter could become.

Jesus sees the possibilities that lie within each of us.

There is an old story about an outcast beggar who always sat on the
 sidewalk across the street from an artist's studio. The artist saw him one day
 and he began to paint his portrait. But he did not paint what he saw.

When it was finished the artist invited the beggar over to look at it. At first
 the beggar did not recognize himself. "Who is it?" he kept asking. But the
 artist would only smile and say nothing.

Again the beggar looked at the portrait,
 again he asked the question—
 "Who is it?"—
 again he encountered silence...
 until there was a glimmer of recognition
 and a light began to dawn.

Haltingly the beggar asked, "Is it I? Can it be me?"

The artist replied, "That is the man I see in you."

The beggar replied: *"If that is the man you see in me,
that is the man I will be!"*

Jesus has a way of doing that.

Zacchaeus sat in a Sycamore tree waiting for Jesus to pass by.

But when Jesus stopped and looked into Zacchaeus' eyes,
Zacchaeus saw the reflection of the man he could become.

Saul was on his way to Damascus to bring the followers of Jesus back to Jerusalem in chains.

He saw a vision of the risen Christ, and in that vision he saw the image of the man he would become...

Paul the Apostle, God's messenger to the whole world.

It was said of Jesus, "In the company of sinners, he dreamed of saints."

Three years earlier Jesus had called Peter to follow him.

Now, perhaps in that very same place,
Jesus confronts Peter with the image of what he could become.

It is as though Jesus is saying to Peter...

Once, on a day like this, I called you, Peter, and you responded. You rose up, you left all, and you followed me. But now you are back at the old life again.

*Are you going to abandon me? Are you pulling out of the adventure?
Having put your hand to the plow, are you now looking back?*

Today is the day of decision, Peter; in this old, familiar place you must decide. That is why I am here!

VI

After breakfast Jesus takes Peter aside and asks him a profound and probing question:

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

It is a question that lies at the heart of the relationship between Jesus and Peter, between Jesus and us.

It is a question that is asked in love that is relentless.

It is a question that is asked three times...
and with each repetition it inevitably and painfully recalls Peter's three-fold denial of that relationship in the high priest's courtyard.

Yet it is hardly an inquisition.

There is no question in this story about Jesus' love for Peter.

Even in the face of denial and betrayal,
there has been no fracture in his love for this most fallible of followers.

There is only love and forgiveness freely offered.

You know...our experience of human forgiveness is often flawed.

Even the most generous of us finds it hard to forgive,
and we are tempted to hold onto a bit of self-righteousness
even as we declare that the broken relationship is restored.

In a similar fashion, it is hard to accept forgiveness...
maybe even more difficult than to forgive.

Shame lingers even when restitution is made and guilt is expunged.

But at the breakfast on the shore, restoration is complete.

Three times Peter answers the probing question:

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

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

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

Peter passes the test,
but notice that it comes with a cost.

Love is always costly;
perhaps that is why we fear it and often betray it.

Peter is given a work to do.

Three times he is commanded:

*"Feed my lambs...
Tend my sheep...
Feed my sheep."*

What it took Peter three times to get—
and what it takes all of us a lifetime to learn—
is that Jesus' question about "loving"
and his command about "feeding"
constitute one directive.

Peter didn't immediately understand the implications of what it means to love Christ.

Truly loving Christ means feeding his sheep—
it means loving, protecting, caring for all those whom Christ loves.

Peter, do **you** love me? Then feed my lambs.

Peter, do you **love** me? Then tend my sheep.

Peter, do you love **me**? Then feed my sheep.

Loving Christ and loving and tending Christ's flock are one and the same thing.

VII

Three little boys were debating whose mom was the most loving.

The first little boy said:

*"My mom loves me more because I gave her a quarter,
but she gave it back, saying,
'Go and buy a piece of candy.'"*

The second little boy argued that his mother loved him more because,

*"If I give her a quarter, she gives me back two quarters and says,
'Go and buy two pieces of candy.'"*

The third little boy, seeing the direction of the debate, scratched his head and said,

*"Well, my mom loves me more because she keeps the quarter and tells
me how much that quarter will help her pay the bills."*

Love confessed and love expressed can take many different forms,
and not all of them are pleasant or easy.

For every loving moment spent cuddling a new baby,
there are an awful lot of equally loving,
but not so lovely,
moments changing smelly diapers.

Loving a spouse is planning a romantic candlelight dinner for two, and going to
the ballet when you would rather go to the baseball game (or vice versa).

A loving friend gives you a comfortable space for coffee and conversation,
but it may also mean being there for him or her at 3:00 in the morning when
there is a crisis.

Tending sheep and loving Christ can be messy,
inconvenient,
upsetting,
uncomfortable,

It can even cost one's life.

As Jesus goes on to remind Peter and us,
 at some point we will all return to the helplessness and powerlessness of
 infancy—
 someone else will dress us and take us where we do not wish to go.

It takes more than just good intentions to make the kind of loving commitment
 Jesus was trying to get Peter to make.

It takes the commitment to follow Jesus,
 to go where he wants us to go,
 to do what he wants us to do,
 to love the way he loves,
 to care the way he cares.

VIII

“Peter...do you love me more than these?”

“Stan...do you love me?”... (Insert your own name!)

"Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

“Feed my sheep...follow me.”

Albert Schweitzer wrote:

*He comes to us as One unknown,
 without a name, as of old,
 by the lakeside, He came to
 those men who knew Him not.
 He speaks to us the same words:
 ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us
 to the tasks which He has to
 fulfill for our time.*

Will you, like Peter, be able to follow?

Amen.

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