

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

A Message for a Select Few

(John 21:1-17)

Introduction: From PREACH and TEACH to the BEACH...

All four of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - tell the story of Jesus. They all include various miracles and teachings, along with accounts of His death and resurrection.

But in none of the four Gospels is the resurrection the end of the story. All four take the story of Jesus beyond Easter to one or more events, to a defining exchange or two between Jesus and His disciples.

- Matthew and Mark¹ give us slightly different versions of the Great Commission.
- Luke lets us listen in on a conversation between Jesus and a couple of disciples on the road to Emmaus.
- And, as usual, John gives us a uniquely personal post-resurrection view, taking us to a scene by the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Both this morning and next Sunday, we are going to turn to John's Gospel to see Jesus' post-Easter interactions with His disciples.

Now normally, my Sunday morning messages are intended for all who are in attendance. For this one though, I've got a select target audience in view. I don't know if you're "in my sights" or not. We'll just have to see as we move forward...

There was one disciple in Jesus' sights, though, and we'll watch His interaction with this disciple as we work our way through John 21 today.

¹ If we will, for the moment, accept the longer ending.

All the disciples we meet up with today have come to full-fledged faith in Jesus. They all BELIEVE! So the purpose of the Lord's interaction with them here on this day at the beach is not to **convince** them to believe the message of His sacrificial death or of His resurrection from the dead.

Rather than convincing, Jesus is out to accomplish something quite different...

John tells us that there were seven of the remaining eleven disciples present for the incident we're about to witness.

FISHING, with Jesus (vv. 1-14)

“Let's Go Fishing!” (vv. 2-3)

Seven disciples were together (vv. 1-2)

[1] After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. [2] Simon Peter², and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together.

These seven had come together at what John calls here, the Sea of Tiberias, but what we usually refer to as the Sea of Galilee.³

The Galilean region would have been rich with memories for all of the disciples, as this is the region where they had all met Jesus.⁴

Now that they were back in Galilee, they could have easily recalled His itinerant teaching ministry, His miracles, and long talks on the road together.

Here at the Sea of Galilee itself, they would have remembered Jesus walking to them on the waves, stilling a nighttime squall and more.

² Note the use of "Simon Peter" - as it is not used later on by Jesus.

³ In John's day, Tiberias Caesar was the ruler of the Roman Empire, and the large inland lake was - at least temporarily - named after the Emperor.

⁴ The long exception would have been the now deceased Judas. "Iscariot" signifies "a man from Kerioth" a city in Judea.

Jerusalem and Judea were the pressure cookers. Galilee was home sweet home. They're home now, but it took a while for these guys to get to Galilee.

Of course, Jesus died on the Friday of Passover and was resurrected from the dead on Easter Sunday morning. He appeared to the disciples on that first Easter Sunday night in an upper room, and then appeared to them again a week later, when Thomas (who had not been present at the first appearance) became convinced that Jesus was alive.

Some time shortly after this, the eleven made their way to north, at least a week after Jesus had told the women at the tomb that they (Jesus' "**brethren**") were to meet Him in Galilee.

One day, perhaps soon after their arrival on home turf, Peter got an idea. At least a few of his fellow disciples thought that it was a great idea.

An unsuccessful fishing trip (v. 3)

[3a] Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you."

Today, the phrase, "*I'm goin' fishing*" carries with it a certain connotation. As opposed to saying, "*I'm going to catch fish!*", "*I'm going fishing*" is the ultimate recreational, kick back and take it easy phrase. "*I'm going fishing*" = "*I'm going to get away from it all.*"

I'm convinced that this is **NOT** what Simon Peter meant. Before he began to follow Jesus Peter was a professional fisherman. That was his job. So for him, "***I am going fishing***" meant that he was going to work. And work it was!

These guys didn't take rods and reels. They fished with heavy nets. And they didn't fish during the daytime. No, the fish bite better at night, so they threw their nets all night long.

On this particular night, these experienced, professional fisherman didn't get so much as a nibble.

[3b]...They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

I can totally relate! I almost never go fishing these days because of too many John 21 experiences earlier in life.

My fishing trips were usually very clean affairs. I never had to mess with the smelly job of cleaning fish. I was never bothered by having to carry a heavy stringer of fish from the river to the car.

Just as I drive up to a fishing spot, the fish all seem to be afflicted with terminal lock jaw.

Maybe you've been "skunked" on a fishing expedition yourself. If so, you know just how Peter and his buddies were feeling as they rowed back to shore.

Well, while these disciples and I have had a shared experience in NOT catching fish, I've never had anything like the experience they had next.

Spontaneous Fishing Success? Get Suspicious... (vv. 4-7)

A Stranger on the beach (v. 4)

[4] But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.⁵

They finally called it a night and rowed into shore. Then, just as the sun was rising, they saw a man standing on the beach. This Stranger called out to the gang in the boat.

Key to fishing success: Jesus! (vv. 5-6)

[5] So Jesus said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No."

Here, Jesus did two things that I would never do.

⁵ Remember the problems identifying Jesus in chapter 20, also in Luke 24, Matthew 28.

First, He called the fishermen “children.” I do not recommend that when you go down to Corpus Christi and see seven men laboring at their nets as they fish in the bay that you address them as “Children.”

It will get their attention, but probably not in the way you hope.

Second, He reminded them of their lack of fishing success.

Again, if you see seven guys rowing in to shore after an unsuccessful all-night fishing excursion, it is generally not a good idea to yell out, “Hey, I see you got skunked! No fish, huh?”

Following their answer - a brusque “**NO**” - He made an arm-chair quarterback suggestion, tailor-made to infuriate people who are in the game.

[6a] And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch.”

I can only imagine that these words went over like a lead balloon!

There is nothing more frustrating to exhausted fishermen, hard-working mechanics or sweaty athletes than having to listen to an interested observer tell them how to do what they already know how to do.

So here was this Guy on the shore, telling THEM how to fish. Yet they are the ones who have been fishing all night AND have spent their lives making a living at fishing!

Still, they took the Stranger’s advice - and it speaks well of the disciples that they did so.

With nothing to lose, they followed His directive. After all, anything was worth a try after what they had just accomplished, which was precisely zero.

The result was an immediate catch!

[6b]...So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.⁶

Now, are we to assume that they hadn’t tried fishing off of the right side of the boat at all during that entire night? Surely not!

I can’t imagine that the disciples thought, “*Oh, we didn’t know that you could fish off the right side, too...*” No doubt, they had tried both sides.

Nothing changed in their tactics. The only difference is that Jesus was now directing the fish into their nets. He made the difference.

As soon as John saw the fish racing for the nets, something clicked for him. He turned and spoke to Peter.

Jesus, recognized on the beach (v. 7)

[7a] Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.”

John may have been the first to perceive that the Stranger on the shore was Jesus. Peter was the first one to do something about it.

[7b]...So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea.⁷

Peter wanted to see Jesus quickly, so he decided to swim, while the others stayed in the boat and came to shore in the more traditional way.

The scene on the beach shows Jesus and His men enjoying a reunion around fish tacos.

⁶ For other fishing miracles, see Matthew 17:27; Luke 5:1-11.

⁷ Some read this act as something negative, as if Peter was making a suicide attempt, perhaps motivated by guilt over past failures. Not me!

Jesus' Disciples Feed on the Fish He Prepares (vv. 8-13)

The disciples and their catch (vv. 8-11)

[8] But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish. [9] So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. [10] Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." [11] Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.

Nothing is said about where Jesus got the fish He was frying. But you'll notice that He was frying fish before they brought their catch to the shore. Evidently, Jesus was a pretty good fisherman Himself.

But it is the last comment, the counting of the fish, that grabs our interest and that lends an undeniable air of authenticity to the account.

There weren't "a whole bunch of fish" or "over a hundred fish" or "about 150 fish." No. They were precise to the last fish - 153.

Not surprisingly, some, in coming to this passage, are convinced that the number "153" stands for something.⁸

Some people see significance in every number they find in the Bible. "Three" always stands for the Trinity. "Seven" always for perfection. "Ten" always for the Law. "Twelve" always for Israel. "Forty" always for trials.

Me? I think that numbers are sometimes symbolic and sometimes not. Sometimes, numbers are recorded because they tell the actual numerical value being reported.

⁸ One said that "153" was the numbers of kinds of fish in the world, so what is in view is the universality of Jesus' offer of salvation to all kinds of people. Another person noted that if you add the numeric value of the letters in the name "Simon" (76) to the numeric value of the letters in the word "fish" (77), you get 153. Somebody else realized that the Trinity is represented by multiplying 3 and 50 and then adding 3! Creative, but not anywhere near the point of the passage.

Here, I think that 153 is included to let us know the actual number of fish that the seven disciples caught! It was a lot of fish!!

And it was a miraculous catch made possible by Jesus, made even more miraculous by the fact that the nets didn't rip under the strain.

Jesus' words to the disciples are warm and inviting.

[12] Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord.

As they prepared to eat, John tells us in deliciously memorable words how Jesus distributed the food to them.

Jesus gave them fish and bread (v. 13)

[13] Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise.

That may sound familiar. It's almost the exact same phraseology John used in chapter six when he described how Jesus broke the bread and distributed the fish at the feeding of the five thousand.⁹

The way Jesus served His disciples AND the way John recorded the serving tells me that the Lord wanted the disciples to tie in what He was doing **here**, with what He had done **there**.

POINT: Jesus is all about fishing!

At the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus had multiplied the fish and loaves. He saw to it that all those in the crowd received the food He provided.

And the disciples were key players in that miracle. They had nothing to do with **resources**, but they had everything to do with **distribution**.

⁹ **[John 6:11 - Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted.**

At that miraculous event (John 6), the disciples depended on Jesus' miracle-working power to equip them to bring His resources to hungry people.

Here, Jesus wants them to see the same thing. They still need to rely on Him. He was the One who made the catch possible! And He reaffirms to them here that “fishing” is still very close to His heart.

When, early in His ministry, Jesus called the disciples to follow Him, the Gospel writers quote Him as saying something like this: *So far, you've been fishing for fish. Follow Me, and you'll catch men and women and boys and girls who will join you in following Me.*

This miracle by the sea is that message all over again. From day one, disciples of Jesus have been called to the nets.

At some point, someone went fishing for us, cast a net for us. Even when we tried to scurry away from the net, they pursued us until we saw the beauty of the cross and the power of the resurrection and placed our faith in Jesus.

The Lord Jesus is still all about fishing. And He intends that disciples should be involved in the chase and in the catch.

But which disciples are fit for the chase? What kind of disciples does Jesus want to see out fishing?

I'm convinced that there is a certain kind of disciple that Jesus wants to use in this way, and here is where you'll begin to see if today's message is for you.

Let's join Jesus and the crew back on the beach and continue with that morning's activities.

Shortly after the breakfast dishes were cleaned, Jesus engaged Simon Peter in a conversation.

It is worth noting that Jesus addressed the lead apostle as “*Simon, son of John,*” and not “*Peter*” (which means “rock”). You'll remember that Simon hadn't exactly been “Rocky” of late...

FOLLOWING Jesus (vv. 15-17)

Jesus and Peter: Round One (v. 15)

[15a] So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?”¹⁰

The question is pointed. I think Jesus is asking, “*Do you love Me more than the other disciples love Me?*”

And the word Jesus used to identify the “love” He was talking about is the uniquely Christian Greek word “agape” - “*Simon, do you love Me unconditionally more than the other apostles do?*”

Simon might have been surprised by the question, but his answer came quickly.

[15b] He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

Good response. But, you'll notice that Simon didn't exactly answer Jesus' question.

He didn't tell Jesus that he loved Him more than the others did. Weeks earlier, he had claimed that he did love more, was more committed, was more loyal than these other guys. He doesn't claim that anymore.

And, Simon didn't use the word “agape,” but another Greek word for love, “phileo,” a word that speaks of the emotional, feeling side of love.

I'm not sure that we should make a very big deal about the difference in words. It may be that Peter was answering a question that Jesus wasn't asking.

But when he says, “*Yes, Lord, you know that I love You*” we get the idea that he intends to be answering the very question Jesus asked him.

So, the difference in words for love used here may be important, or it may simply be a stylistic choice by the writer, John.¹¹

¹⁰ Note Mark 14:29, where Peter claimed that even if all the others fell away from Christ, he wouldn't.

Peter affirmed that he did love Jesus. The Lord accepted the answer and then told Peter,

[15c] He said to him, “Tend My lambs.”

Peter thinks to himself, “OK.” We can almost see him going back to whatever it was he was doing, figuring that Jesus will start talking to someone else now, when Jesus asked Simon Peter the same question a second time.

Jesus and Peter: Round Two (v. 16)

[16a] He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”

The only change in the question is that there is now no comparison between Peter’s love for Jesus and the other disciples’ love for Jesus. Here, it is just an absolute question.

Simon’s answer is identical to what he said the first time.

[16b]...He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”

To this reply from Simon, Jesus says, *[16c]...“Shepherd My sheep.”*

Perhaps Peter was a bit taken aback that Jesus had asked him the same question twice. He might have felt picked on, singled out. Maybe he thought Jesus hadn’t heard him the first time.

But when the same question came a third time, we can just about guarantee that Simon Peter could hear the sound of a rooster crowing in the distance, as he remembered three other questions posed to him on the night of Jesus’ trials.

Jesus and Peter: Round Three (v. 17)

[17a] He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?”¹²

Listen to the pain in Peter’s reply.

[17b]...Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.”

Once, years ago, the author and Christian thinker, C.S. Lewis, said, *“On the whole, God’s love for us is a much safer subject to think about than our love for Him.”*

I’m sure Simon Peter would have agreed! But, again, he assured the Lord that he did, in fact, love Him.¹³

With that, Jesus repeated what has become by now a formula.

[17c]...Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.

Interesting. What are you and I to make of this exchange?

Well, here’s what I think. Given the three-fold questioning and the recent failure of Peter when he had been asked three nearly identical questions, I think we have to view this as a redemptive conversation, as a restoration story.

On the night when Jesus was betrayed by Judas Iscariot and was being tried by the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, Peter was warming himself by a fire in a nearby courtyard.

Three times, bystanders asked Peter if he knew Jesus.

¹¹ So John Murray, who points out that John would have been relaying a conversation that took place in Aramaic, anyway, so neither Jesus nor Simon Peter spoke the words “agape” or “phileo.”

¹² Significantly, Jesus’ question here uses the word *phileo*, NOT *agape*. It may be that we should not put too much emphasis on that shift. If there is a message in the use of the different word it is probably something like, *“Is your heart stirred to love and serve Me?”*

¹³ But, even his protestation of love is not based on his own affirmation, but on Jesus’ knowledge of his heart.

- Once it was a slave girl, [*John 18:17*] “*You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?*”
- Next it came from someone in a crowd, [*John 18:25*] “*You are not also one of His disciples, are you?*”
- And finally, a relative of the slave whose ear Peter had sliced off in the Garden of Gethsemene said, [*John 18:26*] “*Did I not see you in the garden with Him?*”

And three times Peter refused to be identified with Jesus. Three times, he denied knowing Jesus. Three times, he denied being a disciple.

I’m convinced that the questions Jesus posed to Peter on the beach (John 21) were designed to dredge up memories of that night’s failure.

Jesus does this because He knows that without admitting to failure, Peter would have been stuck.

He might have stayed on the ministry sidelines. He might have continued fishing in the Sea of Galilee and not for the souls of men. He might not have ever gotten back in the game.

And, since Jesus wanted Simon Peter to fish, He forced him to come to grips with his failure.

Jesus wants His followers to fish. What kinds of followers? Followers like Simon Peter.

The kinds of followers Jesus can use most powerfully are the followers who have, like Simon Peter, failed, have admitted that they have failed, and have tasted forgiveness from Jesus.

So, to whom am I directing today’s message? Only at those who have failed.

If this exchange between Jesus and Peter speaks powerfully to me, it is probably because I have such familiarity with failure.

Parsonel Failures...

I’ve experienced failures while preaching. Some of these are the stuff of legend.

I’ll mention only one this morning - but I could certainly tell of more.

This one occurred about six months ago as I was bringing a message about the Judgment Seat of Christ. I referenced a verse from Matthew (19:28), where Jesus told His followers that they would be rewarded for faithfulness.

The verse called for me to say, “*You SHALL SIT upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*”

I misspoke. “Shall” came out “sall” and “sit” well, you can figure it out!

Not a great moment in Northwest Community Church lore...¹⁴

But you know, truth be told, that’s a pretty easy story to tell. Other failures are not so easy to talk about...

Like when I was in High School and into the first year or two of my college years, while I was a Christian, I indulged a pretty serious appetite for pornography. I’m not thrilled to share that failure with you. That was a failure of Simon-like proportions.

And other, more recent Simon episodes come to mind.

- I think of my failure a couple of years ago to intervene at a sporting event I was involved in where someone’s temper got the best of him. I should have intervened and didn’t.
- I’ve exaggerated relational challenges I’ve faced.
- I’ve underestimated the extent to which selfishness controls me.

¹⁴ There have been others. Some years ago, I was describing the activities during the Jewish observation of the Day of Atonement. I mentioned the activities of the High Priest as he entered the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in the Tabernacle/Temple, as he made sacrifice for the sins of the people. In this I included a reference to the bells which were sewn on to the ends of the tassels at the bottom of his long robe. These, of course, were placed there so that the people would know by the sound of the bells if the priest was alive, or if God had struck him dead. What I said was this: “*With the bells attached to the priest’s robes, the Israelites could hear the High Priest tinkling in the Holy of Holies.*”

- I've failed to do what Jesus called Peter to do - LOVE HIM with all my heart, soul, mind and strength.
- And I've certainly failed to love my neighbors as myself.

Bottom line? Friends, I'm a mess. A redeemed mess, but a mess nonetheless.

And the only people today's message will benefit, the only people John 21:15-17 will benefit, are people who will admit to Jesus that they are messes.

I believe that help comes from the Jesus/Simon conversation to each of us personally and to our church in at least a couple of ways.

Conclusion:

FIRST, something like releasing a pressure valve happens when we realize that Jesus wants us to admit failure, not hide it. What a freeing, liberating thing that we don't have to pretend that we have our stuff together. We are not a church of perfected saints, but of saints on the way.

As some of my good friends would tell me, we are in recovery. Brothers and sisters, we are ALL in recovery.

Some here are recovering from selfishness and pride, others from sexual additions. Some are recovering from substance abuse, others from anger and cowardice.

It's all ugly. It's all forgiven when we come to Christ by faith. And it is possible to experience freedom from all of it. But that freedom begins for us as it did for Peter, by admitting failure.

I want to say to every one of you today, no matter what you are recovering from, you are welcome here.

And you can tell your friends who are recovering that if they are looking for a place where they will be accepted, loved, nurtured, respected and disciplined, we would be honored to be that place.

The **SECOND** way that the Jesus/Simon conversation helps is when we remember what Jesus said to Simon three times in a row (with variations), at the end of each round of questioning: *Shepherd My sheep.*

At each juncture, Jesus gave Peter the commission to take care of people, to serve others, to fulfill his ministry stewardship.

Don't miss this! Jesus takes a man who has blown it, and urges him to come to grips with his failure, all the while egging him on to re-engage in ministry.

He says, "*FOLLOW ME. Recognize your sin. Own up to it. And get back in the game. Serve Me.*"

Are you familiar with Proverbs 24:16? It is a proverb especially fit for this morning: *For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again.*

The righteous person completes the full cycle of the yo-yo! Down and up. And if you are "down" right now, Jesus says the same thing to you that He said to Simon Peter in John 21.

Following Christ means that we repeatedly get up after we inevitably fall. It means that after failure of whatever kind, we re-confess our love for Him and then re-invest our lives in ministry to others in Jesus' Name.