

MORE THAN A FISH STORY

Sermon, May 1, 2022

Text: John 21

Jesus and seven other men were sitting around a charcoal fire at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. It was dawn, probably quiet and cool, perhaps with the morning fog hanging low. The men were wet, tired and probably a bit cold, having been out on the fishing boat all night. The warm fire crackled; the aroma of freshly toasted bread and smoked fish filled the air. There was probably small talk and a few laughs as they ate. I'm sure there was some good natured ribbing about Peter's restlessness; it seems that Peter was sick and tired of just sitting around, so he decided he wanted to go back to his fishing, and the other six all had joined him. There was perhaps talk about how it felt to once again have the familiar feeling of the ropes in their hands, hoisting the sails and hauling the nets, how good it felt to be back at the familiar, comfortable, long deserted tasks of fishing; after all, it had been three years since they last fished. More than likely they reminisced about the first time the fish-catching miracle occurred, which initially prompted three of them to leave everything and follow Jesus; we find that story in Luke 5, when Peter, James and John (*who is the author of this account*) had again been out all night fishing and had caught nothing, and Jesus met them on the shore, told them then to cast their nets yet again ... and they hauled in so many fish their nets began to break. Luke doesn't tell us how many fish they caught back then, probably because Luke wasn't a fisherman. John, though, lived most of his young life in the fishing business run by his father Zebedee, and so he lists the inventory, so to speak ... he records for us the exact number of fish they hauled in this time ... 153 large fish. Over the centuries many have speculated as to the significance or potential symbolism of this number. I put some of the speculations in the (attached) bulletin insert; some are pretty creative. Don't get sidetracked by the incidental things like that, though ... I think John just put the number in because he was one of the fishermen on board; again, as one of the sons of Zebedee, he had grown up around fishing and paid attention to details like that. There is more here than just a fish story.

I'm sure, too, there was an air of heaviness hanging over the fireside breakfast that was more pervasive than the morning fog. So much has transpired. They had been through an emotionally wrenching time ... the One they had left all to follow had been crucified, they had all in one way or another deserted Him out of fear or discouragement or disillusionment, one of their very close friends and colleagues had committed unspeakable betrayal and then suicide, and then all the astonishing, bewildering, roller-coaster events of Jesus' resurrection and His subsequent appearance to them in that locked room and again later showing Himself to Thomas (*called Didymus*, we are told ... you may remember Thomas is Aramaic, Didymus is Greek, both mean "Twin" ... a literal translation into English would read "Twin called Twin." Some historians say Thomas wasn't even a real name at that era, just an Aramaic noun used as a nick-name at the time given this particular man because he either had a twin sibling or he bore a remarkable resemblance to someone they all knew. The formal name "Thomas" has now evolved into an actual and quite common name today) ... all this and more preceded this morning's gathering. I'm sure these are emotionally exhausted men! And certainly all were aware Peter had denied being Jesus' disciple three times that fateful night. At their Last Supper together Jesus had predicted Peter would do just that, and Peter had vehemently protested, in front of them all, he would never do such a thing. But yet, he did. Three times. Just hours after that Last Supper. Just as Jesus had predicted.

Jesus asks Peter, "*Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?*" Now, what are the "these?" Some think Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than any of the other six men sitting around that fire love Jesus, but most commentators don't think so. The neuter Greek term translated "these" implies Jesus is saying these *things* ... more than likely referring to the trappings of the fisherman's trade, the ropes and nets and the pile of now-suffocating 153 fish all near at hand. "These things" are all symbolic of what Peter had left behind to follow Jesus in the first place, as recorded in Luke 5. Imagine Jesus asking: "*Once there was a day, Peter, when I called you ... the first time I caused you to catch a net full of fish ... and you responded! You rose up at once, left all these things, and came with Me. Peter, I know it has been rough, but what are you going to do now? Do these things, these old ties, these old ways of life, tug at your heart? OR, do you still love Me ... more than these?*" Jesus goes on to give Peter two more opportunities to answer basically the same question, "Do you love Me?" Peter, who the night of Jesus' arrest was warming himself by a fire in the high priest's courtyard when he denied Jesus three times, was now warming himself by a fire Jesus had prepared, and Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Just a bit of a side note: Notice that Jesus does not upbraid Peter! There is never any hint of, "*I TOLD you were going to do that!*" from Jesus. As I mentioned last week, Jesus doesn't want to dis-grace us, He wants to grace us. Jesus tenderly gently and graciously gives Peter, who had made a three fold denial, a gracious opportunity to make a three-fold affirmation of faith and renewed love.

Note that each time Peter answers, Jesus responds with a directive. He tells Peter to *do* something. Just as another aside, I think Jesus knows His forgiven followers need something to DO. They need to be working, creating, producing, and engaging in service. After all, we are created in the image of an active, productive, loving and engaged Creator. Imagine Jesus saying, "*Yes, Peter, I know what you have done. You have denied me. However, let's not dwell on your past. Don't let your past have a future! It is past, it is forgiven ... now, let's go do something! Do what I am calling you to do.*"

Feed My lambs, take care of My sheep, feed My sheep. As we'll talk about next week, Jesus often referred to His people as sheep and Himself as the Shepherd, as in John 10:27, *"My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me."* When Jesus said to Peter, *"Feed my sheep,"* He meant, *"Take care of My people."* (which includes the young people, the "lambs.") We now know from the perspective of history Peter would go on to do just that; he went on to become the recognized leader of the church at Rome, the most influential congregation in the early church and arguably of all time.

As the conversation goes on, Jesus makes it clear it won't exactly be all smooth sailing and full nets. Peter will one day be taken where he doesn't want to go. On one hand, the description *"someone else will dress you and lead you where you don't want to go"* can sound like the fate of many elderly whose faculties are slowly eroding with age, but the implication of Jesus here seems to indicate it will not be a process of natural aging; this is a prophecy of untimely death and martyrdom. And tradition tells us that many years later Peter was eventually taken to a place he didn't want to go; he was taken to a hill in Rome where he died a martyr's death ... crucified upside down. According to the historian Eusebius, Peter's wife was also crucified just before he was, and Peter had to see that happen. After intimating how Peter would go on to die a martyr's death, Jesus concludes by reiterating the command: *"Follow Me!"* Some see Peter's response here as classic. The command is given to Peter, then Peter looks over at the other disciple there (*who is most likely John*), points to him and asks, *"Well, what about him?"* In so many words, he seems to be saying, *"You're telling me I will have to do all this, well, hey, what about John, Lord?"* I used to think this was a cynical response, but over the years I've come to believe it deserves to be seen in a more positive light; Peter may have been asking out of a genuine sense of loving concern for John, the youngster of the apostolic band and possibly someone Peter may have known for all of John's life in that small fishing village of Capernaum. John wrote this account much later, but at that time he may have been as young as sixteen. The sons of Zebedee, the "Sons of Thunder" as Jesus affectionately had nicknamed them, were the youngest of the twelve. In any case, note Jesus' response. Basically, He replies, *"That's none of your business, Peter. I'm speaking to you right now, not John. you must follow Me."*

At root, following Jesus Christ really is an individual matter. I want to say that carefully, because while *"Jesus calls us, over the tumult ... saying "Christian, Follow Me"* (from our preceding hymn) individually, Jesus never calls us to an individualistic, lone-ranger faith; He calls us to live in fellowship and community with His body of believers, the church. I wish I could remember where I read this, and I probably don't have all the details correct as I read it many years ago, but the story is told about Dwight L. Moody who was conversing with a new convert as they sat by a fireplace. The new convert wondered about the necessity of joining a church, which he was reluctant to do ... without responding in words, the wise evangelist used the fireplace tongs and removed one log from the blazing fire and set the lone log on the hearth. As they sat there in silence, the flame on the log diminished quickly, as the logs in the fireplace continued to blaze. The young man got the point.¹ In fact, more often than not, we discern His voice speaking and directing through the collective encouragement and guidance and affirmation of His people as we fellowship together. However, He does call and direct each of us, individually, personally. Peter momentarily forgets this, and becomes overtly interested in the will of Jesus for *John's* life, rather than his own. We know about that. We can at times be more often interested in the will of God for our neighbor's life, or our spouse's life, or our children's lives ... instead of being primarily concerned with following the will of God in our *own* lives and with what WE should be doing. *"Well, what about him/her/them, Lord?"* Jesus answers you lovingly but firmly, as He answered Peter: *"What is that to you?" I'm calling you; I'm dealing with you."*

Personally, I take from this don't overly concern yourself with what others may or may not be called to do; don't concern yourself that someone else may or may not be called to endure what you have to endure. John is Jesus' responsibility, not yours. *You* follow Jesus, and forget about John. Well, don't forget about John ... love John, fellowship with John. But really the most effective way to encourage others to follow Jesus Christ is to make darn sure you are sincerely following Him yourself!

In the little time remaining I want to note the real miracle on display here is not the catch of 153 fish, wonderful as that was, nor was it somehow in the number of fish in the net. Again, as alluded earlier, this is so much more than just a fish story. The real miracle on display in this intimate scene portrayed here is the grand miracle of the whole Gospel itself as so artfully and uniquely presented by John. John's Gospel begins in Chapter One with the extraordinary and majestic proclamation that from the beginning Jesus was the Word of God, He was with God ... in fact, He was God ... and that *"...through Him all things came into being, and without Him nothing was made that has been made."* And the Gospel ends with this same majestic God in the flesh at a small lakeside campfire, enjoying fish and chips He has prepared for seven of His very human friends, and taking personal interest in restoring, redeeming and giving grace and direction to one of those very human friends ... granting him grace, and forgiveness, and direction.

This majestic, transcendent, all powerful God of the universe is found in this very personal Savior Who cares for you, for me, individually ... and He invites us to love and follow Him in return.

That's the Gospel of our Lord.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

¹ Although not the same story, the following devotional makes the same point ... see [Fellowship: Burning Flame or Isolated Ember? - Nancy Kay Grace](#)

VARIOUS EXPLANATIONS OF THE SYMBOLISM OF "153"

(Sermon Supplement)

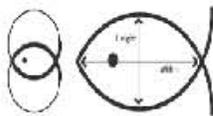
Over the centuries many have speculated as to the significance (if any) of this specific number of fish caught in John 21.

In the fifth century, apparently it was believed there were only 153 different known species of fish in the world. St. Jerome speculated the net miraculously had one of each species ... thus representing that people from every nation will be gathered together to Jesus Christ.

Also in the fifth century, Cyril of Alexandria wrote the number 153 is made up of three elements: 100 represented the fullness of the Gentiles to be saved, 50 symbolized the remnant of Israel and the three represented the Trinity.

I've also read that Cyril of Alexandria was something of a mathematician. He also speculated the number 153 was obviously a Trinitarian reference and/or symbol, because 153 is what mathematicians tell us is a "three narcissistic number" – another term is a "triangular number" – both terms are for numbers that are the sum of its own three digits each raised to the power of the *number* of digits (or a three digit number that is the sum of the cubes of its digits). 153 -- One to the Third power ($1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$) plus Five to the Third power ($5 \times 5 \times 5 = 125$), plus 3 to the Third power ($3 \times 3 \times 3 = 27$) gives us $1+125+27$ and that equals ...153! Yes, *obviously* a Trinitarian symbol ... threes all over!

Augustine of Hippo, something of a mathematician as well, wrote that 10 is the number of the Law (there are Ten Commandments), and 7 is the number of grace (e.g., the seven-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit). So, putting together Law PLUS Grace, 10 plus 7, you get 17. Now, add up the numbers one through seventeen ($1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13+14+15+16+17$) and you get ... you guessed it ... 153! 153 fish represents all those who by both law and grace (as all have need of grace, as all have broken the Law) will be gathered into the grand "net" of salvation by the work of Christ (St Augustine, Commentary on John, 72.8).



$$\frac{\pi}{3} = \left(\frac{4}{3}\right)^2 \approx \frac{265}{153}$$

Pythagoras was *really* into mathematics. He had calculated that 153 is the denominator of the closest known fraction to the square root of 3 ($265/153$), and this was also the ratio of a fish shape drawn between two overlapping circles which are centered on each other's circumference. The shape is known as the *vesica piscis* and the ratio was called by Pythagoras the "measure of the fish." If the two circles represent God and humanity, then the overlap represents Jesus as God incarnate, along with His followers, whose sign became the sign of the fish.

Stephen of Warwick speculates it is a prophetic number about a "messianic" figure to come centuries later ... and sure enough, NFL quarterback great Roger Staubach went on to throw exactly 153 touchdowns in his career from 1956 – 1971. Seriously, though, Stephen of Warwick thinks John told us the exact number of fish for the same simple reason every fisherman tells you how many fish were caught ... because he was on the boat!