

Sermon for May 5, 2019 – Third Sunday of Easter, Year C

John 21:1-19

Amy Balcam – St. Thomas Lutheran Church – “Vocation”

In our Gospel text today, we hear about Jesus appearing to some of his disciples for a third time after his resurrection. Our text last week told us about the two previous times Jesus appeared to them, showing them his hands and his side, speaking words of peace, and breathing into them the Holy Spirit.

I can imagine that for the disciples, the time immediately after the resurrection was one of continuing fear and confusion, interspersed with moments that were also heartening and joyful. After seeing Jesus tortured and killed, they witnessed the return of their beloved Christ, proving to them that the resurrection is true. I hadn't previously put much thought into what must have happened to the disciples between Jesus' resurrection and Jesus' ascension and Pentecost. I figured they simply sat around and talked about everything that they had experienced and wondered what it all really meant.

But today we hear that instead of sitting around or even embarking on dramatic and exciting lives in service to Christ, the disciples were fishing. They went back to the work they did prior to their involvement in Jesus' three-year ministry. The disciples going back to what they did before Jesus surprised me at first, but really it makes sense. Fishing had been their occupation. Fishing was what they did to support themselves and their families. Fishing was what they did to have food on the table. Fishing was what they knew how to do. Fishing was their job.

As it is with jobs even now, the disciples had good days and bad days. Our Gospel text today finds them having a bad day, or more accurately, a bad night. Fishing in the Ancient Near East typically didn't happen during the day – the nets used for fishing were thick and could be seen by the fish in the daylight, so fishing had to take place at night, when the nets would not be easily seen.¹

As I put myself in the disciples' shoes, I imagine coming off of the “fishing night shift” on the Sea of Galilee (aka the Sea of Tiberius), tired, hungry, frustrated, and discouraged. After fishing all night, the nets are empty. How am I to feed my family and pay for our living expenses? What if we have more nights like this one, how it will affect my family's future? If this keeps up, what am I going to do?

Jesus appears on the shore of the Sea of Galilee just after daybreak, watching the disciples return from their unsuccessful fishing trip. They didn't recognize Jesus as he stood there. He asks if they have caught any fish, to which they answer, “No.” And then Jesus tells them to cast out their nets again.

¹ Nicole Moore Eastwood, Facebook post dated January 24, 2019. Used with permission by author.

I can imagine the disciples looking at one another, saying, “What? We just got back from a full night of fishing. Now we’re supposed to turn around and go back out again? Who is this guy? We’re exhausted, we didn’t catch anything the first time, and now it’s daylight- we’re definitely not going to catch anything now!”

Even so, they did go back to sea and cast out their nets once again, and we are told that this time the disciples came back with a HUGE catch; their nets were so full they could barely lug them to shore. It was a miracle!

It was then that they recognized Jesus; the disciple whom Jesus loved turned to Peter and exclaimed, “It is the Lord!” (v.17). It was an experience that made an impression: just when they had to go back to the realities of daily living, just when they weren’t sure of what was next, just when they felt defeated, Jesus shows up. Jesus shows up in their vocation, in their occupation, exceeding their expectations, bestowing grace upon grace.²

We use the words “vocation” and “occupation” interchangeably, yet there’s a difference between the two. Author and Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, explains that Martin Luther made a distinction between a Christian’s “vocation” and a Christian’s “office” (another word for “one’s occupation”), explaining that “our offices are what we do for a living – teacher, shopkeeper, homemaker, priest...”³

Taylor says that a “vocation,” on the other hand, means “to do what one is meant to do”; “in religious language, it means participating in the work of God...”⁴ Our vocation, then, is what God sent each of us here to do.

People can have the impression that their work life is separate from their life with God - completely unrelated - and what they do for an occupation doesn’t really matter for God’s purposes in this world.

This, however, is not the case at all. Taylor explains that “whatever our individual offices in the world, our mutual vocation is to serve God through them.”⁵ She further explains that one’s “...ministry might involve being just who [you] are and doing just what [you’re] already doing, with one difference: namely, that [you] understand [yourself] to be God’s person in and for the world.”⁶ Our God of relationship calls us to show God’s love at every opportunity we find, wherever we are at the moment.

Jesus shows up in our ordinary, daily lives, to help us live out our vocation. Jesus provides for us so that we can live out that vocation regardless of our occupation, just as he did with the

² Ibid.

³ Brown Taylor, Barbara. *The Preaching Life*. Cowley Publications, 1993, p. 30.

⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

disciples. Not only did Jesus provide for them abundantly as they did their jobs, Jesus goes on to care for them and model the care they are to give others.

Let's have a look at how Jesus does this:

After the disciples' return to shore with their nets abundantly full, Jesus makes breakfast for them, inviting them to contribute fish to the meal and share the meal with him. It is at this meal that Jesus models for, and reminds the disciples of, their true vocation; it is "at this meal they receive a commissioning from the Lord. They are reminded who they are and what they were originally called to be."⁷ This meal is one of the ways that Jesus shows what caring for others looks like.

Through Peter, Jesus further reinforces their vocation: three times Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him (recalling Peter's threefold denial of Jesus before his crucifixion), and after Peter answers each time that he does love Jesus, Jesus' reply to Peter three times is: "feed my sheep" (vv. 15-17). The message is direct and clear: loving Jesus means loving others.⁸

This also means that our vocation is clear: we are to "be God's [people] in and for the world"⁹ in our everyday, ordinary lives. Jesus promises to show up for us in our ordinary day, bringing abundance, bestowing grace, turning those ordinary events into holy moments as we live as God's people in the world.

A fellow seminarian, Nicole Moore Eastwood, wrote about this idea of "vocation in the midst of the ordinary" in a profound way as she returned from a trip to the Holy Land this past January. She writes, "As I return to the place I call home to go back to 'ordinary' things, I pray I would expect to encounter God – what a beautiful thing [it is] to have a God of the 'ordinary'. I only pray that I will have eyes to see it."¹⁰

It is my prayer for each of us that we have the eyes to see how God appears in the ordinary, everyday events in our lives, and that we have courage to live out our true vocation: to be God's people in and for the world.¹¹

Amen.

⁷ Wiseman, Karyn. "Commentary on John 21:1-19". *Working Preacher*, 2013, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1619. Accessed 1 May 2019.

⁸ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of John*. Westminster Press, 1975, p. 286.

⁹ Brown Taylor, *Preaching Life*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Nicole Moore Eastwood, Facebook post, dated January 24, 2019. Used with permission by author.

¹¹ Brown Taylor, *Preaching Life*, p. 29.

References

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