

“See: Food”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 21:1-14
April 15, 2018
Third Sunday of Easter

It’s been a quiet week in Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

Quiet, but cold and snowy. The high there today is supposed to be 31 degrees Fahrenheit (that’s about a half-degree below zero for the Celsius crowd). The main topic of discussion in town is the fact that there’s still thirty inches or more of ice on all the lakes. And walleye and northern pike fishing season opens on May 12!

People are still ice fishing, for goodness’ sake! Eventually, of course, the lakes will start to melt into these long cylinders of ice that can go smashing into each other if the wind blows, making one of mother nature’s most spectacular sounds. “It’s like a million crystal chandeliers crashing together,” says my father-in-law, Jim.

But if the ice doesn’t melt quickly enough, it’s going to be awfully hard to put your fishing boat (and your beer) out in a frozen lake! Jim’s plan, should this catastrophe come to pass, is to fish the river. Now, don’t any of you go telling anyone in Grand Rapids. Jim’s already worried that the river will be crowded.

The open of fishing season is a big deal for those who fish for sport and food. But as I learned while Jim welcomed me into his family, the fish are the...icing on the cake? The fish are great. It’s the *fishing* that’s worth living for. Up in Grand Rapids, you put the boat in the water with the rods and the cooler of sandwiches and Milwaukee’s Best, and you find a spot, and the chaos and minutiae and worries of your world fade into the woods on the shore. Or, if it’s winter, you drive your truck out onto the lake (after taking your seatbelt off, just in case!) and you grab the thermos of hot coffee (and maybe a bottle of something spirited) and you scamper into the ice house where a little stove keeps you nice and toasty.

Summer or winter, boat or ice house, coffee or beer, alone or with a buddy, a person could solve all the world’s problems while waiting on the fish. I wonder if that’s what Peter had in mind when he declared, “I’m going fishing, fellas.” Maybe he just needed to get out on the lake to get away and to think and, if all went well, to come home with some fish. The rest of the guys decide that’s a pretty good idea.

You can understand the impulse. These disciples have been through a lot together. The long walks from town to town. The bursts of resistance. The march to Jerusalem. The chaotic Passover. The arrest. The waiting in the courtyard. The sentence. The crucifixion. The burial. And that was all *before*. Then there was the garden. And Mary running and proclaiming, “I have seen the Lord.” The locked doors that night, when he appeared and said, “Peace.” And then the return visit a week later. Their world had been tumbled over, and then flipped, and then toppled again. They had experienced things that leave mental scars and then heard and seen and touched an incomprehensible reality. A night of fishing with the only ones in the world who could know what you’re carrying sounds just about right.

They caught nothing. As the sun crested over the horizon, a shout came from the beach: “Nothing, eh kids?” He calls them children, and at this point they don’t know who he is, so I’ve always imagined the “No” they shout

back as having a little bit of “hey, man, while you’re on your morning beach walk, why don’t you take a long stroll off a short pier” in it. Then this stranger tells them to try the right side of the boat, and they do it. Maybe just to humor him so he’ll go away, or maybe they figure he might be able to see something they can’t. They throw their big round net with its lead weights and suddenly they’ve got more of a haul than they can handle. The beloved disciple smells something fi— *out of the ordinary*. “It is the Lord!”

Now, I don’t know what the disciples actually talked about all night while they were unsuccessfully fishing. But is it too much of a stretch to think that as the boat swayed in the dark, they talked about love and regrets and the future and the meaning of life and what these visits from the risen Jesus meant? Can we imagine that they all looked over at Peter, knowing he couldn’t see them in the dark, knowing about his particular loss and regret and crossing their fingers that nobody near that part of the lake had a rooster who’d start crowing at daybreak?

Whatever was going through Peter’s mind, at the word “Lord” he couldn’t wait for the boat to be rowed a hundred yards. He jumped overboard and made for the shore while the rest dragged the net full of fish.

Meanwhile, Jesus had been making a beach breakfast. He had a fire going, and was cooking fish already, and bread. And that must’ve smelled wonderful, and also familiar. Fish and bread. Just like the time he fed more than five thousand with a picnic basket. Only now there were just the seven of them, plus Jesus, and a whole load of fish. He told them to bring some of their fish to add to the feast. And whatever significance the number 153 had, we’re to understand that it was more than their net was supposed to hold. Jesus invited them to eat, and of course they knew it was him, for he was the one who tried to feed everyone. In the closest thing we get to a communion scene in John’s gospel, Jesus took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

You all have been through a lot. Here, we’ve gone through this gospel and all the signs and the suffering and the Sunday Good News. And you’ve been through a lot in your lives — the things you share with the community, and the things you hold in your bones. And yet, you’ve come here on this rainy morning. You’re here. You must be hungry.

This story appears in the very last chapter of John’s gospel. There will be one more reading from it next week, an uncomfortable breakfast conversation. I’ve been thinking about how the four gospels tell us about Jesus, but don’t tell us what becomes of the disciples. Only one evangelist, Luke, felt moved to write a sequel — the book of the Acts of the Apostles. But for the gospels themselves the task isn’t to tell you about the early church or to wrap up loose ends or to give you a satisfying conclusion at all. They’re not meant to inform so much as to transform the hearers. When each gospel was written, its author couldn’t have known that you’d end up with all four, and with Acts, and all these letters.

So from their first verse to their last, they are working on the project of telling you, the reader or listener, good news. They’re not interested in you getting to the end and saying, “Well, what next for Peter and company?” The question they want you to ask is, “What next for me?”

And so these resurrection accounts are not just the Jesus blotter — *where and when was he spotted?* — they are chosen and curated to make a point. For us. On Easter Sunday, we had Jesus the gardener and we were to understand that *He is Risen*, and that this is a world-changing deal and that new life abounds. And then we had the disciples in a locked house, hiding in fear, and Jesus came and said “Peace” and “Go” and we see that we are sent. The fear of death is overcome for us. The fear that leads to hiding is overwhelmed by a mission. And here, on the beach, the fear of scarcity as we undertake this life of faith sinks under the weight of a heavy net.

When the night has been long and you've got nothing to show for it, here are more fish than you can handle.
When you are weary, there is breakfast already waiting on the beach.
When you don't know what to do with all you've got, the nets will hold.

I really don't know much about fishing, especially with big nets. But I know that in a haul of 153, there had to be a few that were too small, or kind of funny looking, or otherwise not quite perfect. In a different story, the fish with inadequacies, real or perceived, might have slipped through the net, or wriggled free, or gotten tossed back when the count was made. But not here. And with a different God, the fish the disciples brought might have been put aside in favor of the breakfast prepared by the savior. But not here. Jesus asks these imperfect disciples to bring their own catch to the feast. And wherever we are caught in the story — imagining ourselves as fish or disciples — we're to understand that there is not simply room for us at this table, but that we are invited. Not accidentally. Not by a careless host. But with intention, for there is more than enough, and it is meant for us.

When we conclude John's gospel next week, we'll hear it's final verse: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

As hearers of this gospel, we are supposed to be overwhelmed by abundance. The abundance of fish. And the abundance of grace that doesn't end at the cross or the tomb or at the end of the gospel, but is magnified, grace upon grace. We are to hear this as one of the final pieces John offers us, and to do something with this news, as people of new life who are sent on a mission.

This story is a call to accept that we are not *merely worthy* of Christ's love and grace and sustenance, but invited to it, early and often, and asked to bring what we have to offer and share it with Christ and all those with whom we break bread. And it is a call to celebrate the abundance of life and hope and love that we have now seen and to share it.

This story is a rebuke to the opposite tendencies. The inclination to ignore the one offering us grace for fear this blessing is meant for more qualified fishers. And the urge to hoard whatever we can get our hands on, even if we don't need 153 fish for ourselves. It's almost as if John knows something about us. About how we humans vacillate wildly between "I'm garbage" and "Gimme gimme gimme!"

There are blessings around you and they are meant for you, no matter what anyone tries to tell you. And those blessings are meant to be shared, no matter what you try to tell yourself.

If we could only spread that word. If we could become a species that fully lived in wonder at what we are given, we might have a chance of saving this planet from environmental destruction. We might lose our desire to destroy each other. We might strive less often for the brass ring, and more for hands to join in work and play and bridge-building. If we could become a people fully committed to abundance, we might lose the word "refugee" from our vocabulary, for when one was lacking, we would share. We might put to rest other words and phrases: starvation, water crisis, "the beleaguered nation of Haiti."

Of course, that's a big dream, right there. It's the kind of thing you come up with after a sandwich and a beverage, just as you get that hopeful feeling in your gut, that the fish just might start biting any minute now.