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John 21:1-17

Fifty-eighth Message

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RESTORED FROM FAILURE

In the movie “The Mission,” a mercenary and slave trader, Rodrigo Mendoza, kills his brother. He feels hopelessly lost, beyond redemption. He tells a Jesuit priest, “For me there is no redemption, no penance great enough.” But Father Gabriel challenges him to try. He takes him into the mountains and jungles of Paraguay to a mission he founded among the Indians, with Mendoza carrying a heavy bundle of armor strapped to his body with ropes. Arriving at the mission, Mendoza is confronted by the very Indians he had sought to capture and enslave. In a heart-stopping scene, one the Indians approaches Mendoza. Instead of slitting his throat, he cuts the rope around Mendoza’s body and casts the burden of his guilt, the heavy load he had been carrying, off a cliff and into the river. The place of evil and shame becomes a place of redemption.

Simon Peter, one of the disciples of Jesus, may well have thought he was beyond redemption after he denied the Lord on the eve of the crucifixion. We often think the same, that for us there is no redemption, no penance great enough. But our study this morning reveals a God who forgives, redeems, restores, and rewrites the destiny of our lives. We encounter a God who is abundantly compassionate.

We come now to the last chapter of John’s gospel — one of my favorite passages, I might add. After reading the end of chapter 20 we are a bit surprised to find another chapter, because the last verses of chapter 20 seem to conclude the book. Everything is brought to a climax with Jesus’ appearance and Thomas’s confession, “my Lord and my God.” This confession is followed by a nice statement of the purpose behind John’s writing, and the book is drawn to a close, or so we think.

Some think that chapter 21 was part of the original document or that it was written later by John. Others say these verses were added later by some other writer. But there is no evidence that the book was ever published without this chapter. Writers often place a postscript at the conclusion of their story relating what had happened to the characters. John 21 seems to function in this manner, describing what happened to Peter and his relationship to Jesus. The chapter also functions in other ways: it provides a bookend to match the prologue of chapter 1; information about Peter’s death (which had probably already occurred by the time this gospel was written); a glimpse of the future, with Jesus still providing for the needs of his followers, and enhances the commission given in Jerusalem in chapter 20.

After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will also come with you.” They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing. (John 21:1-3 TNIV)

This scene takes place after these things, after the encounters with Jesus in Jerusalem. The word “manifest” forms a bookend with verse 14: “This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.”

This will be the third encounter between the disciples and Jesus (referring to the two appearances in chapter 20). John omits the appearance to Mary Magdalene. Jesus appearing or manifesting himself is a common theme in John (1:31; 2:11; 17:6).

The setting is Galilee. The disciples have returned home after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Only seven disciples are mentioned. Perhaps the number seven represents all of Jesus’ disciples, i.e., the number of perfection. Simon Peter is mentioned first because he is the leader and the main character in the chapter. This is the first time that John mentions “the sons of Zebedee.”

Peter announces that he is going fishing and the other disciples decide to go along. We are not sure why. Perhaps they were returning to their former way of living, thinking the story was over. Perhaps they were not quitting but just wanted something to do. Perhaps they were just hungry. Or perhaps they went to Galilee in obedience to the Lord’s command. We can’t say for sure. But what we can say is that the story does not reflect Spirit-empowered men. There is none of the joy, assurance, sense of mission or unity that characterizes the church when freshly endowed with the Spirit.

The time is night, one of John’s favorite symbols (3:2, 19-21; 13:30; 20:1). The disciples are still in the dark. They are aware of the resurrection and yet the full magnitude of the event is still fuzzy in their minds. John says they did not catch anything. This seems to indicate that they had not learned what Jesus told them in the upper room: “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing (15:5).

The site that commemorates this scene on the shores of Galilee is my favorite place in Israel. A small church sits in a quiet little spot on the northern shore of the lake, bearing the name *Mensa Christi* (the table of Christ). Inside there is a rock that is purported to be the place where Jesus appeared to his disciples. There is also a small sculpture of Jesus and Peter outside the church.

But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. So Jesus said to them, “Children, you do not have any fish, do you?” They answered Him, “No.” And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch.” So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.” 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. 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. (21:4-8)

As the light begins to break early in the morning, the disciples are about a hundred yards from shore. They see a shadowy figure on the shore but they don't know it is Jesus. Maybe there wasn't enough light. Jesus addresses them as children: “Lads, haven't you caught anything? He already knows the answer.

Jesus instructs them to throw their net into the water on the right side of the boat. He must have known there was a school of fish there. The disciples do as instructed. We are not sure why, since they did not know the man was Jesus. Perhaps they were just fishermen getting advice from someone they thought had local knowledge.

John, the beloved disciple, recognizes that the figure on the beach is the Lord and announces his revelation to the others. Impulsive Peter jumps in the water and wades to shore, while John remains in the boat. Peter was stripped down for work, so he either put on his outer garment or it was loose around him and he tucked it in. Greeting Jesus required proper clothing and modesty.

So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already lit and fish placed on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish which you have now caught.” 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. 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. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise. (21:9-13)

This lakeshore meal with Jesus is a very tender moment. Two significant things take place, the catch and the meal.

The disciples put the net into the water and the catch is so large they have trouble landing the net full of fish. Peter must have been very strong because “he drew the net to land.” The word “drew” is used earlier in the gospel of drawing people to Jesus as the Savior: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (6:44); “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (12:32).

In dramatic fashion the disciples, and particularly Peter, are re-commissioned to become what Jesus promised — fishers of men. Peter and the others will be agents of drawing men and women to Christ and making disciples of all the nations.

What about the number of fish? There were so many that the disciples must have counted them. A great deal of ink has been used to explain the number 153. One solution takes note of the fact that 153 is a triangular number: $3 \times 3 \times 17$. The number 17 is the addition of 10 and 7: 10 commandments, 7-fold Spirit of God. It is also the sum of 12 and 5, pointing perhaps to the 5 loaves of bread and 12 baskets of leftovers in John 6.

The most popular theory is that of Jerome. He ties this scene to Ezekiel 47, the prophetic vision of the stream of living water that flowed from the temple to the Dead Sea, which began to teem with life. Jerome cites the naturalist Oppian, who claimed there were 153 species of fish. Thus the number would represent the mission of the church to spread the gospel to all men without distinction, to every tribe, race, and nation. However, the most likely number of species of fish is 157.

No matter what the meaning of 153 is, the significance lies in the sheer quantity of fish caught: when the disciples cast their gospel net, there will be a great response. The gospel net will be full and it will not be torn. In other words, the gospel net will never break, and therefore, there will be no limit to the number of converts it can hold. This vast multitude of men and women who are drawn to Christ will be held together in unity; there will be no schisms or divisions in the net. There will be one people and family of God, one body of Christ as the Bible teaches.

What Jesus is doing for Peter and the disciples is wonderful to contemplate. Despite everything that Peter has done wrong, Jesus is going to fulfill his promise to him and use him mightily. And despite the disciples' confusion, they too will be used by God to draw men and women to Jesus. He is enhancing the commission he gave them in Jerusalem when he told them that he was sending them into the world. He is giving the disciples a visual image of their mission to the world: to bring the message of salvation.

The same mission is given to the church. The church is not a club; it exists for the benefit of its non-members. God calls us to spread the gospel message by being fishers of men. John Wesley said, “You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work.”

We might wonder how we will be able to accomplish this mission. We readily admit that we are inadequate and unreliable. We have to learn what the disciples learned. If we depend

on our own abilities, we won't catch anything. On our own we can do nothing. But when we are empowered by the Holy Spirit there is no limit to what God can accomplish through us. Despite all of our weakness and failures and inadequacies, Jesus delights in using us to further his kingdom. And the people that God chooses are often those that the world would deem as incompetents. God chooses people like Joe the plumber, mentioned in the recent debate between Senator Obama and Senator McCain.

Dave Roper writes: "God surrounds himself with incompetents. The people God uses have rarely been great people, nor have great people been the people God uses. Nietzsche looked for 'a strong kind of man, most highly gifted in intellect and will.' God looks for misfits and milquetoasts, shmucks, and schlemiels. It's not that he has to make do with a bunch of fools. He chooses them."¹

God chose Peter despite his failure, and he chooses us.

The second significant action is the meal of bread and fish that Jesus prepares for the disciples. He had washed their feet, and now after a long night he serves them with a hot breakfast. We might note that the fish that are caught are not part of the meal. The meal is a gift. He doesn't need anything from the disciples.

Jesus invites the disciples to the table to come and dine. They know it is the Lord, but they want to ask him if it is really him. They are uneasy and unsure of what to say so they remain silent.

Jesus takes the bread and fish and serves them. This meal served by Jesus might have been reminiscent of the Last Supper. It also calls to mind the feeding of the five thousand, and Luke's account of Jesus breaking bread with the two disciples at Emmaus, and eating fish with the disciples in Jerusalem.

Close by the church that marks this event stands another church that commemorates the feeding of the five thousand. Mosaics of fish and bread were often placed in the floors of early churches, and the same two elements were used in the art of the early church to depict the Eucharist meal.

The significance of this meal is that even though Jesus will ascend to the Father, he reassures the disciples that he will continue to meet their needs. He will feed and sustain them. What he gives is a gift without effort.

Jesus makes the same offer to us. He invites us to come and sit down to a meal. A meal is a place of vulnerability and intimacy and rest. We continue to feed on the food that Jesus gives because what he gives sustains, renews, and refreshes us. This is the kind of relationship that Jesus wants us to have with him. This is what enables us and equips us for his purposes. The question for us is whether we will take him up on the offer. Is there space and place in our lives to sit in a quiet place and allow our crucified Lord to feed us? As the psalmist said, we must always remember that the Lord is our shepherd. He

leads us beside quiet waters. He restores our soul. He even prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies.

The story continues with a dialogue between Jesus and Peter:

So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" 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." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep." (21:15-17)

The phrase "when they had finished breakfast" ties in to the previous section, excluding the thought that it is an inserted fragment. The mention of a charcoal fire in verse 9 connects to the courtyard scene, where Peter had denied the Lord (18:18). So once again Jesus is gazing at Peter through a charcoal fire.

Three times Jesus addresses Peter as Simon. Peter, the rock, had proved too unstable, so Jesus addresses him by the name he had before Jesus called him by the same lakeside.

Jesus asks Peter a question three times: "Do you love me." The first time Jesus asks him if he loves him "more than these." Who are the "these?" Does Peter love Jesus more than he loves the other disciples or more than his fishing gear? Most likely he is asking Peter if he loves him more than the other disciples love him. Peter had been outspoken and vehement in stating his loyalty for Jesus (13:37). He promised to follow him to death, and had even cut off Malchus's ear. But he disowned and denied the Lord. Peter needed forgiveness, but also reinstatement among the disciples. His boast had been public so his restoration had to be public too.

This exchange between Peter and Jesus has two different words for love, *agapao* and *phileo*. Jesus asks, "Do you *agapao* me?" Peter responds, "I *phileo* you." Jesus asks again, "Do you *agapao* me?" Peter responds, "I *phileo* you." The third time Jesus asks, "Do you *phileo* me?" Peter is grieved and says, "I *phileo* you." *Phileo* occurs five times in the text and *agapao* is used twice.

Commonly it is argued that *agapao* is the stronger form of love. *Agapao* love is covenant love, while *phileo* is friendship love. Most of you have heard that Jesus wants Peter to love him more deeply and more completely than what Peter is capable of. But he is willing to take the *phileo* love that Peter offers.

I am persuaded that this is not the focus of the dialogue. The two words for love are used interchangeably in John as synonyms (for the beloved disciple; the Father's love for the Son: 3:35, 5:20; Jesus' love for Lazarus: 11:5, 36). In the LXX, Jacob's preferential love for Joseph is expressed with both verbs

(Gen 37:3, 4). In the NT, *agapao* is not always used in a positive way (Demas loved the present age: 2 Tim 4:10). Finally, in other places in his gospel John uses minor differences for stylistic reasons. Here there are two different Greek words for “feed” and “take care of,” “lambs” and “sheep,” and “know.” But there is no debate about these. (Even among those who see a distinction in the two verbs there is no agreement as to what it means. So F. F. Bruce argues that when “Greek scholars see the significance of the synonyms so differently we may wonder if indeed we are intended to see such distinct significance.”²)

The significance of what is happening over a charcoal fire is to be found in the three times that Jesus asks the question in order to match the three denials of Peter. When Jesus asks a third time, Peter is grieved because he is reminded that he failed three times. Thus Jesus required hearing his confession three times. The three manifestations of Jesus to the disciples also emphasize this significance.

Peter does not try and answer Jesus’ question with his strength of love but rather an appeal to the Lord’s knowledge of his love: “You know that I love you.” Peter has learned that his boasts of devotion are worthless. Now it is enough that Jesus knows his heart.

When the Lord reenacts this gruesome memory, Peter is fully restored. He doesn’t have to beg or plead with Jesus for forgiveness; it is a gift, just like the bread and the fish. When Peter is restored his memory is healed. The image of a charcoal fire is transformed from a place of shame to a place of affirmation and redemption. But not only is Peter restored, he is re-commissioned. Three times he is charged to feed and care for the flock. “The threefold denial is wiped out and forgiven in the threefold commissioning.”³ Peter is not only called to evangelistic ministry, hauling in nets of fish, but to pastoral ministry: to tend and to feed. The grieved and humbled Simon is charged with shepherding, guiding, guarding, and nourishing the flock, which belongs to Jesus. Some take this passage as evidence that Peter has primacy over the other disciples. However, “if Peter has a primacy among the apostles, it is because he has primacy as a forgiven sinner.”⁴

This is such a beautiful, tender scene. Redemption is possible for Peter and it is possible for each of us. Jesus invites us to a meal, a place of vulnerability, so that he can restore our lives. Perhaps you think, like Rodrigo Mendoza, “For me there is no redemption, no penance great enough.” Your failure has disqualified you. But that is not true.

God is a forgiving God, not a punishing and condemning God. God is more eager to forgive than we are to be forgiven. He draws us to himself, forgives our waywardness, and heals our memories. He takes images and places of failure and sin and transforms them into places of reconciliation and joy. And not only does Jesus restore us, he calls us into his kingdom service. He wants to use us and put us to work. Our past never determines our future. Our failures may put us on the bench for a while but they are never final when we are in God’s hands and our eyes are on the cross of Christ.

As I said at the beginning, this is one of my favorite passages — and for good reason. It is easy for me to dwell on my failures and think I have wasted my life. My default mode is that I am no good and that I don’t have anything worthwhile to offer. I am not sure where this comes from. There are many things in my life that would reinforce this message, but most likely it comes from the deceiver who whispers his lies into my ear. When I hear that condemning voice, all I want to do is go fishing or play golf. But then I read this sweet passage. I hear Jesus calling me to sit awhile and share a meal. I hear his acceptance of my inadequate and impure love. And I hear his word to feed his sheep. The idea that God would want to use me and put me to service is beyond my understanding. Why would he want someone like me? But he does.

And he wants you too. He wants you to put yourself in Peter’s place, to hear his words and receive the restoration and redemption that he offers. He wants to use you and involve you in the great work of reaching out to every tribe, race, and nation, calling together a people for his name’s sake. You don’t have to have a degree. You don’t have to feel adequate. You just have to show up with your fishing pole and depend on Jesus.

We rejoice when we see the character of God displayed through this encounter between Jesus and Peter. We praise our great God who “is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” (Psalms 103:8 NAS95S)

¹ David H. Roper, *Elijah, A Man Like Us* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1997), 36.

² F. F. Bruce, *Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 405.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 279.

Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, 279.