

April 10 –

Sermon: I'm Going Fishing

Scripture: John 21:1-19

The main character in today's scripture reading is Peter. Think about all that he experienced over the past few days. Let's begin at the Passover meal. Peter is sitting at the table with Jesus and the other disciples. Without a word of explanation Jesus gets up, takes a towel and basin and begins to wash the disciple's feet. Most are speechless. They had never seen anything like this. Jesus was the teacher, the leader, the Messiah. He should be served by those around him, not acting like a servant. When Jesus comes to Peter, he is not silent. He at first refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. It just isn't proper. When Jesus says this is an entry right into his kingdom, then Peter wants all in, not just feet but hands and head as well!

Where have we been more concerned about our status than in being faithful? Where have we let enthusiasm cause us to jump into something without counting the cost? We are there with Peter.

Still at the table, shocking events continue. Jesus goes on to challenge them all saying, "one of you will betray me." All, even Peter, asks tentatively, "Is it I?" I'm sure Peter knew he would not deliberately betray Jesus but a word spoken at the wrong time, overheard by a spy of Rome, could lead to disaster. Peter was afraid that he, impulsive as he is, could be the one to betray Jesus without meaning it. Jesus also says that they will all run away and leave him. Peter thinks, no way! I am a brave man. I will risk my very life for this man. He tells Jesus so and the response, "You of the twelve will deny ever knowing me three times before sunrise tomorrow!"

Where have we wondered if we would betray our allegiance to Jesus? You know, those times when we are with friends or family and standing up for our faith would be inconvenient. Is Jesus talking about me when we act these ways? Are our actions types of betrayal? Also, where have we convinced ourselves that we are brave and faithful which leads us to being less careful about our actions? When we are so sure of

ourselves that we can't imagine ourselves being scared about being faithful, we are there with Peter.

The events of the night play out as Jesus had predicted. Peter falls asleep in the garden when he is asked to stay awake and pray. Soldiers come and after a moment of bravery he runs away like the rest. So much for his bold predictions of faithfulness. Later he follows and while standing in the courtyard of the high priest hears, "You were with him." To admit it would likely lead to his arrest as well. He lost his nerve and not once but three times, just as Jesus had predicted, denies ever knowing Jesus. And when the rooster crows he remembers and weeps bitter tears.

When have we failed in our commitment? When have we looked back over past actions and thought, "Why did I do that? I am so ashamed?" We know what Peter was feeling.

Then comes the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Did Peter see it? We do not know. The next couple of days find him hiding behind locked doors scared that the authorities would come for him as well. On Sunday morning Mary comes bursting into the room where they are staying, talking about the stone being rolled away from the mouth of the tomb and the body being gone! John and Peter run to the garden and find it as she had said. They return filled with questions and suddenly Mary is back talking about how she has seen the Lord. What does that mean? Is it good news that Jesus is alive or challenging news because Jesus will remind me of my betrayal? We don't know how Peter felt. That evening he sees the Risen Lord. We hear nothing about his response or the subsequent time a week later when he appears again and challenges Thomas to have faith.

When have we seen visions of new life and remained questioning and in doubt? We know what it means to hear good news with questions because we are not sure how our life and past actions fit into this new reality. We understand Peter's silence.

After all of these experiences, what does Peter do? Peter decides to go fishing and take some of the other disciples with him. What does this action mean? For me, going fishing is a symbol of wanting to go back to a familiar routine. Have you ever

experienced a time of great change? Everything you know is turned upside down. Plans carefully made no longer seem to make sense. What is your response? It is probably just like Peter's. You turn back towards the security of something you know. For the people of Israel when they were wandering in the desert they kept wanting to return to Egypt. Even though that represented slavery it was a known quantity. Their nomadic existence, where each day was a challenge, seemed too unpredictable. We have to work hard to overcome this tendency to turn backwards in time. It stifles any possibility for what new thing God is hoping to accomplish in our lives. Peter had seen the Risen Lord! He knows Jesus had defeated death. What that might mean for him was too scary to contemplate so he went fishing.

Jesus doesn't let him go back in time without a challenge. God is never going to let us ignore the new possibilities just because they are scary. In one way or another we will be challenged to embrace the new. Jesus at the beach is doing exactly this. He confronts Peter and so, in one way or another, Peter is going to have to deal with his guilt about denial. Jesus never mentions it. I think he understands that he doesn't need to make it into a teaching lesson. Peter will do that well enough on his own. Instead he challenges him to do something new, to feed my sheep. We need to understand the cultural enormities of this concept. Asking a fisherman to become a shepherd; that was unheard of. Fishing was seen as a noble business. Work hard and you could have your own boat and become a self-made man. Sorry, women didn't fish commercially. Shepherds, they were seen as slightly disreputable. They usually grazed on land they did not own or were hired hands that were little better off than slaves. Shepherds were suspected of stealing a lamb here and there for their own use when they thought no one was looking. It would be like asking a person today who works in an office with a salary and benefits to give it up and go work at a fast food restaurant. Yet not once but three times Jesus asks Peter to embrace a total new reality. Jesus wanted Peter to see that everything was new after his being raised from the dead. Would Peter accept the invitation or would he remain where he was, comfortable, fishing?

This makes me ask, "Where are we challenged to try something new?" Where do we need to step out of our comfort zone? Sometimes, in faith, this is exactly what we

are called upon to do. And, if we are honest, our response at times is to want to dig in our heels and say, "No way!" We would rather go fishing than feed sheep.

Jesus had risen, he was looking for Apostles. Being a disciple was no longer an option. A disciple is a student, one who is learning, who follows the directions of the teacher. An apostle is one who is sent, who has to make decisions, to take a stand, to risk, to be a teacher to others. Peter had been a good, if tumultuous, disciple. Was he ready for the roll of apostle? Jesus was willing to move past his mistakes, his denials and all the rest. He wanted Peter to face forward and forget what was behind. Was he willing to become a shepherd? Peter's answer of yes was his embracing the new. From this time forward he never, as far as we know, goes back to the boat to fish. He instead becomes the leader of the house church in Jerusalem. He stands and shares the good news with all at Pentecost, even if that might have cost him his life. He is likely part of the group that commissions Saul, now Paul, and sends him and Barnabas forward in ministry to the Gentiles. He becomes the good shepherd.

So we are asked by Jesus: Are we going to fish or feed sheep? Another way to say it, do we look back to what is comfortable or do we embrace what new events God places in our path? That is always and continually the question? God is the God of transformation, wanting to make all things, including us, new. May we give up fishing and answer the call to tend sheep in whatever way or form that job is meant for us.