

“Don’t Skip Breakfast”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 18, 2010

Third Sunday of Easter

John 21:1-17

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There are some peculiar things about this story about the resurrected Christ meeting his disciples by the lakeside. Why, for example, have the disciples, at Peter’s suggestion, decided to go fishing that night? Was it for work or for play; because they needed to or because they wanted to? Or was it because, like many of us, when we aren’t sure what to do, we feel better when we are at least doing something? Why does Peter decide to get dressed before jumping into the water and swim to shore? Wouldn’t the opposite – removing clothes before swimming – make more sense. And if the fishing nets were so full of fish – so full that the crew of fishermen could hardly drag it into the boat – why are we told that Peter drags the nets ashore all by himself? And why – as we would expect – if the risen Christ already knows the answer, does he ask Peter not just once, not twice, but three times the same question: “do you love me?”

Although Jesus was not with Peter on the night of his arrest, we assume also that he knew that Peter had denied him not just once, not twice, but three times. He had, after all, predicted that it would happen; although, at the time, Peter could not have believed himself capable of it. Puzzling also is the particular phrasing of Jesus’ first question to Peter: “do you love me more than these?” What does Jesus mean by this: that Peter is to love Jesus more than the others who are present; or more than his previous life – being a fisherman instead of a fisher of men?

Three times Peter is asked to proclaim his love for Jesus, and three times he is told to care for the sheep. This type of language would have been familiar to Peter and the other disciples, as Jesus had been describing himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who knows the sheep of his flock, just as the sheep know him. Twice the instruction is about feeding, but once about tending to them. It would seem, then, that feeding others is a part of what we are to do, but not all of what we are to do. Sheep-tenders also protect from harm, they lead to green pastures, and they seek out the lost. These are the things that the Bible teaches us about shepherds when its readers are being assured that they are being shepherded by God. This is what I have done for you, Jesus seems to be saying to Peter, and so followers of Christ are to do that which God has done for them.

Often times over the past two-thousand years, Christians have called themselves people of the Word. We pay attention to the Bible – and, in particular, the words of Jesus – because we proclaim it to be the Word of God. At the opening of his gospel, John reminds us also that Jesus is the Word, the self-revelation of God. And so, while it may seem like inescapably circular reasoning, we take the Bible seriously because it is God’s Word, a truth which we can only know because, as the children’s hymn says: “the Bible tells me so.”

Yesterday morning, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann – a giant in his field and author of 58 books, several of which are among those that I take off my shelves most often – was at Forest Hill Presbyterian Church to talk with church leaders about studying, interpreting, and preaching from God’s Word. He talked about the century-old debate within the Christian church which revolves around biblical literalism. A mistake which is often made, Dr. Brueggemann proposed, is that the words of the Bible are used to explain something different than what scripture was intending to say: finding science in story; or history in poetry. Although the two are essentially intertwined, it would be reasonable to say that God’s Word is more about God than about the world.

Peter denied Jesus three times; and three times, Jesus asks Peter to restate his love and commit to doing Godly work. As far Peter removed himself from the presence of his Lord, that far Jesus the Good Shepherd travels to restore him to the flock. More important than Peter’s denials is the grace of Christ: the divine willingness to engage and entrust ministry even to someone whose actions have been impetuous and unfaithful.¹

So, it seems, Christ would not give up on us any more than he gave up on Peter. This encounter of restoration – encouraging Peter to take up a life of feeding the lambs – takes place as they share breakfast. Surely, the setting would not be lost on Peter; sitting once again around a fire, but this time with his Lord; being fed a meal of bread and fish, just as Jesus and the disciples had miraculously fed so many thousands of followers with the same food during his ministry. As the disciples were shown earlier, these feedings do not happen apart from Christ, and when the meal is finished there is an abundance of leftovers. Just as the disciples gathered twelve baskets of extra food after the feeding of the five thousand, so we can assume that a large portion of the hundred and fifty-three fish that had been caught that morning would be left for later. When we do those things Jesus instructs us to do: feeding, guiding, protecting and seeking others; should we not also expect that God will provide an abundance that we can share – and that we will be cared for and fed in the process?

¹ Thomas Troeger in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

The early morning meal on the shore also serves to correct any misunderstanding that the Last Supper was the final meal Christ ate with his disciples.² Jesus came to these earliest disciples when they were at work (or hard at work playing); he came when they had failed to catch anything on their own; and he came even when – as Peter thought – they were not properly dressed to encounter the Risen Lord. Should we not expect to find Jesus with us in the course of our work and our play, when we feel as if we are failing to make any progress, even when we feel ill-prepared to be the disciples and sheep-tenders that God has created us to be.

That this final meal of the gospel story is a morning breakfast rather than an evening supper suggests that there is a day ahead, work to do, a mission to accomplish. It is, in essence, another Easter story that John is telling; not one where there is confusion about whether or not Jesus has risen, for the disciples – then and now – know that he has. Sharing breakfast with Christ shows that we are being fed for the day ahead; that we are nourished when we gather to be in his presence so that we can be included among those blessed ones who are fed and equipped to go and do as Jesus does.

Dr. Brueggemann told his audience yesterday that from his many decades of studying the Bible, he has come to view much of God’s word as an opportunity for what he called “doxological affirmation,” a description that only a biblical scholar could love or even understand. What I think he meant, though, is that God’s Word – both Jesus and the scriptures that reveal him to us – provide us the chance to say: “thank you God that I can believe.” We may not have proof, we may not have had an experience or a vision of Jesus appearing to us in bodily form as he did to the disciples; but we are still able to say that Jesus is Lord; we can affirm that God is our God and we are God’s people.

While some have concluded – as we also are sometimes tempted to think – that Christ’s abundant generosity belongs to the past and not to the present, John’s story about the lakeside gives witness that the risen Christ continues to bless and feed us. Although it has been two-thousand years, for us it is still early in the morning and we have the rest of the day ahead of us. This is true of us, as individuals, and of the church as well. Having gathered to share together a meal with Christ, we prepare to go into the world – to work or to play, to tend and to feed – and to be what God has intended us to be. Armed with a doxological affirmation, the ability to say, “thank you God that I can believe” the world will see that we love God and God’s Word – that which has been written and that which has been revealed. AMEN.

² Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*