

Wandering Heart: “Here’s my heart”

John 21:1-19

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By Rev. Peter J. Blank H.R.

Wandering Faith: “Here’s my heart”

For the last 7 weeks we have been learning from the disciple Peter and his wandering faith. Today, we focus on Wandering Faith: Here’s my heart.

Teachers love to catch the errors students make in their term papers, and they love nothing better than to catch mixed metaphors. Here’s what the Calvin College English department collected as a list of mixed metaphors and posted on their web site:

“He swept the rug under the carpet.”

“She’s burning the midnight oil at both ends.”

“It was so cold last night I had to throw another blanket on the fire.”

“It’s time to step up to the plate and cut the mustard.”

“She’s robbing Peter to pay the piper.”

“He’s up a tree without a paddle.”

“Beware my friend...you are skating on hot water.”

“Keep your ear to the grindstone.”

“Sometimes you’ve gotta stick your neck out on a limb.”

“Some people sail through life on a bed of roses like a knife slicing through butter.”

We have mixed metaphors in our text for today. The first is about fishing and the second about shepherding. When we put the two together, we will come up with “fishing for sheep” or “shepherding fish.” The metaphors may be mixed, but together they can provide a wonderful balance for the church’s ministry.

It is hard to set a firm time frame for the stories in our text for today because chapter 21 of John is so obviously an epilogue or an afterthought. The last two verses of chapter 20 say:

“Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

These words make an ideal ending for the book, but John decides to add a couple more stories before his final conclusion. Although chapter 21 is an epilogue, scholars say that all of the earliest manuscripts include it.

When we review the events of chapter 20, we see that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to Mary Magdalene, Salome, Mary the mother of James and the women whose names we do not know on Sunday morning. That Sunday evening he appeared to the disciples, but Thomas was not with them. Then a week later, he appeared to them again and made his personal appeal to Thomas, who would not believe unless he placed his hands in the wounds of Jesus. Our story in chapter 21 takes place sometime after that, but we have no idea how long after.

Seven of the disciples were gathered together in one place. I believe the disciples were still confused about what they should be doing. They had no idea how they were to carry on their ministry after Jesus’ resurrection. Even though Jesus proved his resurrection to them, things were obviously so different that they didn’t know quite what to do.

Some scholars have suggested that this fishing trip was a sinful act of doubt. These disciples had been fishermen before Jesus called them from their nets. Perhaps this night of fishing meant that they had given up on their new vocation and were returning to their previous way of making a living. I prefer to think of it merely as a night stress reliever, not unlike the desire that many people have to go fishing today. They just wanted to get away for a while. Often a fishing trip is just an excuse to leave the stress of the workaday world behind and return to nature. The seven of them then spent all night fishing from the boat. We can imagine them with a lantern hung over the side to attract fish and each of them taking turns throwing the circular nets into the water. After each throw, they came up empty handed.

If the disciples were anything like me, I think they must have been even more frustrated by daybreak than they were the night before. They had fished all night and caught nothing. No fish!

In the morning midst and fog, they heard a voice calling to them from the shore. They couldn't make out the lone figure, but they heard what he said:

“Have you anything to eat? Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.”

Like most fishermen, they were tireless in their pursuit of a fish. Even today, fishermen seem to like nothing better than trying a new bait. Their tackle boxes are filled with thousands of varieties of lures. These early fishermen were just as willing to try a new spot. So they cast their nets on the other side of the boat. That's when they snagged the surprising catch – 153 fish! It was a miracle that the nets did not break with such a load.

By now the fog was beginning to lift. The miraculous catch caused John to look closer at this mysterious figure on the shore, and he finally recognized that it was Jesus. When he exclaimed, “It is the Lord!”, Peter immediately grabbed his clothes, jumped in the water, and began to swim toward Jesus. The other disciples struggled with the boat and the heavy net of fish, until they brought them both to land.

What shall we make of this post-resurrection fishing expedition? It seems to reflect back to the very beginning of Jesus' ministry when he found some fishermen and said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you into fishers for people.” (Mark 1:17). This analogy represented Jesus' earthy description of the work he was calling them to do. They were fishermen; he called them to fish for people. These disciples had likely felt this was an apt description of their ministry with Jesus. People flocked around them like schools of fish in a feeding frenzy.

But what would be their job after the resurrection? They were confused with Jesus' off and on appearances. What were they to do without him?

I believe this experience is an acted out parable, not unlike those of the Old Testament prophets. The message is that they were to continue

to fish for people. And their post-resurrection catch would be larger than any they had during the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Today we are still called to be missionaries, wherever we are. Our number one task is to find creative ways to cast the net and draw people to Jesus Christ.

The second metaphor comes while the disciples are enjoying the wonderful breakfast of fish and bread that Jesus has prepared for them. Someone called this “The Last Breakfast.”

I suspect that Simon Peter was a bit uncomfortable during this meal. He was still wrestling with his own guilt over betraying Jesus three times before the cock crowed on that Friday a few weeks before. That’s when Jesus addresses him directly:

“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.

“Feed my lambs.”

“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

“Tend my sheep.”

“Simon son of Jonah, do you love me?”

“Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Three times Peter affirms his love, and three times he is charged with the personal care of Jesus’ flock. This triple set of questions corresponds to Peter’s three denials. Peter is saying, “Here’s my heart.”

Much has been made of the verbs used for “to love” in this exchange. Some scholars point out that the first two times Jesus uses the Greek word *agape* and Peter’s reply uses the word *phileo*. Then the third time, Jesus uses *phileo* and so does Peter. Peter is saying, “Here’s my heart.” The conclusion often drawn is that Jesus is asking for a more noble love, while Peter offers simple friendship as all that he can give – and ultimately Jesus accepts the lower form of love.

But it is likely that Jesus was speaking in Aramaic or Hebrew rather than Greek. Hebrew and Aramaic are like English in that they only had one word for love, not the three subtle differences of the Greek language.

In asking the question three times, Jesus is asking if Peter will be his disciple and follow him no matter what the cost. Jesus is alluding to the price of discipleship both in the word “love” and in the use of the shepherding metaphor. By entrusting the care of the flock to Peter three times, Jesus is bringing up the full range of duties that a shepherd has: pasturing, protecting, searching out the strays, caring for injuries, providing shelter.

The church today succeeds or fails based on how it does with these two mixed metaphors – fishing and shepherding. A church cannot live past one generation if it doesn’t go fishing. Without the work of evangelism any church will wither and die, just as a body without nourishment will atrophy.

Most churches are better at shepherding than we are at fishing. Ours is no exception. We do pretty well at feeding the lambs, tending the sheep, and feeding the sheep. We care for one another, we minister to the members. In fact, we get upset when certain members miss several Sunday’s in a row.

We do pretty well at shepherding, but what about fishing? How many of us are guilty of envy about the Easter crowds of last Sunday? We see all those people coming to church, and we wish we had that many or more every Sunday. We wish for a catch of 153 fish.

This story should convict us because we haven’t taken the first step. Peter said, “I’m going fishing.” The other disciples said, “We will go with you.” How many of us are willing to go fishing for people? Our church could double in attendance instantly if every member caught one fish. But you don’t catch fish if you don’t go fishing.

The two stories might be seen as mixed metaphors, but they provide a healthy challenge for our church. Shepherding and fishing – that’s what the church is all about. Let’s commit together to “fish for sheep” and “shepherd the fish.”

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

We believe in a God who shows up in our lives— surprising and catching us off-guard in the best of ways.

**We believe in a God who cares for God's people—
a shepherd who longs for her sheep to be fed and tended.**

**We believe in a God who took on flesh—
a God whose love changed the world as we know it.**

**We believe that this here-and-now God invites us out of the
boat,
calling ordinary people like Peter, like us, into a life of service
and community.**

**And so we give our hearts. We give our whole hearts and
nothing less. Amen.**