

GRACE BEYOND IMAGINATION

Acts 9: 1-6; John 21: 1-19

Third Easter • May 4, 2025

by Pat Berger

The 21st chapter of the Gospel according to John is something of a puzzlement. Last week, we read the end of the 20th chapter, and it sounded as if it were the end of the book: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." All tidied up; taken care of; the end. And THEN we come to today's reading; "After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples . . ." We are right back into the story!

Over the years, most commentators have come to agree that the 21st chapter is a later addition to this Gospel, maybe later by many years, and that it was likely written by someone other than the writer of the rest of the book. Perhaps the community for which the Gospel was written had some questions yet, and this impersonator of John set himself to the task. Things had come to a conclusion, maybe not reassuringly enough, about the love that God and Jesus had for all the people; clearly, someone thought, one more chapter would be helpful, would reinforce key points.

So. The disciples went fishing. All night long they fished, and they caught nothing. Not one fish. Just at daylight, Jesus stood on the shore. Of course, the disciples didn't recognize him at first. He said to them, "You have no fish, have you." Well, as a matter of fact, he was correct: they had no fish. So, Jesus said, put your net out on the other side of the boat, which they did, and right away they had more fish than they could load into the boat – 153 fish! I have been fishing, twice in my life; I know that 153 is a large number. Do you remember the story of Jesus turning water into wine when those who had planned a particular wedding hadn't planned very well? Jesus' mother said to the hosts, talk to my son, and when they did, he turned huge jugs of water into more wine – very good wine, we are told –

than the guests could possibly have consumed even in the week-long celebration. We do not know the significance of the number 153 here, although certainly there was one. It has been suggested that maybe there were 153 known species of fish at that time, so this represented all being included, or maybe there were 153 known nations at that time, also to represent inclusion – and the fact is, we just don't know.

What we do know is: that is a whole bunch of fish. To what end? Karoline Lewis, in her commentary, wrote, "153 fish? That is a crazy amount – and why? Because that is how much God loves us. The whole gospel of John is about abundant grace. Grace upon grace in John 1:16, but after the Prologue, no mention of grace. . . This fourth resurrection appearance is to reveal that grace upon grace is true." Likely all of those fish weren't the same variety of fish, and that, too, reinforced for the people another idea about who this God was: that grace upon grace from their God was for everyone. Yes, it would be for the disciples, and for those who faithfully followed Jesus during his life and ministry – and it would be for everyone else, too. Their God loved everyone, and wanted everyone to know it.

Another place that we are allowed to see the result of God's abundant love and grace for everyone is in our story today from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The piece of the story that Gina read for us tells of Saul's conversion experience. Later, Saul would become Paul; here he was still Saul, and still on the road to find followers of Jesus to bring back to Jerusalem for punishment. Instead, he saw a light from heaven; he fell to the ground; and he heard Jesus calling to him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul asked who he was, Jesus told him: he was Jesus, and Saul should go into the city, where he would be told what to do. The men who were with him could hear the voice but they saw no one; when Saul got up, he could see nothing. For three days, he saw nothing, ate nothing, drank nothing. Then Jesus spoke to Ananias, who laid his hands on Saul and restored Saul's vision, and then told him as Jesus had said: Jesus had chosen Saul to take the Good News to the Gentiles and the kings and the people of Israel. Saul stayed for several days with the disciples;

immediately, he began to tell about Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." Saul, as Paul, would be, one commentator wrote, ". . . a leading actor in the apostolic mission to the ends of the then-known earth."

This is where the disciples, too, would spread the Good News of God's love and abundant grace: to the ends of the then-known earth. God's grace cannot be limited. God's promise then, for Peter and Paul and all who believed, and God's promise now, for each of us and for all who believe and for everyone, is grace beyond what we can possibly imagine. There was an abundance of fish on that day, there was an abundance of wine on another day, and each of us has more stories than we have time to relate or even can remember about God's grace in our own lives, stories we can spread to the ends of our now-known earth. This writer in John didn't have enough time, either; the ending of chapter 21 would sound vaguely familiar to us, because it sounds quite like the end of chapter 20: "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." Remember this on days that are difficult, on days when you wonder if God's grace is for you. Karoline Lewis finished her commentary this way: "This is the resurrection story we need. Desperately. All of us. That we will, indeed, experience the truth of the resurrection beyond the empty tomb. That Jesus will always show up on the shore, will invite us to share a meal once again, because abundance really means abundance when it comes to God. Why? Because it seems that God truly does love the world." And it will ever be so!

Let us pray.