

Catch and Release

It's interesting, I think that the whole idea of "catch and release" in fishing comes about the time of the invention of digital cameras.

I could be wrong, and I'm no fisherman, but the evidence of the big catch can be captured on camera much more easily now and thus the need to bring the catch into shore to show friends and family is not so easy. And just telling about the "big one that got away (or I let go)" is not evidence as we all know.

And, to follow my line of reasoning, in the olden days of regular film photography, one couldn't trust that the lighting was right, or the film was in the camera or the camera was pointed just right to get the size of the big one. One had to be sure that the catch of the really big walleye would not be written off as just another tall tale.

Now your buddy can take the picture, look at the back of the camera, see the evidence and then say, "Yup, that's a good one. You can release it."

Alas, there was no digital photography in Jesus' time. So, we just have to accept this marvelous story of the catch so big it could barely be hauled in at face value. Or, shall we say, "at Gospel value." Just part of the story we love to tell.

So many fish.

I find it troubling here that after the appearance of the resurrected Jesus in the upper room that we read about last Sunday, the disciples who were once fishermen, decide to go back to the fishing business. It's, I guess, the only thing they knew how to do. And without the presence of Jesus, they just go back to doing what they had done all their lives. Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen. And without Jesus, they are just fishermen.

And so are we just what we were before the resurrected Christ appeared among us.

Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, 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 go with you."

I'm going fishing. What else can I do? We'll go with you.

The scene is almost comical, isn't it.

The disciples have just had this remarkable experience with the risen Christ. Then there's this pause and Peter blurts out, "well, let's go fishing."

Jesus disappears from their presence as he often does in these days following the resurrection. One moment he's there and another he isn't.

Like the appearance on the road to the town called “Emmaus” in Luke chapter 24. He’s with the two disciples but they don’t recognize him. Then they invite him to rest with them at an inn and eat with them. He takes the bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them and their eyes were opened as they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. And then as quickly as he came to them on the road, he is gone.

So, there they are –Peter, James, John, Andrew and a few others--back in their home town in Galilee.. Fishing. But the catch is not very good. They are heading back into shore. Giving up. And in the distance, there is this fellow offering fishing advice from the shore.

“Don’t give up yet. Try something different. Cast your net on the other side of the boat.”

Who is this stranger offering fishing advice from the shore.

For some reason, they follow this stranger’s advice and lo and behold, they have a catch so big they can barely haul it in. And the disciple whom Jesus Loved (we later discover at the end of John’s Gospel that this disciple whom Jesus loved is the writer of the Gospel himself. The disciple whom Jesus loved says to Peter—I’m guessing just above a whisper, “This is the Lord!”

And the ever impetuous Peter puts on his clothes and throws himself into the sea. He doesn’t just slip into the water. The gospel of John says “he threw himself into the sea.” Like he throws himself into every encounter with Christ. Impetuous Peter. Jesus asked him before his death, “who do people say that I am?” Peter blurts out, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God!” At the last supper, Peter says, “I will never deny you!” Then he does. Three times as Jesus had predicted. Impetuous Peter. He seems to be so sure of himself in every encounter with Jesus, but we know that he rarely is so sure.

This time he throws himself into the sea.

The rest of the disciples head into shore with the catch dragging along behind them and they meet this stranger by a charcoal fire.

The risen one just says “come and eat breakfast.” And like the encounter on the road to Emmaus, he took bread and gave it to them.—and so with the fish.

Then the scene shifts rather abruptly to a private session just between Peter and Jesus. Jesus asks him three times, “Simon Peter, do you love me?”

Three times!

This exasperates Peter. Or it grieves him. Or it offends him. Or it saddens him. The word in Greek is not all that clear. Is he broken-hearted or is he just offended that Jesus, who knows all things, doesn’t know whether or not Peter loves him.

Perhaps Peter has in the back of his mind, a remembrance that three times, he denied knowing Jesus while he was being led to the cross.

Three times! Three times! Three times.

And Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.” And “Tend my lambs”. And “feed my sheep”

Whatever else Jesus is doing in this encounter, it is clear that despite his earlier denial of Jesus, he is being reinstated as the head of the church with the commandment to feed and tend those who would follow Jesus.

Without feeding and tending, the church would fall into disarray. Feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my sheep. Let none of them fall away from me.

Have you found yourself in this complex story yet? The intention of the Gospel of John is not just to tell a series of interesting stories. As he says at the end of the last chapter, “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

These things are written so that you may have life, and live always in the presence of the Son of God.

We all have some role to play in the life of the church, the life of discipleship, the life of being true followers of the living Christ. Bored or disappointed, some of us leave and go back to doing what we know best. We leave the powerful encounter with Christ and go back to fishing or accounting or ditch-digging. But the writer of John wants us to know that we all have something to do so that this story is not just a tale of days long ago. It is a story we love to tell and a story that shapes us in powerful ways. It shapes our life together so that we can do the will of our Jesus in all encounters with others. Together we will feed the sheep and tend the lambs of Jesus.

Would that we could have the mountaintop experience every day of our lives. Would that we could live in the glorious presence of Christ all the time. Would that we could have an upper room experience like the disciples had, that Thomas had—all the time.

But alas, we have to live our lives, fishing or taking out the garbage, or hanging the laundry, or filing the papers, or digging the ditches.

The disciples wanted the same things. They wanted Jesus with them forever in case there were questions that needed answering or wounds that needed healing. We all want Jesus with us all the time. Physically present in our very midst. Stay with us, Jesus, stay with us, stay with us forever. But he died and he went away. And even though several of those closest to him saw him again, things would never be the same.

Somehow, we need to lead our ordinary lives

Stay with us, we shout out to him

“Follow” is all that Jesus says back as he heads out into the world, blending into the crowds. And he “blends in so well, that we have to search every face on the off chance that it might be his.” (The Familiar Stranger, Barbara Brown Taylor p. 65)

Plead as we might, the Jesus we once knew can no longer be physically with us. We must feed the sheep and tend the flocks as best as we are able with only that mystical thing called the Holy Spirit to guide us.

We can either stay put where we are and hope that Jesus physically reappears, or we can throw ourselves into the sea of humanity and clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, visit the imprisoned and feed the hungry.

We can either stay at home and wait for him to appear, or we can throw ourselves into the crowds doing unto the least of them so that we might in some way do it unto Jesus.

We can either stay at home and wait or we can go into all the world, making disciples of all people and baptizing them in the name of the father, the son and the Holy Spirit.

We can either stay at home on Sunday mornings reading the paper and having that extra cup of coffee, or we can gather as his people and feed one another and tend to the needs of one another, we can eat together with the sure and certain hope that in that mysterious way, the risen Christ will be in our midst after all and we will be given the courage to do powerful things in his name.

Amen.