

“Fishing with the Risen Lord”
John 21:1-14
April 25, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We come this morning to John 21:1-14.

Jesus has risen from the dead. He has appeared to his disciples and they have believed. And at the end of chapter twenty we had what felt like a conclusion to the book, as John explained his reason for writing. But now the Gospel continues for one more chapter – for twenty-five more verses.

Chapter twenty-one is recognized by many commentators as something of an epilogue. Now, an epilogue is not an appendix – it’s not an unnecessary addition tacked on to the end. Rather, it’s part of the book’s overall structure. But still, it is set aside from the main body of the book.

Since John’s gospel began with an eighteen-verse prologue, we should not be surprised that it ends with a twenty-five-verse epilogue. And as the prologue primarily looked back to what happened *before* Jesus’s earthly ministry, we should probably expect that the epilogue will be looking forward to what will come *after* Jesus’s earthly ministry. [Roberts]

Again and again John has used signs to teach us about Jesus and how we relate to him: great works that Jesus performed, but works that not only display Jesus’s power, but also symbolically point us to deeper spiritual truths.

And that pattern continues again in our text this morning. It’s about fishing for fish. But it’s also about fishing for men and women.

With all of that in mind, we turn now to John 21:1-14.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{21:1} After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶ He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter

went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, we call to you, and we ask you to save us,
so that we might be your faithful servants, and live in light of your testimonies.
We cry out to you,
and we put our hope in your words.
We gather here today,
that we might meditate on your promises.
Hear our prayer now, according to your steadfast love,
according to your justice in your covenant, give us life.
And as we face opposition from those who oppose you,
help us to know how to root ourselves in you.
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus’s sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:46-151]

The Looming Question

In the previous chapter – in the passage we considered two weeks ago – Jesus gave his followers a commission. He told them: “As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you.”

The disciples know *what* they are to do. What’s less clear is *how* they are to do it. *How* are they to go out – how are they to be sent – as Jesus was sent, and to thus fulfill his mission ... especially given the fact that Jesus is so strong and they, by comparison, are so weak?

Answering that question is the role of the epilogue. In the prologue, the first eighteen verses of the book, the key phrase for our orientation to time was “in the beginning”, in verse one. This phrase oriented us to the time that spans from the creation to Jesus’s first coming.

In the epilogue, the last twenty-four verses of the book, the key phrase for our orientation to time is Jesus’s words “until I come”, found in verse twenty-three. That phrase orients us in this chapter to the future – to the time that spans from Jesus first coming to his final coming at the end of history. [Roberts]

And so, as D.A. Carson puts it, the epilogue “points the way forward” for the Church. [665]

The chapter as a whole does this in a few ways, pointing us first to how the Church should relate to its mission to the world, then to how the members of the Church should relate to one another, and finally to how the Church should relate to an uncertain future. But our text this morning focuses on that first theme: how the Church should relate to its mission to the world.

And in some ways, this should not surprise us, because as others have pointed out, that is how every gospel ends. The gospels end not with the resurrection of Jesus or even with the belief of the disciples, but with the assurance that the truth of the gospel will go out to the world, through the Church, and under the command and the ongoing authority of Jesus himself. [Carson, 666]

And John addresses that topic here by telling a story about fishing. Now, why would he do that?

The Background

In the lives of some of these disciples we have something of an *inclusio* in this event, which makes this connection all the more powerful.

Peter is the leader of this fishing party. Do you remember how Jesus first called Peter to follow him?

We read in Mathew and in Mark that while walking by the sea of Galilee Jesus saw Peter and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea. And he said to them “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

That interaction and those words changed their lives.

And now Peter is again at the Sea of Galilee. And he is again casting his net into the sea. And Jesus is again walking on the shore and calling out to him. As Peter realized it was Jesus, how could he not think of those words that Jesus first spoke to him that changed his life?

We might wonder, if Andrew, who was with Peter when Jesus called them to be fishers of men, might be one of the unnamed disciples who is also in the boat in our text ... and if so, if he might not have thought the same thing? And what about James and John, whom Jesus also called to leave their nets in order to seek the souls of men and women – because they too were in the boat here in John 21.

As Jesus guided them in their fishing, the disciples could not have helped but think of how Jesus himself had told them that such fishing was a picture of the ministry he had called them to: to seek the lost souls of men and women, and draw them out for Christ’s kingdom. [Roberts, Carson, 673]

And teaching them how to do that in this symbolic interaction is in many ways what we would expect Jesus to do and John to record. Even commentators like D.A. Carson who tends to downplay more symbolic readings of Scripture in general, admits that this interaction is laden with symbolic meaning, and the disciples would have understood it that way, and contemplated its symbolic meaning in the years that followed. [Carson, 674,677]

As another commentator puts it: “John, describing this scene, isn’t wasting words. He isn’t filling in time. John never pads out stories. He is telling us something, something about working under Jesus’ direction, something about the relation of our work to his.” [N.T. Wright, 159]

And the Old Testament background seems to support that as well. As we’ve noted before, John at times alludes to the Book of Ezekiel from the Hebrew Scriptures. In Ezekiel 47 we have a vision described, of God’s great temple. And from temple comes a stream of water. And wherever that water goes, it brings life. And it flows into the Dead Sea, where it makes the water fresh with life and teeming with all kinds of fish, which the fishermen then go out and draw up.

From the early church many Christians have seen this as a picture of the grace of Christ going out, and it’s not hard to see why, given the themes of John’s gospel. After all, in John chapter two we were told that Jesus is the real temple. In John chapter four we are told that it is from Jesus that real living water flows, and in chapter seven he proclaims that his living water will flow from him, through his followers, and to others, bringing life with it. And now we have Jesus’s disciples described as fishermen, like those in Ezekiel 47, called on to draw up those to whom this new life has come. [Block, 699; Carson, 672; Roberts; Christopher Wright, 356]

Our text this morning is about fishing for fish. But even more than that, it is about fishing for men and women – seeking men and women who are spiritually lost, and bringing them to faith in Jesus Christ.

And as such, it gives us a picture – really a series of pictures – of *how* Christ wants us to go about that work.

A Brief Defense of Evangelism

But before we even get to that, we should pause and ask *if* we should really even do that work.

Because the fact is that many people are hesitant about evangelism. It makes many of us uncomfortable.

For some Christians, they know they are called to share their faith ... but on a gut level they struggle to do it. It feels almost like a violation of our relationship to non-Christians we care about to present them with our religious propositions.

For other Christians, they struggle even with the idea of evangelism. They know Jesus calls us to it ... but it just seems arrogant to claim that we know the truth and that others are wrong.

And then, for many non-Christians, being evangelized to – having someone try to persuasively present their religious beliefs to you – to proselytize to you – feels offensive. You might wonder how they would dare to be so bold or so presumptuous.

A helpful corrective to this perspective comes from an unexpected source ... from Penn Jillette, of the magic and comedy duo Penn & Teller.

In addition to being an entertainer, Jillette is also an author, and in his writing he openly advocates for his atheistic views.

But a few years ago he posted a video on religious proselytizing – on evangelism, and specifically when others evangelize to him.

And Jillette describes how a man came up to him after a show, and told him how much he appreciated the show. And he really seemed to mean it. And then he describes how the man gave him a Bible as a gift, with a note in it. And Jillette saw the genuine care in the man's eyes. And as he describes it, he seems to even get choked up a bit.

Now ... the incident did not convert Jillette ... but Jillette understood exactly what the man was doing, and what evangelism – what proselytizing really is.

Jillette said: "I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think that it's not really worth telling [someone] this because it would make it socially awkward [...] how much do you have to hate somebody to *not* proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"

"I mean, if I believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is *more* important than that."

Jillette saw that real evangelism is motivated by love.

Christians believe that our choices now have eternal consequences. And if we refuse God – if we refuse a relationship to him in Christ now – then that estrangement from God continues and intensifies for all eternity, as hell. But if we will turn to Christ – if we will accept the gospel of Jesus Christ – then eternal life, in the joy of God's presence, can be ours.

If we believe that ... if the Bible teaches that ... if that is true (and it is) ... then how can we not tell others?

And that mission of love is what Christ has sent us out for. And he shows us how to do that in the picture he gives us in our text this morning.

The Picture

And the picture in our text is a bit like one big picture that is made up of several smaller pictures. Maybe you've seen those kind of photo mosaics before, where there's a larger, somewhat pixelated-looking picture of maybe an American flag, but when you look closer you realize it's made up of lots of smaller pictures of military veterans ... or maybe it's a big picture of a famous basketball player, that's made up of lots of smaller pictures of him actually playing.

Our text is kind of like that.

The big picture – the main thing we see – is that it is only by relying on Jesus that the Church can be successful in its mission to the world. That is the main point: that it is only by relying on Jesus that the Church be successful in its mission to the world.

But then, as we look closer, we see that that big picture is made up of a series of pairs of smaller pictures.

And to better understand what it looks like for us to do the work of mission while relying on Jesus, we will walk through our text and consider those pairs of smaller pictures.

First Photo Pair: Skill & Obedience

We come to the first picture as the text begins. Peter announces that he is going fishing. And as he does, we are reminded that this is his trade. It is a skill he has developed. And as fishing for fish is a skill that must be learned, so is fishing for men and women.

But we often neglect this fact ... don't we? We often act as if we're spiritual then we'll just know what to do, and so we rely on our gut, rather than seeking to learn, from the Bible, how evangelism is actually to be done. Or we confuse evangelism with apologetics, and think that if we have an arsenal of arguments, then we know how to do evangelism. But neither of those views are right.

Evangelism, like fishing, is a skill. And as a skill it must be cultivated.

If you have neglected that cultivation, a good place to start might be the works of Jerram Barrs, one of my professors at Covenant Seminary. His books *The Heart of Evangelism* and *Learning Evangelism from Jesus* are especially helpful as we seek to learn from the Scriptures – from Jesus and Paul – what sharing our faith is to look like.

So, the first picture we get in verse three is a reminder that evangelism is a skill.

But then the second picture (which is paired with it) reminds us that at the very same time, it is not our skill, but our obedience that truly yields fruit in the end.

The work of the apostles, who fished all night, was fruitless, we learn in verse three. They caught nothing.

But then, when they obey Jesus's simple command in verse six, they catch an enormous catch of fish. Now, the skills they had mattered – without those skills they could not have obeyed Jesus well. But their skills, in themselves, were not sufficient. At the end of the day it was their obedience to Jesus's command that really led to results.

We should note that Jesus's command, and their obedience was quite ordinary. He didn't call on them to do anything grand. [Roberts] But the results were quite extraordinary. The results were astounding. One hundred and fifty-three large fish was a very large catch. And it came through simple obedience.

And so the first thing we see is that though the work of evangelism – the work of being fishers of men – is a skill we must seek to develop, it is our obedience to Christ more than our skill that leads to fruitful results.

Second Photo Pair: Guidance & Recognition

The second pair of snapshots come in verses six and seven.

In verse six we see how Jesus provides guidance to his disciples. And it's noteworthy that he does it in a hidden way. When he guides them, they do not see that it is him.

And so it so often is with us. Jesus guides us to the work he would have us do ... but as he does, we don't see what he is doing or even the ways he may be at work.

And this is an important thing to consider. When we must make big decisions, or when we must decide when or how to tell someone about Christ, we often want a clear sign. We want overt guidance from Christ. But that is rarely how he works. More often Christ is hidden, and we don't realize how he is at work until after the fact. Which means that part of our calling is to continue to step forward in faith that he is guiding us, even when we cannot see how he is guiding us.

And so, Jesus often remains hidden as he guides us, but then we must have eyes to recognize his work when it suddenly bears fruit. After such a large catch John looks up, and now he recognizes that it was the Lord who guided them. And so we too, after we have seen the gospel go out successfully, must recognize that it was Jesus who brought it about, and give him the glory.

And so the second pair of snapshots we see here remind us that the Lord will indeed guide us in unseen ways, and we must be ready to recognize him once our work has borne fruit.

Third Photo Pair: Work & Outcomes

The third pair of snapshots we see come from the haul of fish itself.

Jesus has given the disciples success. But we are reminded in verse eight that success usually isn't all that easy in the kingdom of God – even when it is given as a gift. The work, even with (maybe especially with) Jesus's blessing is hard work. We see this in the picture of the disciples struggling to haul the net, filled way beyond capacity, the 100 yards to land. That was not easy work. Jesus's blessing means that the Church's labors will be fruitful ... not that the Church's labors will be easy.

Are we ready for that? Are we prepared as Christians and as a congregation that the more God uses us in his mission to our community or to those around us, the harder our work will actually become? Or do we tend to equate God's blessing with ease?

The picture of successful evangelism that we have here is six disciples, struggling with all their might to get their boat to shore, with a haul that must have felt beyond their strength in the moment.

But even as we see that, we get the next snapshot: that Jesus will still ensure the results. Jesus brings the fish to the disciples' nets. But he also keeps them in the nets. The fact that John notes in verse eleven that the nets had not torn indicates that the disciples expected that they would. But Jesus not only brought the initial results, he ensured the final results. The net did not break, the boats did not sink, and the strength of the disciples did not fail.

And so with the Church. The work is hard. But Jesus will accomplish what he sets out to do. He will not just bring initial results to us and expect us to take it from there. He will ensure the outcome that he has ordained as well.

That is the third thing we see here: the work is hard, but the outcome is secure.

Fourth Photo Pair: Communion & Commission

The fourth pair of pictures we see are found in Peter's reactions to the Lord.

In Peter we see the twin pulls in the lives of Christ's disciples towards both communion and commission.

Peter longs for communion with his Lord – he longs to be with him – so much so that when John identifies Jesus on the shore, Peter jumps into the water and swims to him in verse seven. And Peter is not disparaged or scolded for this. Christ's followers should desire to be with Christ.

But Peter is also sent back to the work. That's the next picture we see. And we often miss that one.

Peter jumps in and swims to Jesus. But then, in verses ten and eleven Jesus sends Peter back to the boats to finish the work he had started.

We should long to just be with Jesus. But that does not sum up the Christian life. For Christ has also commissioned us to a task here. He has given us work to do. And that work includes the work of mission. And if we really love Christ, then we must commit ourselves to the work that he has given us.

The Apostle Paul acknowledges these dual callings in his letter to the Philippian Christians. He writes:

“²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.”

Paul, like Peter, was ready to jump into the water and swim to Christ. But Christ still had work for him to do. And he sent him back to his nets to do it. And when he did, Paul gladly and willingly returned to the work that Jesus had given him.

The fourth thing we see is that we are to long for communion with Jesus, but also apply ourselves to the commission he has given us in this world.

Fifth Photo Pair: Differences & Dependence

The next thing we see in our text is about the kind of people the Lord has brought together for this work in the world. Our text reminds us how different they can often be from one another. And the snapshots we get here (and throughout John's gospel) remind us of those differences, along with the fact that in Christ, we are to act as a united Body.

John (who identifies himself here as "the disciple whom Jesus loved") is the reflective and thoughtful one in our text – he's the one who sees what others don't see. But Peter is the doer – he's the one who does what others don't do.

And so it is John who realizes, after the amazing catch, that the man on the shore is Jesus. But it's Peter who jumps into the water after him. John is characterized by quick insight while Peter is characterized by quick action. [Carson, 671]

And that contrast comes up several times in John's gospel. It comes up in chapter thirteen when John is just spending time with Jesus, but Peter wants him to press Jesus with more questions. [13:23-24] It comes up when Jesus is arrested and Peter attacks with the sword while John returns later simply to witness what is happening [18:10, 19:26-27]. It happens even at the empty tomb, as John arrives and reflects at the door, while Peter barges in right away. [20:3-8]

And if you know anything about human nature, it's hard not to think that these two must have gotten on each other's nerves. It's hard not to imagine John rolling his eyes when Peter did something rash, or Peter letting out a loud sigh when John hesitated and thought for longer than seemed necessary to him. That's what we're often like with people different from us, isn't it?

And yet, within the Body of Christ, we are reminded that we are not just different from one another, but that for the mission Christ has given to us, we are dependent on one another.

After all, without John's insight as to who was on the shore, Peter could not have jumped in and swam to him in verse seven. And without Peter's quick action and strength in verse eleven, they could not have finished the task that Jesus gave them in verse ten.

And so with us. God has called us together as a diverse body because we depend on the different gifts he's given each of us. It is through those different gifts that he intends to equip us for the mission he has given us in this world. For he commissioned us not just as individuals, but as a unified body.

That's the fifth thing we see.

Sixth Photo Pair: Unnecessary & Central

The sixth pair of snapshots we see in our text is that when it comes to the mission of God, we, as the people of God, are both unnecessary and central.

Let me explain what I mean by that.

The work we have seen in our text this morning is all about fishing. Jesus is helping the disciples to catch fish – a great picture of the ministry he has called them to of catching men and women for the kingdom of God.

But when they arrive on shore in verse nine, they see that Jesus already had fish. In fact he already had fish and bread cooking over the fire he had made.

That fact is an important reminder that Jesus was not dependent on them. He didn't need them. He could catch fish just fine on his own. He already had.

And yet he still wanted their fish. He tells them to bring them to him in verse ten. And when they go to get the fish for him, they are reminded again in verse eleven that the number of fish Jesus has caught *through* them is far greater than the number of fish he has gathered without them. [Wright, 159-160]

And all of this reflects important truths about the Church's evangelistic mission. God doesn't need us in order to reach the world. He doesn't need us in order to gather in his people. And yet he *wants* to use us. And he wants to use us in a way that is not just supplemental, but that is central. He wants the overwhelming majority of the people who come to know him, to come to him not through his independent actions reaching out to them, but through the ministry of his followers.

And so, in grace he says to us: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do." [John 14:12]

Seventh Photo Pair: Servants & Served

The seventh pair of truths that we see here is that we are both servants of Jesus, and we are served by Jesus.

In verses six and ten Jesus gives orders to the disciples ... and rightly so since he is their Lord.

But then, in verse nine we see him cooking for them. And in verses twelve and thirteen he serves them breakfast.

Jesus calls us to follow him and to be servants of his kingdom. And there should be nothing surprising in that, for he has made us, and he has redeemed us, and he has bought us for a price. We are his.

But then, as we serve him, he begins to serve us. He feeds us. He cares for us. He meets our needs. And that should astound us. Even as we struggle to serve him, Jesus, our Lord, serves us. That is what we see in verses twelve and thirteen. [Carson, 671]

So far, we have these seven pairs of pictures that each tell us something about *how* we are to fulfill the mission Jesus has given us. Jesus has called us to share the gospel – he has sent us out for the life of the world.

And here in our text we are reminded that evangelism is a skill we should cultivate, but even more than that it is a command we should obey.

We are reminded that Jesus, unseen, will act as our guide, so we should recognize him when our work bears fruit.

We are reminded that the work of mission that we've been given to do is hard work, but Jesus will ensure the outcome.

We are reminded that it is right that we desire communion with our Lord, but we must not neglect our commission from our Lord.

We are reminded that Christ made his Body diverse for a reason, and so we must depend on one another as we seek to fulfill Christ's command.

We are reminded that though Jesus does not need us to reach the world, he has chosen to use us to reach the world.

And though we are lowly servants before our King, even so he has chosen to serve us, as we serve him, feeding us and sustaining us.

All seven of these pairs of pictures are so important to giving us the overall picture of our text of what it looks like for us, as the church, to be successful in its mission to the world.

There are many things to do there – many things for us to consider.

Eighth Photo Set: Presence, Belief, and Unbelief

But we must add one more final point. Because the only reason we can do any of this is because we know that Jesus is with us ... and because we know that this is so even when we struggle to believe it.

We see this in verse twelve. As Jesus invites them to breakfast, John tells us: "Now none of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord."

What exactly does that mean?

D.A. Carson is helpful there. He writes: "One might ask why, if the disciples 'knew it was the Lord', they would *want* to ask him, 'Who are you?' But [John] does not merely say they *did* not ask him, he says they *dared* not ask him [...] 'knowing it was the Lord'." The issue, Carson points out, was not that they did not recognize Jesus – they did. But even then they were "still so uneasy, so hesitant, so uncertain, that they apparently long[ed] to ask him, in effect, 'Is it *really* you?', yet dare[ed] not do so." [Carson, 674]

They *knew* it was Jesus, they *could see* it was Jesus, and even so, they struggled to believe it. And yet, regardless of their struggle, he was there. And that is what made everything that happened possible.

Our text tells us much that we should do. And we should do those things – for that is how we love our Lord and how we love our neighbor.

But even as we busy ourselves with the tasks we’ve been given, let’s not miss the most important part: Jesus is with us. Jesus is really with us. Whether we recognize him or not, whether we struggle at times to believe it or not, he is with us. And that is the thing that makes it possible to do what we’ve been called to do, and to be who we’ve been called to be.

The task of living faithfully in a hostile world is a daunting one. The calling to tell others about Jesus can be an intimidating one. The weight of being sent out by God can be a heavy one.

But we need not bear it alone.

For Christ our Lord, even as he commissioned us, also said to us: “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

And Christ always keeps his word.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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