

## On The Other Side of the Boat

Psalm 30

John 21:1-19

One thing that is hard for us all to remember is that even though we call them “saints” now, the disciples were people, just like us. I like to imagine what it must have been like for them to live with and learn from our Lord, up front, personal, and close, to be the ones chosen to spread his message to the world. But when I really think about it, I realize it must have been very hard! Today’s Bible passage brings that to mind! Imagine this: You have experienced the horrors of Holy Week, and the rejoicing of the resurrection, but what to do now? Pentecost, the great commissioning hasn’t happened yet. There is no Jesus to follow, *per se*. Can you imagine how confused and lost they must have felt at this point? What should they do? Well, one has to make a living, and so they went back to the one safe comfortable thing many of them knew well—they went fishing. Not for men this time, just for fish. And before the story is over, they caught something very unusual—a mission to follow. Let’s look at this wonderful story in John in greater depth.

Peter decided it for them. “I am going fishing” he announced. He didn’t know what else to do. But he did know about fishing, so off they went to the Sea of Tiberius, which is more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee—a symbolic location, wouldn’t you agree—back to where it all started. They went out in the boat but came back empty handed. We all know that feeling—we go out into the world with all the best of intentions but come back empty handed. As they returned to the shore at daybreak, empty handed and empty hearted, they see a figure on the beach. This line struck me. Have you ever noticed that when you are at your lowest, most empty point, that’s when the Lord appears to you, in one form or another? And so it was with the disciples that morning. And have you experienced Christ at these low points in life without recognizing his presence until later on? So it was with our disciple friends. They did not know him at first. Jesus says, “Children, did you catch any fish? Cast your nets out again!” By now surely the men were feeling a very strong sense of *de ja vu*, and they did not hesitate. They cast their nets on the other side of the boat. And of course, you know

what happened. The nets were so full they had trouble hauling them aboard the boat! “It is the Lord!” they cried! Just like before! How full of joy they must have been! And Peter grabbed his clothes and jumped in—good old impetuous Peter, never one to hold back—always the first one out of the boat, the first one to stick his neck out. The others brought the boat in, and they shared yet another meal together. Jesus said, “Come, eat” and broke for them the bread and the fish, so reminiscent of other times and other stories, so full of meaning. John tells us at this point that this was the 3<sup>rd</sup> time Christ had appeared to them after being raised from the dead—there’s that special number three again. Oh, how John loved symbolism!

And the number 3 occurs again in the story.

3 times Jesus says to Peter, “If you love me feed my sheep.” And Jesus final words in this passage are, “follow me.”

This is a powerful passage.

I have been saying for the last several months now that since 2020, church has changed, and not just here at Potwin. You have all seen the statistics—fewer and fewer people think the traditional church is for them. The old way of being has died and is seemingly being buried—but I think it is to rise again. God is preparing to do a new thing. Does that story sound familiar? As we have gone about being a church for the last 4 years, it seems like every time we try doing something in the old way our nets have come up empty. So, let’s think about the symbolism of empty nets for a moment. The disciples pulled in empty nets when they first cast that night. Then a strange man calls to them from the shore and tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. Try something new, cast your nets in a different way or in a different direction—and the results are astounding. Perhaps it is time to cast our nets on the other side of the boat. Jesus told the disciples to cast their nets in a new direction. Some churches may cast once or twice, reach out once or twice in familiar places, and get no results, and then declare that the fishing is no good anymore and close their doors. But Jesus tells us to cast again, cast away, cast in places where we’ve never thrown before, cast beyond our usual places. We’re told to look at the

net again, but not with eyes bound by tradition and old visions, but through the wondrous eyes of our gracious Savior.

Meanwhile, let's look at another key element in our Bible passage for today. Three times, Christ tells Peter, Christ tells us, to "feed my lambs". What do you think he is telling us? I think he is telling us that as disciples of Christ, our reason for existence as a church is to feed his lambs—and NOT to have programs in a building. I think he is telling us that as a community of Christ it is our calling to go out into the world and take care of God's children. And as the previous part of the story tells us, Christ will make sure we have plenty of fish in our nets to accomplish the task if we but cast out in faith to make it so. He is calling us to be a discipleship church.

What does a discipleship church look like? First, we are to be centered in Christ. Everything we say and do as Christians and as a community of Christ is to glorify, worship, celebrate and imitate our Lord as found in Jesus Christ. In addition, a discipleship church is focused out to the world, not in to itself. We have to go out and find the lambs in order to feed them. We can't just sit in the church building and wait for the lambs to come in from the field to be fed! Christ calls us to go out into the world and minister to his people, and to tell the good news. If we don't do that, we will catch no fish.

So, we gather together in the community to worship and share fellowship and hardship, and, most importantly, to share the love of Christ with all we meet. That is what we are called to do.

Now don't get me wrong. You have done a good job of exactly this for nearly 135 years—and despite the existence of some doubters we are still here! But we can't rest on our laurels. Think of our fishermen in today's story. They had been very successful fishermen in the past. But Jesus called them to do something new, to cast their nets in a new direction, to try something different and look at the results! Nets so full they had to struggle to bring them in! We just celebrated Easter. What will Potwin Presbyterian Church look like by next Easter? What do we want to be able to say about ourselves by then? What kind of

fishermen will we be? What shape will the nets take? What kind of fish will we catch? I would like you to begin to ponder and pray upon these questions as well. Let your imagination and your prayers go to work! I see a lot of good fisherpersons out there! Together we can haul in those nets!

You know, it occurs to me that we are a lot like those fishermen from 2000 years ago. Times have changed drastically for us too. What we thought we understood is gone. We are confused, and not exactly sure what Jesus wants us to do next. But Jesus is telling us the same thing he told those fishermen of old. He is telling us to go back out there and try again! We can't get out of the boat yet, because we have a lot of work left to do! So, let's roll up our sleeves and get busy with those nets. As the theme from an old TV show went, "We're goin' fishin'", instead of just a wishin'!" Let us pray.

Dear Lord,

Help us, we pray today, O Lord, to discern your will for us as your followers here at Potwin Presbyterian Church. We know that times are changing, and you are asking us to do a new thing, just like the disciples from long ago. Help us to know what you would have us do. We are willing to cast our nets out again Lord. We ask that you fill them for us. Give us work to do Lord, and let us be your willing disciples. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.