

MY FAVORITE FISHING STORY

A SERMON FOR EASTERTIDE
SUNDAY, APRIL 14, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

JOHN 21:1-19

I am not a fisherman. My father was a fisherman, and my son is a fisherman, but I am not a fisherman. I used to attribute it to a lack of patience. But in recent years, I get seasick. If everyone else is going by boat, I'm going by rail. Or by pail. I once got seasick on my brother-in-law's houseboat while it was tied to the dock. On a mountain lake in Tennessee! Dramamine just makes me sleep in between bouts of nausea. The bands that go on one's wrists, and are supposed to stop nausea with acupuncture just make my hands go numb. Land's the name, and staying on it is my game.

The ranch where I love to go in Wyoming offers classes in fly fishing. I guess I could take it up, fly fishing, but I always wind up with my line tangled. I saw a young lady in a restaurant in Jackson Hole who had a fish-hook in her eyebrow. I'm not sure whether it was supposed to be ornamental or whether it was accidental, but it looked painful, and was sufficient to cause me not to want to try casting a fly.

Maybe I could fish like the disciples did, with nets. But I'd have to fish off the bank, or in the shallows, where I could wade.

Jesus was not a fisherman, either. But he surrounded Himself with fishermen. Simon Peter and his brother Andrew were fishermen, as were James and John the Sons of Zebedee. In our text this morning, seven of the eleven remaining disciples go fishing.

Jesus had spent time with his disciples in boats, sometimes on still waters and sometimes on storm-tossed seas. He had even preached from boats on occasion. Luke in the fifth chapter of his gospel records how Jesus finished teaching and directed Peter to put the boat out into the deep water and let down the nets. In his inimitable style, Peter tried to argue with Jesus, but was rewarded with a great catch of fish, which apparently were abandoned as Peter and James and John left their boats and nets behind to follow Jesus.

You'd think that Peter would have remembered that, when the man he didn't recognize on the shore told him to put his net on the right side of the boat. You'd think that when that net came up so heavy with fish that it was about to sink the boat that he'd have known. But Peter had proven time and again that he wasn't the brightest bulb in the pack, or the sharpest knife in the drawer.

It took the disciple whom Jesus loved, who was probably named John, and probably the author of our text, to announce, "It is the Lord!"

Part of what makes this text my favorite fishing story is what Peter does when he realizes that the man on the shore is Jesus. He puts on all his clothes, and jumps in the water and swims to shore! Now most of us would take our clothes off to go swimming. Stripped down to his skivvies as he was to haul the net, Peter could have just jumped in and swum ashore. But no, he dresses first! Whether he is ashamed to be seen in his nakedness before the Lord, as some have suggested, or whether it just seemed like the thing to do at the time, it is a funny thing to do!

Another thing that makes this story real, that makes it my favorite fishing story, is the report of the number of fish in the net. When they got it to shore, there were one hundred and fifty three fish in the net. Not “more than a hundred” not “a ton of fish”. One hundred and fifty three. That isn’t a number anyone is likely to make up. It has no symbolic meaning. It doesn’t sound like an exaggeration. It is precise. It makes the story real.

A third thing that makes this my favorite fishing story is that Jesus had cooked breakfast. He’d build a charcoal fire, and he had fish and bread ready to eat on it when the disciples arrived on shore. He put some more fish from their catch on the fire.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room, he ate fish. Here, by the seashore, He does it again. With the two on the road to Emmaus, He took bread and blessed and broke it, and here Jesus takes the bread and gives it to the disciples. Let no one question that He is alive. Let no one doubt that He is real. Dead men, ghosts, spirits, don’t build fires, don’t cook breakfast, don’t eat fish, don’t pass the biscuits. It is in the little homely touch of eating breakfast with a bunch of fishermen on the beach that I find great comfort in believing in a risen Lord.

I remember a breakfast shared on the bank of a mountain stream in Tennessee. It must have been, indeed it was, more than fifty years ago. I remember because it was rare for my mother to let me miss Sunday School and Church, but somehow my father convinced her to let me go trout fishing in the mountains with my father and two of my uncles.

Uncle Fred and I built the fire while Uncle Raymond and Daddy went fishing. We sliced tomatoes. We peeled, sliced and fried potatoes. We warmed the biscuits that Aunt Hester had baked the night before. But there was no bacon, no sausage, not even any of Uncle Fred’s beloved country ham.

We were going to have trout for breakfast, and when everything else was ready, here came my Daddy and Uncle Raymond with a stringer full of trout ready to put in the skillet.

As I look back over half a century, I realize that what happened that morning bordered on a miracle, and certainly constituted an act of faith. I'm not sure if it was faith in my father and uncle as fishermen or of God's providing hand. The latter, I suspect.

But when I remember that cool morning, with the fog moving over the waters, the sound of the mountain stream rushing over the rocks, the smell of the fire, I know that I was blessed, and that as the four of us were gathered for breakfast, the Lord was with us.

The Epilogue to John's gospel is my favorite fishing story. In part because it reminds me of the first morning in my life that I had fish for breakfast. But mostly because of what it tells me about the risen Lord.

Peter had betrayed Him. Denied Him. Deserted Him. And Jesus could have scolded Peter, could have chastised him, cursed him, reviled him, and no one would have thought that Peter deserve any better.

But Jesus fed Peter, and then He asked, "Do you love me?" Three times, once for each of the denials, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" And each answer is more intense than the one before, until Peter is no doubt close to tears as he cries out, "Yes, Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you."

And each time, Peter is told to care for the sheep that Jesus has entrusted into Peter's care. And then Jesus says to Peter, as He had said to him when He first called him from the nets to become a disciple, "Follow me."

No matter how many times we deny, betray, desert our Lord, He still loves us, and He still calls us to be His followers.

That's what makes this my favorite fishing story: it reminds me that Jesus loves me, provides for me, forgives me, and calls me to follow Him through this life and into the life to come.

Let us pray.

O Lord Jesus, continue to call us to follow you, even if the pathway lead to a cross, until we reach your kingdom's shore. Amen.