

## John 21: 1-19 Gone Fishing

On one of my visits to Israel, our group stayed in a hotel in Tiberius which was located right on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As a tribute to Rome in ancient times it was also called the Sea of Tiberius after the Roman Emperor and the town named after him. My biological clock often wakes me very early in the morning and since I was sharing the room with someone and was too restless to stay in bed, I went out on the balcony overlooking the water. As I looked out, I saw many lights bobbing up and down out there. As the sky began to lighten I could tell they were lanterns fasten on fishing boats. As the sky grew lighter, the number of boats remaining on the water rapidly declined so that as the new day actually dawned there were no longer any boats out there. As I read this passage from John, I remembered this scene. Night fishing is still a way of life on the Sea of Galilee. Although John does not give the previous careers for those disciples with Jesus, other gospel accounts tell us that for many of them before Jesus had called fishing on the Sea had been their way of life. Evidently fishing at night has been the most productive time for those whose livelihood depends upon the catch from the Galilee as that practice continues to this day. In today's passage we find that a group of the disciples have now left Jerusalem. We are not told in the text why they have left Jerusalem after receiving the Holy Spirit from Jesus. In Matthew and Mark, the angels at the tomb had told the women to tell the disciples that the risen Jesus had gone ahead of them to Galilee. What John tells us that Peter and six other disciples have basically gone back home—back to the region of Galilee from which Jesus had called them at the beginning of his ministry. It is not clear how well they knew each other before being formed into a group, but seven of the remaining eleven seem to be acting as a community even in the absence of Jesus' physical presence. The community base has been formed but they seem to lack purpose. I think going back home is a very common human desire or response when something has caused upheaval in our world. We like to go back to what is familiar—in general we do not like great changes in our lives. Small changes may be difficult, but large sudden changes tend to make us want to retreat. The disciples have seen the risen Jesus twice, but this is still hard for them to understand what it means for them—Jesus has said that he is sending them as he as been sent, but that has not been translated in their minds. Send to do what? They must be asking. Simon Peter speaks up and declares he is going fishing; he's going to go back to doing what is familiar to him. Some interpreters have seen this as a lack of faith. It seems that it could just as easily be a lack of direction about what they are being sent to do. The disciples with him all decide to go along as well maintain that contact as community. They get into the boat and spend the night fishing, but we are told they caught nothing. Not that the catch was small, but that they caught nothing. This may not have been the only time in their experience as fishermen that a long night of toil ended with nothing, but as dawn breaks this becomes a very different occasion. They are heading into shore when they see a stranger standing on the beach. The narrative tells us that it is Jesus, but that the disciples do not recognize him. This stranger addresses them with an endearment saying, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answer that he is right, they have caught nothing. They are then given advice on how to fish by this stranger: "Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." Now since they had earned their living before following Jesus by fishing, I imagine that during the night they had fished

from both sides of the boat. Considering how we often respond to unsolicited advice, especially when we are tired and frustrated, this advice shouted to them from the shore might not have been all that welcome. But whatever their reaction to this advice from the on-looker from land, they throw the net over the right side of the boat. Immediately it is so filled with fish that they are unable to haul it in. As in other encounters, this miraculous catch of fish prompts the recognition of the miracle worker as Jesus by that disciple whom Jesus loved. When this news is whispered into Peter's ear he reacts in typical Peter fashion, he jumps into the sea and swims to shore. What seems strange is that before he jumps into the water, he stops to don his clothes. He has been fishing naked, but puts on clothing before jumping into the water. This is the third time that Peter has seen the risen Jesus but the other times were with the group in a room. Here he races to get to Jesus before the others. But have you ever wondered about why we are told he waits until he is dressed before starting his swim? This narrative comes from the same gospel which begins with words reminiscent of Genesis. After the apple was eaten breaking the close relationship with God, Adam and Eve felt the need to hide their nakedness with fig leaves. Peter clothes himself in preparation for this meeting with the one that he denied. As he swims to shore Peter's thoughts must have been very much on how the denial Jesus had predicted had come to pass despite his boast that he would never deny being a disciple. The other disciples remain in the boat dragging the net full of fish with them. Arriving on the shore they see a charcoal fire burning which also carries a sense of the warming fire in the courtyard of the high priest where Peter's denial took place. But here the fire is being used to provide nourishment—a breakfast of fish and bread. Jesus is again providing for them, but interestingly he also asks them to bring some of the fish they have just caught. He doesn't just give them that breakfast, but also asks them to share some of their catch. This is an important detail as Jesus also continues to both provide for us but also to ask us to contribute what we have. That invitation to contribute—of our time, our talent, our insights, our passion, our very lives—both honors us by drawing us into Christ's mission while simultaneously conferring on us the gift of meaningful, purposeful work—like the disciples becoming fishers of men. There is also the underlying message without Jesus' presence in the work there will be no catch. Jesus and the Holy Spirit will draw the fish to the net; disciples through their actions will need only to haul in what Jesus has caught. There are two other important points we can gain from this passage. First, when the disciples are told to bring some of their catch to the meal, we find that the net was full of large fish, 153 of them. Even though the net contained this many, it was not torn indicating that all the catch remained within the net. In other words, what Jesus has drawn to himself will not be lost. This is an echo of what Jesus said during the farewell discourse in John's gospel. The listing of the number of fish was believed by the early church to have significance because of the exactness of the count. Although many allegorical or metaphorical claims have been made, it seems that the simplest idea is to show that the catch was miraculous and that it was inclusive—the gathering of many where none are lost. Jesus may draw into his net many that we do not think should be there with us, just as the Pharisees objected to those with whom Jesus ate and spent time with. The net cast is big enough to hold and retain—it is inclusive, not exclusive. The second observation concerns the relationship of Peter with his Lord. We have already mentioned the shadows of the denial which are present in this narrative. Then after they had finished breakfast, Jesus says

to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John do you love me more than these?” Peter replies, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” There is no definitive explanation for what “these” is referring to. It could be simply do you love me more than what you knew before. Do you love me enough to leave all that old life behind and go forward into being sent? This question becomes a three-fold question and answer sequence. A sequence which balances the three earlier denials Peter made earlier. What we have here is the confession, three times repeated, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus in response to these professions neither congratulates Peter nor offers him forgiveness. Jesus’ response is to give Peter work to do: a mission to accomplish: “Feed my lamb.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.” Peter is being restored to the discipleship community and commissioned to love and lead Jesus’ followers. He is being called to a life of purposeful service, witness and eventually sacrifice as the closing verse indicates. There is an important connection between this scene and our life of faith. We are claimed at baptism and then affirm this at our confirmation. We promise that we will share in the work and ministry of our Lord. Yet we often fall short, failing to give witness in word or deed to our faith in the living Lord. And yet Jesus doesn’t just commission us to participate in his kingdom’s work. He also forgives us when we fall short then calls us to try again. Jesus doesn’t just call for us to try again, but also invites us to share what we have and gives us meaningful work to do. By the third time that Jesus put this same question to Peter, we are told that Peter felt hurt. You can sense his discouragement by the repeated question. You can sympathize with his desire to convince his Lord of the truth of his avowal of love. Peter’s third response then was, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus again told him to feed his sheep, but he also ended the conversation with the same words he had used to call Peter: “Follow me.” Jesus did not give up on Peter after the three denials, and he does not give up on us when we fall short. God is not looking for lip service love, but love that is doing something—actions of kindness, caring, generosity, patience, forgiveness. There are two aspects of that love—the seeing or believing in God’s love and the actions of love for others called out of us in response. What wonderful comfort is to be found in this last chapter of John: when we are claimed by God, nothing can separate us from that love—nothing outside or inside of us. Truly that is good news. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.