

**The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**April 18, 2010**  
**John 21:1-19**  
**Breakfast on the Beach**

When our world is turned upside down, we often retreat to familiar places. We lean on what we know. We surround ourselves with the comforts of home, comfort food, and the comforting presence of those we know and trust. It's not a bad thing – not really – because in these comforting places we find some grounding and also some strength to forge ahead through uncharted territory. Sometimes this looks healthy – we turn to our family of origin for support when a new baby is born, we head to our hometown after a divorce to be around those who know and accept us. Sometimes this dynamic can be unhealthy though – we embrace old habits of overeating or substance abuse when times get tough; we fall into old family roles that might have stifled our personal growth. But good or bad, we all do it. We all have those times where we head back to more familiar territory –where we can clear our heads, get our bearings, and figure out how to move on.

In our text for this morning, the disciples themselves follow this all-too-familiar pattern. In spite of three years on the road with Jesus: of Jesus' mentoring and miracles – of healing those who couldn't see or walk, and feeding thousands on a hillside, the disciples too turn back. In spite of their presence outside of Lazarus' tomb as he was called to life, and even in spite of their encounters with the Risen Christ just days before – *the disciples have gone fishing*.

Sure, it *has* been something of a roller-coaster ride for the disciples. They have seen the most amazing sights that one could imagine: from miracles to life lessons to the resurrection of their teacher and Lord. But they have also seen terrifying sights: the arrest of their friend and leader; his unjust hearing and his painful execution. And they've seen *how weak they are* – one of their own the betrayer, the rest of them falling asleep in the garden, denying their friendship with Jesus, fleeing from his side.

And so, as if they don't know what to do next without Jesus to lead them, they decide to go *back* –to a familiar place, perhaps even a familiar time, where life was certain, simpler, comfortable for them. Six disciples follow Peter to the lakeshore – to that same lake where Matthew tells us they first met Jesus, first heard his call. From the beach of *this* lake they dropped everything, quite literally, to follow Jesus – to hear his teachings, see his miracles, to work alongside him. But now they are back on their boats – catching *fish, not people*.

This is, by all accounts, an odd story in the Gospel. Rather than end the story of Jesus on the high note of Jesus' appearance to the women and then to the disciples – and finally to even Thomas, the doubter – *we have chapter 21*. Scholars typically understand this chapter as a later addition to the text, probably even added by another writer – its tone and language different from the rest of the book. Frankly, it is compelling to ask the question, “Why?” Why add on a story of doubt and misdirection when things were going so well? Sure, there is the beautiful and poetic reinstatement of Peter as a leader of the church – the one who denied Christ 3 times now affirms his love for him 3 times more. But why the fishing trip? Why go *backwards* in the story?

The writer of Chapter 21 did us a favor. This redactor added a lesson on discipleship that reminds us of the very real human element in the midst of God's alluring call. The disciples in Chapter 21 sound a lot like us. Like the disciples of old, we gather today because we, too, have had times in our life in which we have *known* that **Jesus was by our side**. We have walked with Jesus, and talked with Jesus; felt the forgiving and redeeming hand of Jesus upon our lives. But for some of us, those days of intimate connection are days gone by. We can *remember* those times – we know they happened – but the same spark just isn't there; the same reassurance isn't there; the same confidence or energy isn't there. And we, too, go back. We fall into old and **familiar habits**; we resume the **old roles** that our families or neighbors have carved out for us; we take on the **old worries and insecurities** that seemed to fit us well; we sometimes even get back into **old patterns of sinning**, of falling short, **living into behaviors that ensnare us rather than those which set us free**. Like the disciples, we may have found ourselves leaning on old, familiar ways when the uncertainties of the world have overwhelmed us or when life, in good or bad ways, has been turned upside down.

A loved one gets sick. We get sick. Our hours are cut at work and we struggle to pay our bills. Our kid makes some bad decisions and winds up in trouble. Someone we rely on or depend upon lets us down. And so we lose sight of God's promises in the midst of human failings. We forget – even as we sing Easter Alleluias – that this struggle will *not* have the final say. We forget that we have a cause for hope even when things seem hopeless. We forget that we have not only our own strength upon which to lean. We forget that we're not alone.

Like the disciples, we sometimes forget, even, who we are. That we were made by a creative Creator whose intimate knowledge of us surpasses our own understanding. We forget that we, too, are heirs of God's grace and mercy extended to us through the love and power of Jesus our Savior. And we forget that we are sustained each day through the power of the Spirit – God's very breath within us – guiding us and calling us to life.

But even when we forget who we are and whose we are, ***God does not forget***. A cry went out from the darkened morning beach – a cry to cast fishing nets on the other side of a boat; a call blessing too rich to contain. And then ministering to the disciples once again, in body and in spirit – Christ prepares a meal for them. As they eat breakfast on the beach, Christ demonstrates the abundance available through God's grace in Christ. Christ reminds them that He will supply for their need – equipping them with more than they will need to answer this call to fish in new ways – for men and women hungry themselves for the Good News of God's love.

***Christ's call is relentless – not just to disciples centuries ago, but to us, here and now.*** And as Christ finds the disciples in their wanderings, and meets them on the lakeshore, Christ likewise enters into the imperfect scenarios in our lives, coming alongside *us*, and **meets us right where we are**. Even when Christ's call takes us to scary places – to radically loving our enemy, to taking a stand that offers Christ's justice to all – Christ gives us what we need to get back on track, to be equipped for the service of love to which He has called us, to find our strength in Him.

They say that breakfast is the most important meal of the day – and for the disciples that morning, it was. For it was during this meal that **they got their identity back**. They felt Christ's nurture as they again heard Christ's call. Obstacles to their serving were overcome, as Christ reinstates Peter to ministry after a period of shame and grief. And we remember that Christ, too, nurtures us. We are reminded of this in many ways – when we find a word of encouragement in our devotional Scriptures, when a neighbor extends a measure of compassion, when we look at those around us and recognize them as instruments of God's love for us, we are fed. And when we share a Communion meal together as a family faith, we remember that Christ is with *us* through the power of the Spirit – and that Christ equips us with what we need to serve God. The gift of this breakfast meal is ours too. Thanks be to God.

Amen.