

CAMPING WITH JESUS (Jn. 21:1-17)
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JOHN 21:1-17
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The week after Easter, has life for us returned to normal? Are we back to routines that have little to do with our spiritual wellbeing or development? Or have you been able to hold on to some remnant of that special connection to our living Lord? I don't speak accusingly here—it is the same issue I struggle with day by day too. Life is often a mix of waiting expectantly, then reverting to life as we have previously experienced it.

We're in good company in this regard. Simon Peter and six of his compadres—Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John and two other disciples were back in Galilee, where they had gone to await the resurrected Jesus. He had appeared to two men on the road to Emmaus on Easter Sunday, then to the disciples behind closed doors when Thomas wasn't with them, then a week later to all eleven, when Thomas was with them. Thomas goes from not believing Christ is risen until he sees it with his own eyes and touches Jesus's hands and side, to declaring Jesus as “my Lord and my God”. There's no higher declaration in all the Bible. It would have been fitting for John to conclude his Gospel right then and there. But he didn't.

Instead, we get this passage we read today in the following chapter. Peter, whether out of impatience, boredom or an inability to find inner peace or the desire to take matters into his own hands, decides he's going fishing—back to his old ways, to his old way of life, back to his bread and butter. The disciples, with Peter in the lead, haven't any plan for preserving Jesus' name among humanity. They fish all night and have absolutely nothing to show for it. Exhausted and probably quite discouraged, they head back to shore, only to experience something totally unexpected. Somebody on shore had prepared a breakfast barbecue for them of fish and bread and invited them to the feast.

But first, this Somebody asks them if they haven't any fish—notice that He already poses the question anticipating the negative answer. Then He directs them to throw their net on the right side of the boat, assuring them they will find some. They do so and catch so many fish unable to haul the net in! The light finally goes on for John and he recognizes that the man on the shore is none other than Jesus! He tells Peter, who then jumps right out of the boat in his haste to get to Jesus, leaving the others behind to wrestle in the fish catch.

How is it that a stranger would know precisely where they would land? Even stranger that He already had a meal ready for them? How often has that ever happened in your lifetime ... pause...? Stranger still that He invited them to bring their newfound catch of fish and add them to the cooking meal. And stranger still that none of the disciples dared to ask Him who He

was. Evidently, the resurrected Jesus didn't look the same. But it seems that John's spiritual sensitivity—the voice, the syntax—whatever it was—John was the first to recognize Christ.

Christ took the bread, gave it to them and did the same with the fish. Wait a minute. Didn't somebody do that in one, no make it all four of the Gospels earlier on? Ahh, it happened with the feeding of the 5,000 with a few loaves and fishes! That was quite the miracle, wasn't it! And what about this—a miracle, or just a guy on shore who could see the school of fish in the water when the fishermen couldn't? Scholars are actually divided as to whether or not this was a miracle. It seems from John's perspective there's no question it was and that is why it's included in the final chapter of his gospel, as the final miracle of Jesus—the only one recorded after His resurrection.

Left to their own resources, their best efforts and even their collective expertise, the fishermen were incapable of looking after themselves, let alone others. It was the Lord who met their every need, and not just barely, but abundantly. What's even more exciting, is that He showed them how to be fruitful (fishful!), then invited them not only to participate in the feast, but to bring their “own” gifts, their “own” offering and combine it with what the Lord had already provided and prepared—though even “their offering” had been given to them from the Lord. Everything that's good is from the Lord. But He calls us to come and share in the feast. He calls us as friends, just as if we had every right to such treatment, even though He has made it all possible!

The smell of the burning coals must have been a strong reminder to Peter of the last time we know of him around a fire—when he was keeping warm while Jesus was before the Sanhedrin and the chief priest in the mockery of a trial that led him to the cross. That's when Peter denied even knowing Jesus three times, after insisting hours earlier that he would die with Him if need be. Jesus knew he would fail in this promise. And while Peter had seen Jesus on two earlier occasions a week apart, to our knowledge, there'd been no one-on-one conversation between them. Imagine what this meeting would have been like. Peter jumped out of the boat, apparently quite eager to see Jesus. Should he have been so eager, or should he have been decidedly reluctant given his triple denial? What might you expect Jesus to do or say? We can remember Him scolding His disciples for having insufficient faith when they awakened Him in the back of the boat during a fierce storm. We remember Him telling “Satan” to get behind Him when Peter tried to dissuade Him from the “foolish” talk that He (Jesus) must die.

So, what would this rendezvous be like? Would He stare Peter down and point a finger at him, saying, “Pete, what were you thinking?” or “Pete, I told you so”? At the very least, you'd think He might insist that Peter sign some kind of contract or at least have to endure a

lengthy lecture about being more dedicated and reminding Peter of how he'd undermined Jesus' work as well as the Kingdom of God, or how he'd let Jesus down in His time of need.

But no. Jesus goes face to face with Peter, asking him, "Do you love me more than these?" "These" could mean the things in the boat, that is, the fishing career he was returning to; it could be all of the old life that he might cling to such as friends, family or possessions. Or, "these" could be his fellow disciples. Regardless, it was a clear call to put Jesus first, above all else. Nothing is as important as our relationship with Jesus. Jesus asks Peter three times. Each time Peter says he loves Jesus. He was offended the third time, adding, "Lord, you know all things".

The parallel is clear. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times, so Jesus recommissions Peter three times. "Feed my sheep". In the 16th chapter of Matthew, it's Peter who confesses Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God". In the sequence that follows, Jesus declares that He will build His Church and Peter will be at the centre of it. Now Jesus tells him to "feed my sheep". The church will be built by affirming a love for Christ **BY** feeding Christ's sheep...pause... not by better doctrine, not by more Bible studies, not by singing more hymns. But just what is it that makes up feeding Christ's sheep? One place to look sits in the OT, in the book of Micah, where the prophet asks directly: "What does the Lord require of you?" It's the kind of question you search the entire Bible looking for—just what is it that God wants or expects from us, anyway? The answer complements how Christ's sheep may be fed. We are to act justly (or seek justice), love mercy (be kind and compassionate to others) and walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

Can you see how all this holds together. 1st this passage affirms the reality of Christ's bodily resurrection. While some might pass off His earlier appearances as hallucinations or visions, here Christ was clearly in the flesh, walking the beach, coaching His disciples, eating with them in a relaxed manner, conversing and communing with them. He is feeding His sheep. He models the request He makes of Peter. The resurrection is a reality.

Second, the whole church was encouraged into being with this exchange. The disciples had been on the verge of hanging up their newfound spiritual life and returning to the same ole' same ole' of what they had done before. They were going back to fishing. What about you—have you returned to fishing, to your old way of life and shut Christ out? Had they been successful, humanly speaking, the mission of the church would have been thwarted. But they couldn't do what they thought they knew so well. They had no resources, no ability whatsoever, except what was given them by Christ. Christ's church would not be denied. The gates of Hell would not stand against it. Symbolically, view the fishing net as the church and the great quantity of fish as the multitude of nations. The net's not broken; the church has room for the people of all nations; At the personal level, Jesus will fill up the nets of your life. God's mission will not be thwarted.

Third, by inviting Peter to feed His sheep, Jesus gives him three opportunities to affirm his love for Jesus. Jesus graciously forgives Peter, not only giving him the chance to wipe out the memory of his three fold denial by a three fold declaration of love, but invites Him into active partnership in the Lord's mission, in the Lord's business, in the Lord's service. This exchange reshaped Peter, taking him from the discouragement of what he believed to be unforgivable failure to preaching to thousands. Christian life is often forged in difficulty, in failure and in struggle. Have you ever, maybe even repeatedly, made such a mess out of your life that you can't imagine anyone, let alone God forgive you? If He can do that for Peter, He can do the same for you. He specializes in lifting our lives from the gutter! If you're discouraged today, or heartbroken or overwhelmed by the circumstances confronting you—the Gospel message is that God wants to and is able to restore you, has already done what's necessary to restore you, and will walk with you and coach you through! Not only can I do it, He says, but I will do it if you will love me. Not only will I establish a relationship with you forever, but you will become part of my plan for building the Kingdom of God! He not only shares Himself with us, but invites us to work with Him, to give our lives to shepherding the sheep of His flock. We prove we love Jesus only by loving others. Love is the greatest privilege in the world—but it brings the greatest responsibility in the world.

If Jesus could turn a fisherman into a shepherd—strange, isn't it?—then He can turn each of us into shepherds in our own neighbourhoods. Are you willing? It's not a matter of being worthy. Jesus knows our past failures. He knows they can sap the joy right out of our lives.

You may have unhealed hurts hindering you from following Jesus. His probing, just as with Peter, begins the healing process. So it doesn't matter if you aren't worthy. None of us are. As we have seen, you don't have to be able; in fact, you are not able, except that Christ makes you so. If you know Jesus in this personal way, you're called to be a shepherd and feed your neighbour. By doing so, you honour Jesus and serve as His ambassador, His letter to others. It matters only that you will love your neighbour. By doing so, you show the love of Christ. If you know Jesus in this personal way, the Holy Spirit will enable you to live for and to honour Christ.

If you're not yet so sure about Jesus, He stands at the shore of your life, inviting you to come and feast with Him, to enjoy and and to grow in Him. Will you listen to His voice today? The love of Christ is compelling. In the deep reality of knowing that we are forgiven, we know that we're created and called to be more than we are. Will you step up to that challenge today? The good news is that God loves us just the way we are...pause...but loves us too much to leave us there. That is the great hope for us all!