

May 1, 2022 The Third Sunday of Easter

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

John 21:1-19

"Directions from the Shore"

Douglas T. King

"I feel like my arms are going to fall off!"

"You're telling me. I don't know if I have ever seen so many fish in my entire life."

"No kidding."

"We had been fishing all night and nothing. And now more than we can handle. I wonder how that guy on the shore knew where we should cast our nets?"

"Dumb luck, I guess."

"You know this reminds me of something."

"What? And keep pulling while you tell me!"

"Remember that night in Cana, the wedding."

"Yeah, I remember some of it. We drank a lot of really good wine that night."

"Remember how Jesus made all of that fine wine out of water, and then the party was really on, and we began to believe anything was possible with Jesus?"

"Hey I wonder if that guy on the shore is..."

The very first miracle of Jesus' ministry in the gospel of John, his coming out party as it were, was the wedding at Cana. It was the first sign revealing who Jesus truly was. It revealed his glory and the disciples believed in him. It was an

act of such outrageous and unexpected abundance that it opened their eyes to the possibility of a messiah in their midst, to the possibility of anything and everything.

And now we come to the very last of the miracles, the signs, in the gospel of John. After fruitlessly fishing for hours in the darkness, with the dawn comes directions from the shore. And once again the disciples are presented with outrageous abundance. And once again they recognize who is in their midst.

I have to admit that I sometimes find these texts problematic. They are problematic because I want them to be true in a way they are not. I want them to be announcing that if we listen to God we will be swamped with fine wine and delicious fish. I want them to preach the prosperity gospel, to tell us that if we are faithful we will be assured lives of ease and material abundance. But that is not what these texts are teaching us.

Following the wedding in Cana, Jesus brings his disciples to the temple in Jerusalem where he overturns the tables and decries his Father's house being used as a marketplace. And in this text, as soon as their breakfast is over, Jesus takes Peter aside and teaches him that the way Peter can demonstrate his love for him is by obediently feeding and serving the children of God. Jesus goes on to prefigure for Peter how his hands will be stretched out and Peter will be led away for his own crucifixion.

Unfortunately, faith is not a promise of a pleasure cruise, either for any of us individually or our life together as the church. That group of disciples out on the lake are the church. They are going about living their life together following the

routines they know best. For them it is fishing. And in this case fishing and failing. Life can be hard and sometimes we work hard together and the fruits of our labor are not immediately apparent.

If we were to think about this text as a metaphor we are immediately drawn to the image of fishing as fishing for people and evangelism. We could picture those disciples returning to Galilee and seeking to share the Good News of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we can also easily picture folks cocking their heads to the side and looking at them like they are a little crazy. They have this remarkable story to share and they find themselves with no takers. One can imagine the fears and anxiety they might have possessed. What if no one ever believes them? What if the only people in the entire world to receive and believe this news of resurrection is their tiny little band? What if they are just a generation away from no one even remembering who Jesus is and what he did?

And then they get a seemingly anonymous nudge to move in a different direction and all of a sudden there are ears to hear and hearts that are changed and fellow believers in their midst. God's presence has been revealed in the providence of what has occurred.

As we seek to journey beyond the darkest days of pandemic there is anxiety to be found in the church across the nation. Will people come back to worship in the sanctuary? Will people continue to give to the church? In the midst of all of this disruption have people forgotten about the church or decided the church is just not that important to them anymore? What if we just keep trawling with these nets and keep coming up empty?

There is much handwringing about the future of the church across the country.

This text speaks directly into that anxiety. First, it reminds us that since the very early days of the fledgling church until today, the church has faced obstacles and risk. And God has always provided for the church. Improbably, nearly impossibly, generation upon generation has been led to claim this story of the resurrected Jesus Christ and has gathered together to worship and serve and share the story with the next generation. And there is absolutely no reason not to trust that God will continue to call out to us, showing us where to cast our nets.

What is also clearly demonstrated in this text is that we do not get to set that agenda of how the church will be. In the immediate aftermath of the resurrected Jesus' appearing in their midst the disciples return to life as they had known it before. Peter taking charge and heading off to fish produces nothing. It is only when Peter and the disciples follow Jesus' direction that the nets begin to fill and fill and fill.

This is an extremely apt text for the third Sunday in the season of Easter. A scant two weeks ago, with a nearly standing room only sanctuary, we exuberantly proclaimed that all of existence has been transformed in the defeat of death by God's love. If death can be defeated by God's love, as we face the future what can ever possibly stand in our way?

In these days we have learned that the phrase "return to normal" is a misnomer. The world never circles back to what it was in the days of the past. And this is never more true than when a global crisis has created shifts in society we have only begun to consider.

And just as the world never circles back to what it was in the past, our God, though unchanging in one way, is always on the move forward. The resurrected Christ was not merely a return of the mortal Jesus but a step forward in revelation.

So if the world is never circling back to what it once was, and our God is never circling back, what does that tell us about the church? Interestingly enough it calls us to be held accountable to one of the most venerated traditions of being reformed. We are called to be reformed and always reforming. We too, are not called to circle back to the life of the pre-pandemic church. As we toil in the darkness with our nets in the sea we are called to keep our eyes and ears peeled for the dawn and for a voice from the shore. We are called to look and listen for the new ways and places we are called to do what we do.

Just as in the countless generations which preceded us, God's providence will provide and the Body of Christ will be born anew for this day and for every day to come. In response to God's providence we know we will be called, just as Peter was. We will be called to be present with all those around us, all God's children, and feed them, in all of the ways they need to be fed.

And the ever-evolving life of the church has a lesson for us personally as well. Each of us has been changed by the past few years. And so it is likely our relationship with God may very well experience change. If the ways we used to connect to God may not be working as they once did this is not cause for concern. It may just mean we need to listen carefully for a word at dawn from the shore about which new direction we should turn that we may continue to be fed by the divine.

In this season of Easter let us remind each other that the resurrection is not a return to normal, or a return to what was, but a bold step forward into a brand new existence shaped by the power of God's almighty love. The God who turned water into wine, empty nets into those overflowing with fish, and death into life, is ever by our side offering transformation. And we have been called to be vessels for this transforming power of God's resurrection. We need not be anxious that what we once knew is no longer the place we find ourselves today. God moves forward into every future before us and God's providence will never forsake us. I am hoping it includes much fine wine and fish but I am also prepared to be surprised.

Thanks be to God. Amen.