

Breakfast on the Beach

John 21:1-19

Third Sunday of Easter/ 1st May 2022/ Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

On Friday morning, Dorothy and I went over Sunday's bulletin and looked ahead to worship this morning. Dorothy commented on the sermon title, and we both shared how much we've come to love this chapter in John. It's a treasure of a text that continues to give and give. I opened my Bible to chapter 21 and was going to share something with Dorothy, which I honestly can't remember now because my eyes settled on a verse, specifically a word that I never noticed before, which struck me and moved me deeply: "Children, you have no fish, have you?" (Jn. 21:5). I was shocked. Stunned. "Children, you have no fish, have you?" *Children*. I was pretty sure this is the only time Jesus calls to disciples as children in John's Gospel. (I later checked. It is.) Friends, yes, but never children. In the Letters of John, which we're studying on Thursday mornings, which is related to John's Gospel and his community, the author often refers to members of his community as "little children," a term of endearment (see 1 Jn. 2:1; 2:28; 3:7; 3:18; 4:4; 5:21). In the same epistle, we find, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" (1 Jn. 3:1).

"Children, you have no fish, have you?" In love, the Risen Lord comes to us, always ahead of us, even when we don't recognize him, to give us what we need—because we are vulnerable, dependent, naïve, needy, innocent, confused, trusting, overwhelmed by the world and the task at hand, like children, and like children worthy of love. On Friday, I was almost moved to tears when I glimpsed all that stands behind Jesus' question to his friends at the lakeshore.

This is what just one verse can do in this extraordinary chapter. It's incredible. I resonate with Jaime Clark-Soles' description of John 21—Clark-Soles is a professor of New Testament at Perkins, who wrote a wonderful book on John (which we used several years ago)—"It's full of endlessly fascinating material that causes you to wonder, tickles your imagination, makes you laugh, challenges your soul, breaks your heart, puts it back together again, and just generally takes your breath away."¹

The scene is the Sea of Tiberias or Galilee. Familiar territory for Jesus and his friends. Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John, and two others without names are there with nothing to do. Peter decides to go night fishing, and the others go with him. But they catch nothing. Then, just after daybreak, out of nowhere, Jesus stands on the beach. He must have shouted out to them, "Children, you have no fish, do you?" They said, "No." And because he wants them to have fish—he really wants them to have fish—he tells them what to do and shows them where the fish are, so many fish that they could not haul them all in. It's striking that their experience of abundance, fullness, *overwhelment*, too-much-ness, and surprise allowed them to recognize, see, and know the Lord again. And they head for the shore.

And then, when they get to the shore, they discover that Jesus had been there for some time, waiting for them. The charcoals are lit and hot enough to grill fish, and bread—what an extraordinary scene! Just sit with this image for a while. In the chill of the morning, wet and cold after a disappointing night of fishing, feel the warmth of the fire. Feel the hunger pangs in your

stomach. See the fish, hear the fish sizzling on the grill, smell the fish and the warm bread. Jesus, the host. Generous. And then ask yourself: where did Jesus get the fish and bread from? How did he already have fish? Jesus has his own supplier. As we say in New Jersey and New York, “So, I know a guy....” Earlier in John’s Gospel, Jesus told us that he is the Bread from Heaven (Jn. 6:54-59), and so we shouldn’t be surprised by his provision of bread or manna because every meal is his meal. Every table—or grill fire—is his table and grill. For, he is always before us, preparing the way, providing what we need.

And then, did you notice what Jesus did next? Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught” (Jn. 21:10). He invites them to add what they have to what he has provided. It’s a partnership.² We are invited to bring what we have and add it to what Jesus has. Radical hospitality. What we have to give, who we are, is welcomed by the Lord, added to what he freely gives us so that everyone will be blessed. So they went back to the boat, hauled the net ashore, full of large fish—a hundred and fifty-three to be precise (John is a stickler for detail)—and they’re able to bring them in without the net breaking, adding not one or two fish to the grill, but the entire catch.

“Come and have breakfast” (Jn. 21:12), Jesus said to them. The Lord of the universe says, “Come and have breakfast”!

“Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.” How did they know? “Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish” (Jn. 21:13). Can you feel the grace, love, and generosity around this fire? The original breakfast club. Can you hear the eucharistic overtones all over this story?

John tells us it’s a particular kind of fire, a *charcoal* fire—this is not by accident. Grace is in the details. Charcoal fire. What else happened around a charcoal fire? John tells us that Peter stood around a charcoal fire the night Jesus was arrested, the night he denied knowing Jesus three times (Jn. 18:18). And so, around another fire, after breakfast, Jesus says to Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” These are the only two references to “charcoal,” and they are linked. Jesus never says, “So, Peter, we need to talk. Why did you deny me?” Jesus doesn’t judge or condemn; he comes to restore the broken relationship. Three denials, three invitations to love and serve. The charcoal fire: a place of failure and a place of redemption. If you love me, then feed my sheep, tend my sheep, feed my people, as I’ve fed you as your good shepherd (Jn. 10:1-10) and showed you how, showed you the way. Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Tend my sheep. Love my sheep—love one another (Jn. 13:34).

Jesus is saying to Peter—and I hope we can hear Jesus saying to us—“Put the past behind you. I now need you to put your heart into this work. I now need you to invest in this work. I need your intention. I’m counting on you. I need you. There is more work, even greater work, to be done.” Did not Jesus say to his friends, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes”—that is *trusts*— “in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater work than these” (Jn. 14:12)?

And we do not do this work alone, on our own. The Lord provides fish and bread and invites us to add our own gifts and resources so that together we can continue to do the holy

work of redemption, healing, wholeness, and justice that God has placed before us—to serve with heart, with joy, with deep gratitude—feeding, tending, loving God’s people. As we do this work, at the same time, we need to remember that as God’s children, we don’t have what we need. We don’t have “fish.” And so we must receive what God longs to give us and allow the Lord to serve us. *Come, have some breakfast.* Come to the table of the Lord.



¹ Jamie Clark-Soles, *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 148.

² Clark-Soles, 148.