

Fishers of People

John 21:9-17
April 24, 2022

First Presbyterian Church
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Bible commentator Karen Chakoian says that having Christ dwell in our hearts is like having a new person move into your household. “If they’re just visiting, it is all rather easy; you simply offer hospitality and try to practice good manners.

But if someone moves in to stay, everything changes. At first you try to hold on to your familiar patterns and routines, and the new member may work hard to accommodate you and stay out of your way. But eventually they make their mark. Conversations change. Relationships realign. Household tasks increase and responsibilities shift. So it is when Christ moves into the hearts of Christians. This isn’t merely tweaking old patterns; everything changes.”¹

In today’s New Testament lesson, everything changes. Everything changes for the apostles with Jesus on the lakeshore that day, and everything changes for us, who love and serve the Lord today.

The apostles have just set out anew after having seen the Risen Lord in the breaking of bread in the Upper Room. As we’re told earlier in John, Simon Peter says to the others, “I am going fishing.” They say to him, “We will go with you.” And John tells us they went out in the boat, “but ... caught nothing.”

Some of you may remember the rest of story – how Jesus appears on the shore and says, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” “No,” they say, not yet knowing it is the Risen Lord. And what happens, next? Jesus tells them to fish off the other side of the boat. And when they do, they catch so many fish they can barely haul in their net, it’s so heavy with fish. That interaction and our reading for this morning is all about remembering, remembering what Jesus said to the disciples and how the disciples responded.

Do you remember what Jesus said to Simon Peter when they first met? “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” And now, as soon as Jesus is gone, Peter goes back to fishing for fish. It’s as if Jesus never was. “I am going fishing,” he says, leading all his friends to follow him in this futile attempt to get back to normal.

With Jesus, there is no getting back to normal. Everything changes.

¹ Karen Chakoian in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox, 2009), 280.

And yet, how often do we leave a particularly inspiring worship service, or move on after a really powerful scripture passage or devotional, or walk away from a heartwarming, reassuring conversation or prayer – how often do we go right back to doing what we always do the way we always do it?

Seldom do we give much thought to how we might be changed by that interaction with Jesus, how we might be called to act differently, respond more faithfully, cultivate more joy and hope in our lives and the lives of others.

It's kind of like what newspaper columnist David Brooks said in his message to the Boston College Class of 2021. He said, "The wrong thing to do is to ask, 'What do I want from life?' The right question is, 'What does life ask of me?'"² What does the Risen Lord ask of us, of you?

Well, it's the same thing he asked of Peter. Jesus wants us to be fishers of people, bring people into relationship with Jesus. Jesus wants us to feed his lambs -those he lifts up in his grace and mercy and, tend to his sheep, those he calls to be his followers embodying his hands and feet and heart.

Through the ministry of this church, we are called and equipped to tend to those in need and bring people into relationship with Jesus, which we do. Not that this is easy. It's not; it's hard. It's hard to know what to do in service to the Lord.

We see that where the disciples struggle hour after hour to catch fish, even though it's clearly not working. But it is what they know how to do. It's what they've been good at, providing them with a decent living as fisherman, it's what has always worked before, up until now.

Now, with the Risen Lord in their lives, nothing is like it used to be. What worked in the past no longer works. All their skill and knowledge and experience as fishermen isn't as fulfilling or fruitful as it used to be. Their nets are empty. And that's when Jesus points them in a new direction, gives them a new calling in life, teaches them a new way of doing things, a new way of being.

And sure enough, when they follow the Lord's lead – and fish off the right side of the board – their net is full. To underscore this, Jesus says to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter hauls the net ashore, and it's "full of large fish, a 153 of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn."

² <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2021/05/25/david-brooks-boston-college-graduation-commencement-covid-19-240745>.

Here we see that doing things Jesus' way works, when we rely on the strength and sustenance of the Lord. Jesus provides the disciples with strength and sustenance for their ministry. He gives them a place to rest and refuel for the work ahead. He says to them, "Come and have breakfast." And John tells us, "None of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you? Because they knew it was the Lord.'" We know when Jesus is calling us, when he's wanting us to step out and do something new, take on a new calling or ministry on his behalf. And when we do, he gives us the energy and direction we need.

Just as he invites the disciples to breakfast, Jesus invites us to start our day taking strength from him, taking sustenance from him, body and soul. Yes, doing things Jesus' way is fulfilling, even if it is a little unsettling. It's unsettling to try something new, learn a new skill or task, realign our goals to God's will, strive to live up to his measure of success. But we can do it, because Jesus is there alongside us, even as he stretches our capacity. Just like Jesus made sure the net didn't fail under the weight of those fish, he gives us the strength to succeed in taking on the work of the Lord.

We, too, are to be fishers of people, ministers in the name of the Lord. And as such, we are called to put Jesus first in our lives, to tend to his calling upon our lives, first and foremost. If we do that, all the rest will follow, just as it did for Peter.

Jesus built his church upon the faith and ministry of Peter. And in doing that, he pointed Peter in a new direction. Peter is no longer a fisherman; he's a shepherd. "Do you love me more than these?" he asks Peter - more than fishing buddies of yours? and Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," and Jesus says, "Feed my lambs, those who are young in the faith, new to the faith." A second time, he asks Peter, "Do you love me," do you love me more than anything in this world? "Yes, Lord," says Peter. Jesus says, "Tend my sheep," set aside all else and help to guide and care for those who follow me. He says to Peter a third time, "... Do you love me? and Peter feels hurt because he asks him a third time. Jesus says, "Feed my sheep" – set aside your doubts and worries, your past hurts and future fears – and tend to what I place before you, day by day. That's all we're called to do. It's that simple, it's that hard, and it's that fulfilling.

We are each called to numerous and various types of ministry and service. And all of them take something of us – whether you are serving here at church, out in the community, in your own family, among your friends, or in all of those places and more. Being a follower of Jesus takes something of us.

We have to set aside our own agenda, look beyond our understanding of success, rely on the Lord for direction and strength. And when we do that, we do indeed become fishers of people, building up the kingdom of God; and shepherds of his flock, tending to the needs of others in the name and spirit of the risen Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Mighty God of mercy, we thank you that your resurrection power brings the everlasting glory of our risen Lord, who makes every day new. Especially we thank you for the beauty of your creation. And the new creation in Christ and all the gifts of healing and forgiveness. We thank you for the sustaining love of family and friends, and the fellowship of faith in your great church.

Merciful God of might, renew this weary world, heal the hurts of all your children, and bring your peace for all in Christ Jesus, the living Lord of life.

We pray for those who govern the nations of the world. We lift up the people of countries where there is strife and hunger and warfare.

We give thanks that all who work for peace and true justice.

We pray that the joy and promise of Easter will grow stronger in our lives. And that those battling illness and disease would feel the strength and healing of your touch upon them.

All these prayers we offer in the name of the Risen One, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.