

Sermon on John 21:1-19
3rd Sunday of Easter, April 10, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

As we endure this April cold spell just weeks after Easter, it's time when all Minnesotans start looking forward to that ever elusive true spring – which leads to summer. We look forward to those days when we can spend more time outside than inside, gardening, sitting in the sun, lying on the beach, swimming in a lake, and, of course, fishing on one of those 15,000 lakes we are famous for (10,000 lakes is so yesterday, so modest of us!). So it is ironic that today's gospel story centers around fishing – the act which Jesus' disciples returned to immediately following his resurrection from the dead. Today we have heard one of the most famous fishing stories of all time, from the pages of John's gospel. And nothing draws the attention of Minnesotans more than fish. Right?

It started with seven of the disciples together by the Sea of Tiberias (aka the Sea of Galilee). Jesus had already appeared to them in Jerusalem, and now they were back in Galilee, where they had started. Not one just to sit there, Simon Peter announced that he was going fishing, and the rest joined him. They went out in the boat, and fished all night, but caught nothing. (You can relate to that, right?) In the morning, they were still out there, but they had no luck. A man appeared on the shore and asked them if they had caught any fish, and they called back, “no, nothing”. So he said, “Cast your net on the other side of the boat.” Well, duh, they may already have tried that – but they threw out their nets anyway, on the other side. And all of a sudden, they felt a great tug on the net, and they pulled it in – a great haul of fish! 153 large fish, when they landed and counted them! Peter, when he saw the nets were full, realized who that man was on the shore. It was the Lord! Peter jumped in the water and swam to shore. The man had already started a charcoal fire, and invited them to eat – so they brought some fish and grilled them for breakfast. None of them dared ask his name, but as he gave them bread and fish to eat, they knew exactly who it was.

It is fascinating to read how it was that the disciples recognized Jesus, after he was raised from the dead. It seems that it wasn't clear just by his appearance. We don't know what crucifixion and three days being dead had done to Jesus' body. Maybe he became unrecognizable by sight. I can relate to this – when I am not expecting somebody I know to be somewhere, I may not recognize them, because they are “out of place”, out of context. I remember just last week, one evening at church, and a man from one of our N.A. groups came up to me and greeted me, saying, “Hi, Pastor.” He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. I must have been obviously staring, so he said, “Do you know who I am?” I nodded,

but I couldn't remember his name. He said, "I'm Toya's husband" – and then I knew! Toya is a church leader in Isaiah, and I had met her several times at the state capitol, as we held prayer vigils in March for prison sentencing reform in Minnesota – aha! So that's where I had seen him! I knew him, but it took a moment before I knew for sure. Context is critical.

In the dark of early morning on Easter, Mary Magdalene didn't recognize Jesus either. She thought he was a gardener, and she asked him if he knew where they had put Jesus' body, which now had disappeared. But when Jesus said her name, "Mary", she knew who he was immediately, and worshiped him! When Thomas had missed out on Jesus' first appearance to the disciples on Easter Sunday, and said he wanted to see him and touch him first before he believed, it took another week. But the next Sunday, Jesus stood before Thomas, who touched the wounds of his hands and his feet, and the scar on his side, and then he knew. "My Lord and my God!" So they knew him by his voice when he called their name, and by the wounds from his crucifixion. On Easter evening, on the road to Emmaus, two of his disciples recognized Jesus when he broke bread at dinner. And now, today, when he told them where to cast their nets after a night of fishing without success, they recognized Jesus in the abundance of fish that they caught when they followed his command to throw their nets on the other side of the boat!

They recognized him in the abundance which came through him, after they had experienced empty nets and a scarcity of fish. Hmmm, where have we heard this before? In Jesus' first miracle in John, at the wedding at Cana, when the wine had run out, Jesus had told the servers to pour waters from the purification jars and serve it to the guests. And the best wine of all was poured out in abundance, rescuing the wedding feast! When 5000 people gathered to hear Jesus preach, and it was getting late, and the people were getting hungry, Jesus didn't send them away, but instead took bread and fish from a young boy's lunch and passed it out until all 5000 people were fed, with leftovers to take home! And now, when there were no fish to be had after a whole night of fishing, Jesus simply told them to throw their nets on the other side, and immediately the nets were breaking with the catch of fish! Surely Jesus was recognized in the abundance of wine, of bread, and fish, overflowing in the midst of scarcity and hunger!

And now, today, you and I can think about those times in our lives when you and I experience scarcity and lack, when we don't have enough, when may be down to our last bit of food, our last friend, or wondering if God really exists, or if Jesus could actually be present with us after so many centuries! Think about it. Scripture tells us how God is there with us in our moments of pain and loss, when we feel most alone, when we are suffering, and wondering if anyone can help us. That is where you and I find that God is present, when you don't expect it, when things seems most desolate – God is there to bless you and give you strength.

The gospel of John is full of stories about God's abundance – abundant wine, abundant bread, abundant fish, abundant mercy, abundant grace, abundant love! When a man and woman are caught in adultery, and the woman is about to be stoned to death for having “sinned” in the eyes of the community, Jesus stops them by telling the one without sin – whoever is perfect among them – to cast the first stone. No one can, and they leave her alone – abundant mercy, abundant forgiveness! When a woman from Samaria – a foreigner who has been an outsider – meets him at a well, Jesus strikes up a conversation. He tells her of abundant water overflowing for eternal life, that he gives to everyone – a riddle, a mystery, but it's the clue that she needs to realize that this life is also for her, available through faith! And she runs to tell the whole town about this abundance of God's love, which includes everyone – and excludes no one – who will listen!

So much abundance – overflowing nets of fish, baskets filling over with bread, water gushing like a great founding, wine flowing like water, a great banquet to which all are invited, a great harvest of people hearing God's words of love, acceptance and invitation! Yet how many times do we hear from preachers and the Church about judgment, about who will be judged and left wanting, condemned and left out? How often do we hear in this world from politicians about a great SCARCITY of resources, how there isn't enough of a pie for everyone to have a slice, like we are all on a melting iceberg fighting amongst ourselves to stay aboard, that there isn't enough money for everyone to make a decent living wage, how there aren't enough prison cells to imprison all those who should be locked up (so let's build more??), how there isn't enough to give every child a good education, for everyone to have health care, or a home. What is it about scarcity that makes it so enticing for some to make it the center of their political and economic philosophy – while some can't ever get enough? Why do some have so much abundance that they have to hide it in foreign lands with investments in Panama, the Cayman Islands, and other places so they don't have to share it with others in the community – which creates the very scarcity which they insist is the rule??? How much sense does this make???? When will we stop believing this myth of scarcity, and end the madness that is dividing us all?

Today, even we who are faithful and have remained within the Church, have bought into this myth of scarcity. We see the shrinking numbers of those who come to worship in churches throughout the Western world (while lavish stadiums are built, filled with worshipers of a new religion of entertainment, games and circuses). We decry the shrinking numbers and see the scarcity, and we are scared to death of the future. What we don't realize is that this may actually be a sign of hope, and not a failure of faith! What is dying may be what needs to die – the idea that the Christian Church should be dominant and rule in our culture (which is not the faith which Jesus came to model and teach). The Church once accepted

slavery, advocated the genocide of native peoples, preached anti-Semitism, and protected clergy who abused children – things that we are ashamed of today. A Church that lets the dominant forces of racism, bigotry, sexism, and capitalism rule is no Church of Jesus Christ, and should shrink and die! Those who have rejected such things as being the antithesis of Christian faith may have left for good reason! Who wants to be associated with that? So we become one faith among many other faiths in God in this world - what is wrong with that? If all of us who believe can live our faith in God in our daily lives, then the abundance of God's mercy and love will be much more plainly seen than in a dominant Church that crushes people, excommunicates sinners, subjugates women and supports regimes that terrorize or make war on other countries, or their own people!

We know that there are many large congregations with an abundance of resources, mega churches with thousands of members who build campuses for their ministries and multiple satellites to proclaim a gospel of prosperity. I have served in churches like that. I don't see in them the gospel of God's abundance of *mercy and forgiveness* that reaches out to those who have been made outcasts by their vulnerability, their gender, their ethnicity or race. I would much rather serve as pastor in a small congregation where we open our doors to people and families in crisis – whether it's a lack of housing, addiction to drugs, poverty or mental illness. I see a Church today and in the future that builds an abundance of love and a new reality of justice for those who have been “left out”, where people of faith oppose those who would build more jail cells to put more people in prison, when we seek humane ways to treat people's addictions and struggles without putting them in jail, where refugees from civil war and immigrants are welcomed and not deported, where walls on our borders or around our communities are unthinkable! Where we fight for every child to get an education, and for every human being to have a future – the abundant life that Jesus promises is not for heaven only!

This is the abundance of love that God gave to the whole world in the gift of Jesus, God's own Son, who came to give his life so that ALL of us can live! This promise came true in the great victory over death that came on Easter, when God raised Jesus from the dead! Jesus' disciples had experienced the desolation that came from Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, when he died on that cross, and later when they were persecuted for their faith. But they also witnessed the power of God in raising Jesus from the dead, and the power of the Holy Spirit which gave them the courage to take their faith outside as witnesses to the whole world. This same faith can lead us out of our Christian “funk” of recent years, and make us bold witnesses as well to the abundance of God's love that Christ calls you and me to share! So we thank God for the opportunity to be such a witness, and pray that God will give you and me, and the whole Church the strength to love, as Christ loves us! Thanks be to God. For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!