

**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 23 (Unison) John 21:1-19**  
**Sunday, April 10, 2016**  
*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **FISH & SHEEP**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

My grandfather on my mother's side (we called him Bumpa) loved to fish. For many years, he would go to a fishing camp in Florida for a couple of weeks and enjoy time away from his work as a refrigeration and cooling engineer in New Orleans. Unfortunately, I never got to go fishing with Bumpa.

Thirty years or so ago, I got hooked (pun intended) on surf fishing down at Holden Beach. When I called my mom to tell her about my new pastime, she asked, "Did you catch anything?" I said, "No, but I had a great time anyway." She laughed and said, "That's what Bumpa used to say!" As the man said when someone asked him, "How was the fishing?", "Well, the fishing was great, but the catching wasn't so good!"

However, if I had to make my living by fishing, I don't know how much fun it would be not to catch anything. It's one thing to stand waist-deep in the warm waters of the Atlantic off the shore of Holden Beach, late in the afternoon, and enjoy the quiet and calm and anticipation of something grabbing your line. It would be something else to work all night on the open sea, throwing out and hauling in heavy, stinky, water-logged nets, and catch nothing.

That's what Simon Peter and his six companions, all disciples of Jesus, did that night off the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (which we also know as the Sea of Galilee). Peter hung up his "Gone Fishin'" sign. Why, we don't really know. Maybe he was trying to get his head around everything that had happened with Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Maybe he was looking for some kind of normalcy in the routine of fishing. Maybe he needed to make some money or catch something for his family to eat. Whatever the reason, Simon Peter said, "I am going fishing." And his six buddies said, "We will go with you."

Fishin' all night with nothin' to show for it! What a disappointment! Just after daybreak, when it was probably still kind of hazy — you know how it is when it's not quite full day, but not quite still night — there he is again, standing on the beach, but the disciples didn't know it was him. "Him," of course, is Jesus — the risen Jesus! There's something vaguely familiar about that figure standing on the seashore, talking with some fishermen, and giving them directions about how to catch some fish. In Luke's version of this fish tale, Peter says to Jesus, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." In our story today, Simon Peter and the other disciples go ahead and drop the net on the right side

of the boat. Amazing! They're not able to haul in the net because of the number of large fish — 153!

What a catch! The most I ever caught off the beach was maybe 8 or 9, and I considered that a good afternoon of fishing. When our kids were small, we used to camp by the dunes at Holden Beach for a couple of weeks each summer. If I had a good afternoon of fishing, I would go back to the campsite, clean the spots and whiting I had caught, and cook them up, along with some shrimp we bought under the bridge.

What a treat it must have been for Simon Peter and the other six guys to come in from a long night of fishin' and to be served breakfast on the beach. John 21:12 is one of the most sublime verses in the Bible: "Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.'" Can you imagine? Jesus himself cooking and serving you breakfast after a long, frustrating, unsuccessful night of fishin'?

Is there something about this fish story that kind of tickles your brain? Does it sound sort of familiar? The last time Jesus and his disciples were eating by the Sea of Tiberias, Jesus had far fewer fish — only two — but there were a lot more people there for dinner — 5000. But Jesus is the gracious host at both meals — "he took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted" (John 6:11) and "he came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish" (John 21:13). And just last Sunday, as we came to the Lord's Table for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we heard these words, "on the night when he was betrayed he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" There is certainly something sacramental going on in this story about a breakfast of bread and fish on the beach.

But there's something more going on here. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." Jesus invited Simon Peter and the other guys to contribute to the meal from the abundance that he had provided. Jesus invited them to be part of this new thing on the beach. Our sacrament of the Lord's Supper is also referred to as the Last Supper at which our Lord gave the disciples a new commandment and made a new covenant with them. Someone has referred to this meal on the beach as "the first breakfast," at which our Lord invited and commissioned the disciples to be part of something new.

But there's also an "elephant on the beach" with Jesus and Simon Peter and the other disciples — that charcoal fire. The last time (and the only other time) we heard about a charcoal fire, Peter was warming himself, alongside the slaves and police in the high priest's courtyard while Jesus was being questioned by the religious authorities. As Peter was standing and warming himself, three times he denied knowing Jesus. Then the rooster crowed.

How do you suppose Simon Peter and those disciples felt sitting around that charcoal fire there on the beach? Only the beloved disciple (we know him as John) had stayed with Jesus until the end, standing at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother. All the rest of the disciples had abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, and Peter had denied

him. My guess is Simon Peter and the other guys must have choked down their fish and bread, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And then the shoe dropped! Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Not once — not twice — but three times! “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Three denials — “I don’t know the man!” Three questions — “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

All of a sudden, we’re not talking about fish any more, but about sheep! “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” Then Jesus tells Peter, “Follow me.” In Matthew and Mark, Jesus calls the fishermen by the Sea of Tiberias and says to them, “Follow me.” But here, in John’s story, Jesus commissions (re-commissions) them for the work that is ahead of them, and it’s a mix of fishin’ for people and feeding the sheep.

Jean Parks’ son, Spencer, who preached here in November, is the director of the Menucah Retreat and Conference Center in Oregon. He and his wife, Sarah, raise different kinds of animals, including sheep. Recently Jean showed me pictures of the newborn lambs Spencer and Sarah had helped deliver.

This week I e-mailed Spencer and asked him to share with me what he does to “feed the sheep.” Here is what he said: “Hi Phil, I’m afraid it’s a bit anticlimactic. Feeding the sheep just involves hauling hay, alfalfa, and grain up to their shed and doling it out. We do that twice a day, morning and evening, and then they graze in the pasture the rest of the time. The real challenge is providing good pasture. Sheep growers are really glorified grass growers. The better and more grass you can grow, the less you have to buy and the better the sheep you raise. If I’ve done things well with the pasture (and I’m still learning at this point) then by this time of year I should be cutting down on the hay I’m feeding and they should be relying more on what they can forage.

Other sheep activities include giving them vaccinations (we do it ourselves and have become pretty good with a needle and syringe), other meds, vitamins, and other supplements. I shear them once a year (I ended up taking a week long class to learn how to do this....we have the wool spun and plan to sell it in the gift shop at Menucah). As you know we birthed our first sets of lambs in February. Sarah had to actively assist with one ewe otherwise I suspect the ewe and the lambs would have died.

There are predators we have to worry about...cougars, coyotes, bears and occasionally dogs and humans. We have a guardian dog that take care of this...she’s great. On top of that they do injure themselves from time to time and we have to deal with whatever (we’ve become good buddies with the mobile vet).”

That sounds like a lot of hard work — kind of like casting out and hauling in heavy fishing nets. But that’s what Jesus commissions his disciples to do in his name and on his behalf and with his help — Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, two others of his disciples, you, and me.

I don’t think this fish & sheep story is just for ministers. I think Jesus’ command/commission to cast our nets on the right side and to “feed my sheep” is for all of us who want to follow Jesus. In a reflection on this story called “All the Way,” Rick

Morley writes, “what Jesus is really saying is: If you love me, do something about it. Show me. And, not like the last time . . . This time, feed. Tend. Do it. What he doesn’t say is, ‘If you love me, have a nice fuzzy feeling in your belly. Feel all warm and tingly inside.’ But, then Jesus goes for broke. Follow me. This isn’t the first time he’s told Peter to ‘follow me.’ But this time it’s different. This time there’s no room for Peter’s denial. For his sinking doubts. This time Peter is to follow Jesus all the way. In love. In ministering to others. In spreading the Good News. In life. In death. But, then of course there’s one more level to the conversation. John recorded this for us in his gospel because . . . we’re also in on the conversation. Because if we love Jesus . . . then feeling something isn’t good enough. Thinking things in our minds and hearts isn’t enough. We need to live it. We need to do it. We need to feed. Tend. We need to follow Jesus. All the way.”<sup>1</sup>

Oh, Spencer had something else to say about taking care of the sheep. He wrote, “On a side note..... Sheep are stubborn, pushy, greedy, at times skittish, they like to follow one another and they don't like to be alone. They are creatures of habit and not all of the habits are good (bad ones are hard to break). Mine, at least, respect boundaries (the fence) but part of the fence has electricity running through it. That's a powerful deterrent. Since I've been tending sheep, being called the sheep of God's hand has taken on a different meaning.”

In a piece called “Commissioned Again,” David Lose writes, “I think there is an important connection between this scene and our life of faith. We are commissioned at Baptism to share in the work and ministry of our Lord. And yet we often fall short, failing to give witness in word or deed to our faith in the living Lord. And yet Jesus doesn’t just commission us, Jesus also forgives us when we fall short. And Jesus doesn’t just forgive us, but calls us to try again. And Jesus doesn’t just call us to try again, Jesus also invites us to share what we have and gives us meaningful work to do.”<sup>2</sup>

The prophet Isaiah says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.” (Isaiah 53:6) The psalmist writes, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” (Psalm 23: 1) Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11) Jesus says, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15, 16, 17) Jesus says, “Follow me.” (John 21:19)

***Let us pray: God of victory over death, your Son revealed himself again and again, and convinced his followers of his glorious resurrection. Grant that we may know his risen presence, in love obediently feed his sheep, and care for the lambs of his flock, until we join the hosts of heaven in worshiping you and praising him who is worthy of blessing and honor, glory and power, forever and ever. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rick Morley, “All the Way — a reflection on John 21:1-19,” *A Garden Path* at [www.rickmorley.com](http://www.rickmorley.com).

<sup>2</sup>David Lose, “Commissioned Yet Again,” at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).