

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

John 21:1-19

April 12, 2015

The Ordination and Installation of a Ruling Elder

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

FROM FISHIN' TO FEEDIN' 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.

In 1951, Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong recorded a song called "Gone Fishin'." It's a short, kind of silly song. They don't really "sing" it. Instead, they sort of talk back and forth in a melodious way. In the first half of the song, Bing Crosby takes the lead, and Louis Armstrong responds:

I'll tell you why I can't find you
Every time I go out to your place
You gone fishin'
(Well, how you know?)

Well, there's a sign upon your door
(Uh-huh)

Gone fishin'
(I'm real gone, man)
You ain't workin' anymore?
(Could be)

There's your hoe out in the sun
Where you left a row half done
You claim that hoein' that ain't no fun
(Well, I can prove it)
You ain't got no ambition

Gone fishin' by a shady wady pool
(Shangrila, really la)
I'm wishin' I could be that kind of fool
(Shall I twist your arm?)
I'd say no more work for mine
(Welcome to the club)

On my door I'd hang a sign
Gone fishin' instead of just a-wishin'

You gone fishin' (Well, how you know?)

Well, there's a sign upon your door (Uh-huh)

According to an online thesaurus, some words associated with the phrase "gone fishin'" are: bankrupt, locked, sealed, fastened, folded, padlocked, dark, not open, out of business, out of order, and shut down.

If you go to somebody's shop or home and see a sign that says "Gone fishin'," things may not be quite as dire as most of those words suggest. Another possibility is "I'm taking a little break from the normal routine."

Of course, it's nothing but speculation when we try to figure out why Peter said, "I'm going fishing," and six other disciples said, "We will go with you." Maybe Peter needed to make some money. Maybe they needed something to eat.

In Peter's case, when he said "I'm going fishin'," he might have meant "I'm taking a little break and **going back to** the normal routine." There had been nothing normal about what had happened in Peter's life most recently, not to mention the three years or so he spent traveling around Galilee with Jesus after he and his brother, Andrew, "immediately left their nets and followed him." (Mark 1:16)

When someone you love dies, there is **nothing** routine about it. In fact, our loved one's death shatters the routine — at that moment and forever. We can try to "go back" to the way things were before, but we know that's not really possible. So we have to figure out how to move on, as hard as that is to do.

Here is Simon Peter — the leader of the disciples; the disciple we remember as bold and brash and impetuous; the disciple who made **the** confession of faith when Jesus asked the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" — "You are the Messiah"; the disciple who said, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you," only to deny him three times.

What is Simon Peter supposed to do now? The man he vowed to die for had been crucified, and he wasn't even able or willing to say, "Yes, I know him," much less, "Yes, I am one of his followers." The man he loved and who died on the cross had appeared to him and the other disciples, giving them peace and the power of the Holy Spirit. But what is Simon Peter supposed to do with all of that?

"I'm going back to fishing." Maybe Simon needed to clear his head. Maybe it was all too much for him to process. Maybe he thought he could find some comfort in the old, familiar routines of his previous life. Maybe he didn't know what else to do with himself, so he hung out his sign — "Gone fishin'." Maybe he thought "I'm goin' fishin' instead of just a-wishin'" what might have been . . .

There is a telling verse in this story, a comment that almost seems inconsequential at first glance. John 21:3b says, "They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing." My grandfather was an avid fisherman. He used to say it didn't really matter whether or not you caught anything, as long as you were fishing. I read a good quote about fishing this week: "The fishing was good; it was the catching that was bad." You may have seen the bumper sticker that says, "A bad day of fishing is better than a good day of work." But for Simon Peter and Thomas the Twin and

Nathanael of Cana and the sons of Zebedee and the two other disciples, “a bad night of fishing **was** a bad night of work.” They weren’t relaxing on the beach with their fishing poles stuck in the PVC pipe, or leisurely dropping their lines over the edge of the pier on the Sea of Galilee. They were out all night long, casting their nets, hauling them in, casting their nets, hauling them in — over and over again — “but that night they caught nothing.”

In the gospels, the risen Lord Jesus reveals himself to his followers in some interesting ways. Mary didn’t know she was talking with Jesus until he called her name, “Mary.” The two men on the road to Emmaus didn’t know they were walking and talking with Jesus until “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” Thomas said he wouldn’t believe until he saw Jesus’ pierced hands and side and put his own fingers and hand in the wounds. Then Jesus showed up in a locked room and offered Thomas what he thought he wanted.

“Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. . . He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’” (John 21:4-7) Maybe at that moment, Simon Peter began to realize there was no going back — no “going fishin’” on his own. When Peter jumped into the sea, maybe he knew things would be different going forward. But could he have known just how different they would be?

When all of the disciples made it to the beach, they found a charcoal fire there, with fish and bread. The last time we heard about Peter standing by a charcoal fire, he was warming himself in the courtyard of the high priest, along with the police who had made the charcoal fire. While Jesus was being questioned by the religious authorities and bound over to Pilate, Simon Peter was standing outside, denying that he even knew the man Jesus — three times. (John 18:15-27)

Fast forward a few days, and there is Simon Peter, once again standing by a charcoal fire. Only this time, he is not standing with the temple police but with the risen Lord himself. If you were Simon Peter, how would you feel right then?

Simon and the others must have been flooded with memories there on the beach — memories of the time when Jesus took the bread and the fish and blessed them and gave them to the disciples and fed the 5000; memories of the time Jesus took the bread and the cup and said, “Take, eat. This is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And, for Peter especially, memories of another charcoal fire and what happened there.

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter . . .” Picture Jesus tapping Simon on the shoulder and saying, “C’mon, let’s take a little walk.” Again, if you were Simon Peter, how would you feel right then? What’s coming? How can you bear to look Jesus in the eye? How can you bear to hear what he is sure to say to you?

But it might have been easier to be chastised by Jesus than to hear him ask, “Simon, do you love me?” No wonder Simon felt hurt/distressed/pained/grieved/sorrowful when Jesus asked him for the third time, “Simon, do you love me?”

Then again, the lightbulb probably went off for Simon — three times denying Jesus, three opportunities to look him in the eye and say, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Then Jesus said to him, “Simon, you need a new sign that says, ‘Gone feedin’ sheep.’ That’s what you’re going to do from now on.”

What is good news and grace for Simon Peter there on the beach is certainly good news and grace for any of us who try to respond to Jesus’ call in our lives to “Follow me!” We can stand around our own charcoal fires and deny even knowing who Jesus is. We can strike out on our own and toil away with no results, because we don’t listen to Jesus’ instructions and guidance. We can make our vows of allegiance and discipleship to Jesus Christ, only to find that we fall short again and again. We can get so overwhelmed by life that we hang out our own “Gone fishin’” sign.

But the risen Lord says “Follow me! Feed my sheep!” to us, just as much as he said it to Peter there on the beach in the early morning. This morning we ordain and install Brenda as a ruling elder in the church of Jesus Christ and for this congregation. In the church, when we talk about teaching elders/ministers and ruling elders, we often use the pastoral language of shepherds and sheep and nourishing and nurturing and leading. So, yes, teaching and ruling elders are called to and ordained to particular leadership responsibilities in the congregation, “among and for the flock” if you will, “so that the congregation is and becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness.” (*Book of Order*, G-3.0201)

But, Jesus calls **all** of us to spread his Word and his love as a community of faith, hope, love, and witness. As you hear the risen Lord Jesus Christ call “Follow me!” and you decide what that will mean for your life, hear this beautiful benediction from the end of Hebrews (13:20-21):

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Let us pray: God of all power, you called from death our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep. Send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed one another with knowledge and understanding; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.