

Breakfast at the Beach: A Sermon on John 21:1-19
Triune Mercy Center 5/1/22 Rev. Lizzie Bebber

Let's begin this morning with a prayer from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former bishop of South Africa: *"Come, Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of thy faithful people and kindle in them the fire of thy love. Send forth thy spirit and they shall be made, and thou shalt renew the face of the Earth. Amen."*

He could have met them somewhere else. In one of their homes. Up on the hillside. Or in the temple— if the religious leaders were willing to let him in. But instead, he came to meet them in the midst of their ordinary, daily routine.

It's another bad fishing day— they've been fishing all night and so far, nothing. They're probably tired and hungry and grumpy— at least that's what the fishermen in my house are when they don't have a good fishing day. 😊 Jesus walks up and tells them to fish another way. "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." And in doing so, their nets were so full that they couldn't even haul them. It was a huge catch!

As the nets overflow, the disciples realize who they're talking to. This is the 3rd time Jesus has shown up to a group of disciples after his resurrection, and it isn't until he connects them to his identity— through the breaking of bread, through touching the holes in his hands and in his side, and now on the beach, as they are working to catch fish— that they recognize him. And when Peter realizes it's Jesus, he puts on some clothes, because, as the text tells us, he was naked and he jumps into the water. It's comical! Peter was surprised and honestly, maybe embarrassed.

Jesus invites everyone back to the beach, to gather around the fire, and to have breakfast. If you didn't know about all of the things that had just happened days before— like the crucifixion and resurrection— you might just think a group of friends were getting together, enjoying some time around the beachside campfire as the sun began to rise that day. Jesus has come to them *as they are, meeting them in the midst of* their ordinary lives.

Jesus takes bread and gives it to them— and does the same with the fish. And as he breaks it, they recognize him. I wonder if their memories are triggered as he breaks the bread and fish— remembering the day he did the same for a much larger, hungry crowd— one of multitudes, in fact. Or if as they take the bread from him, they remember gathering with him in the upper room, just before he was taken to be crucified.

I'd imagine it's all still a bit surreal for the disciples. Jesus is with them, breathing and talking and eating and laughing— as one of them— and yet so much has happened leading up until these moments.

As they finish breakfast, Jesus speaks with Peter and asks him three times— *Do you love me?* They go back and forth and each time Jesus asks this same question, Peter responds— yes, of course I love you— and Jesus tells him that if he loves him, he will feed his lambs and tend his sheep. The lambs and the sheep— the very people, from the

crowds on the hillside to the small group of disciples who were gathered around that early morning campfire. Those imperfect, stubborn, stinky, needy friends and community members and fellow fishermen and women. That's who Jesus is calling Peter to love and care for and eventually, to carry on Jesus' message as his church. "What I was doing", Jesus says, "I want you to keep doing. As the Father sent me, so send I you."

Just as the disciples continue to not recognize Jesus until he reveals his identity to them, Peter has a history of these back and forth exchanges with Jesus. And remember what happened at the crucifixion? Peter was the very one who denied that he had anything to do with Jesus, as Jesus was being crucified. Not only did he deny his affiliation or identity with Jesus once— but he denied him three times, just as Jesus said it would happen.

At this point, you may be scratching your heads— why in the world would Jesus come back to the very disciple who rejected him at the height of his suffering and as he was abandoned on the cross? Why would Jesus ask the very disciple who has denied any affiliation or connection with him? And yet, this is the one Jesus invites to love— and to tend— his sheep.

Peter isn't the first— and he surely won't be the last— person who Jesus comes back to time and time again with an invitation to follow him. An invitation to love him. And an invitation to lead his church— carrying Jesus' love and presence to others. The whole biblical story gives an account of the back and forth between God and God's people. From the beginning, we humans have had a tendency to be fickle and inconsistent. And yet— the whole biblical story is one threaded with *redemption*. And *hope*. It's a story about a loving God who continually offers us the opportunity to live in that hope, a loving God who invites us freedom by living fully into the identities as those who are beloved by God.

Remember David— the revered child king who was restored to righteousness and is known as Israel's greatest king? Or the nation of Israel, who was reconciled over and over again. Saul, the murderer and persecutor of Christians, became Paul the Apostle. And here is Peter, who denied Jesus three times at his crucifixion, and is later appointed leader of the early church. Depending on where you stop in the biblical narrative, you'll find people who made some really bad decisions. And who were met by a loving God who called them to a different way of living and being. And through those defining moments, we see God's redemption shining through.

In 2008, I moved to Washington DC to join my then fiancé, Eric, who was working as one of the pastors at a downtown church. I took a job at Christ House, a medical facility for unhoused men who are also sick, as their Volunteer Director. One part of my job was to make sure that men in our recovery program, called Kairos, had volunteer opportunities as a part of their weekly commitment to sober living. A month or two on the job, I met Richard, a gruff, life-long smoker and alcoholic who I'd heard about through the staff as the man who was admitted to our facility 19 times. Over the course of many years, he became a bit of a legend— 19 admissions, each with a different story

about what happened when he'd relapse and then how he came back around— and from what I could tell, this had all actually happened and wasn't just hearsay. So when Richard came to my door that day to meet with me about his volunteer hours, I introduced myself, sat down next to him, and attempted to make a connection.

Seeing me struggle, my colleague, Shannon came over, and said, “ Hey Richard, tell her a little bit— help Lizzie get to know you better.” And he said, “Well, my name is Richard. I'm an alcoholic. And I've been admitted here 19 times.” And that was it. Shannon sat down on the other side of him and said, “And Richard, what was it about those times, and especially the 19th time, that kept you coming back?” Richard paused, and, a little teary, he said, “Well, it's pretty simple. I knew that people here believed that I still had good left in me. And well, I guess I finally decided to believe them. To believe that I had good left in me, even after all of these years and after all I had done. That I could still love and be loved.”

That 19th admission was a defining moment for Richard. And hearing him share about what happened along the way, and when he decided to stay at Christ House once and for all, was a defining moment for me. The most important thing I learned from Richard that day was that keeping our hearts open to hope and to believing that each of us has goodness left within us— well, that's a posture that we need more of in our world. And that's God message through Jesus, offering us the opportunity to receive that love and hope and goodness within ourselves, and believing it for others.

For Richard, having a group of people he could come back to, people who actually believed that he had good left in him— that was *healing* power. This reminds me of what Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative says, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.” And I would add Richard's wisdom— that no matter what, each of us still has so much good still left within us. No matter what we've done or where we've been.

This is what Jesus knows and sees as he visits with Peter that day on the beach. He acknowledges the goodness and the capacity for love within Peter, even after Peter has denied him. Even after questioning and probably being a real pain in the butt... Jesus knows that there is goodness in each of us— that the places of hope always exist, even and especially when it feels like we've run out. And he invites us to see that— believing it for ourselves and for one another.

Can you recall a moment like that? When you didn't believe in the goodness within you— but someone else saw it and called it forth? Or maybe it was a situation— when all hope has been lost— and then something changed. What was the defining moment when things changed?

I have the privilege of serving as the Executive Director of United Ministries, a 52-year-old nonprofit in the West End of Greenville. Our mission is to serve and empower individuals and families on the transformative journey to self-sufficiency. Many of the people we work with are just one paycheck, or one significant life-hiccup away from being in crisis. Life has been hard for many of them, and they often show up weary,

distrusting, and overwhelmed. Our staff and volunteers spend a lot of time with our participants on goal setting and providing access to the tools and resources needed to achieve economic and psychological mobility and well-being.

And in all of that, while the goals are important and the tools and resources matter, the most important thing we can offer as we are working with them is that of *dignity and belonging*. To be told that their lives matter, that they are welcome, and how important it is to be seen as people who are still capable of and carry goodness and love within them. We sometimes refer to this as our “secret sauce”-- although it really isn’t a secret because it’s the guiding principle for our work and our interactions. It’s the thing we want our staff and volunteers to show up with in every appointment and exchange we have with our participants.

As we consider how we extend the affirmation of goodness that resides within one another and are invited to believe in that same goodness that is within ourselves, we must be mindful of those things which keep us from seeing and believing. For Peter, and David, and the people of Israel– there were distractions, and fears, and addictions, and revenge– and it all got in the way of God’s desire to move among God’s people. And yet, it wasn’t too late for Peter to encounter Jesus one more time– and in that to experience a defining moment that would truly shape the future of Peter’s life and the lives of so many beyond his time. As the Rock on whom Jesus said he would build his church, Peter was God’s vessel to continue Jesus’ message.

Episcopal priest, Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, says that we are born into this world with a certain operating system already installed. It’s a system focused on comparing itself to others, keeping score, acquiring positions, clinging to what one has, grasping, etc. Yet, she says, *we each have the choice to upgrade*. We have the choice to choose the operating system of the heart. The operating system of the heart is one that perceives differently, in terms of meaning and value and conscience. It perceives in a deeper and more integral way than our minds can imagine. Cynthia compares the operating system of the heart to putting on the “mind of Christ”.¹ Philippians 2:5 says: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” The invitation for us is to see through Christ’s eyes, feel through Christ’s heart and to learn to respond to the world with the same wholeness, generosity and healing love.

And for each time that we try again or choose to believe in the goodness within ourselves or others for the first time– let us remember that *hope* is what fuels our feet as we go. Archbishop Tutu said, “Hope says, Man, hey, things can, things will be better, because God has intended for it to be so. You know? At no point will evil and injustice and oppression and all of the negative things have the last word. And, yes, there’s no question about the reality of evil, of injustice, of suffering. But, you know, at the center of this existence is a heart beating with love; that you, and I, and all of us are incredible. I mean, we really are remarkable things — that we are, as a matter of fact, made for goodness.”

¹ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind*.

Church, we are made for goodness, and we are called to follow in the way of Jesus—to tend his lambs and feed his sheep. “What I was doing, I want you to keep doing,” Jesus says. That was the message on the beach that morning. And it’s the message for each of us today, no matter who we are, where we come from, or what we’ve done.

May it be so. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.