

Scripture Reading for May 1st, 2022

John 21:1-19 (NIV)

21 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. ⁵ He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. ⁶ He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” ¹⁷ The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

Sermon: “Do You Love Me More Than These . . .?”

Have you ever made a jigsaw puzzle and when you have finished you find there are other pieces left over? If that happens, you know that explains why it was so hard to complete! It also means you know someone put extra pieces from *another* puzzle into that box that had the right color palette and shapes. John chapter 21 is a bit like that. Most scholars consider it an epilogue or an appendix to the rest of John, which is a coherent unit. However, the Greek style and vocabulary certainly feels like John and there are no ancient manuscripts of John’s Gospel without this chapter present. So what’s the problem, you may wonder. Well, chapter 20 ends in Jerusalem with Jesus commissioning his disciples and 21 seems to go *back* in time to another resurrection appearance in Galilee, and so that discontinuity is a bit puzzling. However, Matthew and Mark mention the risen Jesus meeting his followers in Galilee,¹ so it appears John wanted to add that separate tradition to his account for the sake of completeness. And you can see why - given the important conversation Jesus has with Peter. Having mentioned the discontinuity issue, I suggest we don’t get bogged down by it but instead explore the significance of the miracle story and what Jesus said.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, some of the disciples wanted to quit. Seven are mentioned: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John, and who others who were not named. Presumably they were disappointed – devastated even - in that they had followed Jesus with high expectations and with his death their whole world collapsed.² Simon Peter said, “I am going fishing!” “We will go with you,” the others replied, suggesting that Peter was the leader.³ They went back to their old way of life, the world they knew well. However, that night they caught nothing.⁴ A man on the shore shouted, “Lads, you don’t have any fish, do you?” They replied, “No.” He told them, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.”⁵ As experienced fishermen, they knew that it was less likely they would catch fish in the daylight, but for some reason they did what he said and struggled to pull in the net because of the large number of fish.

The mysterious “disciple who Jesus loved,” who many assume is John himself, seeing what happened suddenly has an epiphany: “*It’s the Lord.*” How come he says that? The boat is 100 yards offshore and it would be impossible to recognize the man clearly from that distance. The answer lies in the *abundance* of the catch. John’s Gospel begins with the extravagance of the excessive amount of the good wine in the wedding of Cana.⁶ And later on, after the feeding of the 5000 with five loaves and two

¹ See Matt 28:16-19; Mark 16:7. (And Mark 14:27-31, esp. 28, which is repeated in Matt 26:31-35.)

² Cf. John 16:32.

³ John 21:3; Note, the Sea of Tiberias is another name for the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1).

⁴ Some hear an echo of John 15:5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because *apart from me you can do nothing.*” Others connect this story with Luke 5:1-11, esp. 5, which seems more likely.

⁵ John 21:5-6.

⁶ John 2:1-11; <https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gods-Gracious-Extravagance.pdf> .

fish, there are 12 baskets' full of leftovers and no one goes hungry.⁷ God's grace is lavishly demonstrated and the "disciple who Jesus loved" quickly made the connection that person on the shore was the Lord because of the *magnitude* of the catch of fish. Impulsive Peter leaps out of the boat and swims for the shore, leaving the others to manage the large catch and land it.

You probably know the rest of the story: Jesus had bread and a fire going and was *already* cooking fish for breakfast. Jesus then asks for more fish from their catch. We are told two additional details, which is suggestive of an authentic memory. First, that there are 153 fish and, second, that the net was *not* torn.⁸ Many people have tried to find symbolism in the number 153. If you are mathematically inclined, add all the numbers from 1 to 17 and you get 153! I suggest the number itself is not important, other than it was very large and unexpected. As they eat breakfast we are told, "None of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they *knew* it was the Lord."⁹ And this is reminiscent of Luke's Road to Emmaus story, where the risen Jesus was similarly recognized over a meal.¹⁰

This sets the scene for the important conversation between Jesus and Peter. Jesus refers to Peter as "Simon, son of John" and asks him, "Do you love me more than these?" First, in addressing Peter as "Simon, son of John," Jesus is reverting back to Peter's birth name and title, rather than the name Cephas or Peter, as Jesus renamed him when they first met.¹¹ Presumably that must have hurt Peter, it was a reminder that their relationship was damaged and needed restoring following Peter's triple denial. Second, Jesus asks him "Do you love me more than these?" And we may wonder *to what* does "these" refer? There are two possibilities to consider: first, the large catch of fish. Maybe Jesus gestures to the 153 fish and asks: "Simon, do you love me more than your old way of life as a successful fisherman? Seeing all those fish may have been a temptation for Simon; yet he had worked all night and caught *nothing* – it was the presence of Jesus that made all the difference.

Alternatively, Jesus could have been asking, "Simon, do you love me more than these other disciples do?" And we might be shocked by that possibility. Although John doesn't explicitly make this connection, Mark does. He reports that after the Last Supper, Jesus predicted that all his followers would desert him.¹² Peter boasts: "Even if everyone else does, I will *never* desert you." At which point, Jesus predicts that Peter would deny him three times that very night. The ambiguity in the Greek allows for both possible interpretations, but many favor the latter because Jesus goes on to ask Simon, son of

⁷ See John 6:1-14.

⁸ John 21:11. Taking a canonical view, Jesus tells his disciples they will become "fishers of men" (Matt 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:10). Some have therefore seen an *allegory* of the large catch representing the church and the fact the net did not rip means there was not schism (which is the Greek word used). I suggest this is over-analyzing what is, after all, *John's* story!

⁹ John 21:12. (See also John 14:21.)

¹⁰ See Luke 24:13-35, <https://securerusercontent.com/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/How-Can-We-Encounter-The-Risen-Jesus-Today.pdf> ; (cf. Eucharistic tones of John 21:13.) Moreover, perhaps the fact Jesus was already cooking fish (with bread) links back to John 4:32-34. . .

¹¹ John 1:42.

¹² And sees it as a fulfillment of Zech 13:7; Mark 14:27; Matt 16:31; cf. John 13:37. (After which Jesus promises, "After I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.")

John, three times whether he loved Jesus.¹³ Simon replies each time, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” and, using that special title “Lord” is a confession of his faith in Christ’s identity. Through this process, Peter’s earlier denial is overcome with grace and forgiveness; it’s turned into a new beginning and a new opportunity. That is a word of hope and encouragement for each of us, regardless of whatever we have done, real or perceived. Jesus takes the initiative to restore the relationship with us again for his grace abounds.

Jesus’ response to Simon is the same each time: “Feed my lambs; tend to my sheep; feed my sheep.” Jesus is entrusting Simon with his flock.¹⁴ By invoking the language of sheep, we are reminded that in John 10 Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.” He is the shepherd who calls his sheep by name - as he has just done three times with Simon - and the sheep recognize his voice. John’s readers would also recall that Jesus said, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John tells us that Jesus was confident that in giving his life he would receive it back again, at which point some people thought he was crazy, but Christ’s resurrection is an indispensable part of the Easter story. In one sense, the risen Jesus has finished his shepherding task and passes his crook to Peter and says, “Continue following me.”¹⁵ That commission, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to partner with God the Father and the risen Son in fulfilling the earlier prophecy from Ezekiel, where God says: “I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak . . . I will shepherd the flock with justice.”¹⁶ The Easter story therefore continues. This final chapter of John transitions from post-resurrection appearance to the future of the church and in carrying on the mission of Jesus. There is a continuity with Jesus’ miracles, and the Kingdom message continues. Moreover, Luke’s book of Acts records many instances of God’s abundance and grace being revealed in the life of the early church.

Having heard the whole story, let’s go back to Jesus’ first question to Simon Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” How does our love for God compare to some desirable fill-in-the-blank alternative? Such a question is *not* asked to guilt anyone but posed because it’s too easy to wander uncritically through life and so it’s no bad thing to shine a light on our activities, ambitions, passions and respond to that question. “Do you love me more than these?” Jesus does not say that those alternatives are inappropriate or wrong, rather what’s our first priority - our first love - out of which all other actions follow? I invite you to reflect on that question.

Notice too that Simon Peter’s response is not, “I love you,” but “*You know* that I love you.” If that is our response to God, it invites and welcomes *God’s knowledge of us* and indicates we are not, like Adam and Eve, trying to hide from God. Whatever Simon Peter knows of himself, the Lord knows his heart of

¹³ Some have noticed the Greek word for love in Jesus’ first and second questions is ‘*agape*’ and Peter responds with ‘*philia*.’ On the third occasion, Jesus uses *philia* and some suggest this is Jesus coming to Peter’s (love) level. Other scholars point out that John seems to use *agape* and *philia* interchangeably and hence this is a non-issue.

¹⁴ This echoes the words he said at an earlier post-resurrection appearance: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

¹⁵ John 21:19b.

¹⁶ Ezek 34:16.

love for him. That response, “*You know that I love you,*” is a courageous thing to say to God. Dare we say it? Will we say it?

If we *can* say it, what *will be* God’s response? We already know that: God says, “You demonstrate your love for me by the way you love your neighbor.”¹⁷ Each of us can we reflect on that too. And we can do that collectively as a church. How does St. Andrew’s reflect God’s love and mission to redeem and restore a broken world? We have been given many blessings from God; those talents and gifts are so that we can be a blessing to others too. Is there more we can be doing? At the heart of the church’s mission is our love for Jesus as Lord; love involves responsibility and even sacrifice.¹⁸

Jesus not only *reinstates* Simon Peter, he *recommissions* him with the command, “Follow me.” Following Jesus is a way of *discipleship*; Peter’s leadership style is always one that seeks to faithfully follow the loving heart of the master. What he has seen Jesus do as shepherd now become his task. To faithfully follow the Lord is also one of Jesus’ themes in his final speech to his followers before he died.¹⁹ Jesus repeatedly says: “Abide in me” or “Remain with me.” He promises that if we abide in him, the true vine, we will bear much fruit because apart from him we can do nothing. (And here I am reminded that the disciples caught no fish all night long!) Jesus also says, “Abide in my love.” what does “abide in my love mean?” Jesus explains: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Doing that is the secret of joy, says Jesus. He is the good shepherd knows the sheep who hear his voice; he knows those who love him, and he says he *reveal* himself to such people.²⁰

In conclusion, few people have John’s writing brilliance which has moved the hearts of countless people with his enduring Gospel. Few are like adventurous Paul who traveled widely telling the story of Jesus the Messiah, establishing churches as he went and writing pastorally on theology and ethics. Peter had his role to tend the flock. But today’s passage is not just for church leaders! We are *all* called to follow Jesus in Peter’s footsteps. When we help someone not go astray or reach out to some who has lost their way, or provide hope and encouragement, or come alongside someone who is suffering, then we are acting like a shepherd. No one could ask for more; Jesus never asks for less. Amen. Let us pray.

¹⁷ See John 13:34-35; 1 John 4:7-21, esp. 11, 20.

¹⁸ In John 21:18-19 there is a prediction that Peter would later die by crucifixion – ‘stretch out your hands’ (cf. John 13:36-37). John and his readers already knew Peter had been martyred.)

¹⁹ See John 15.

²⁰ John 14:21.