

John 21: 1-17 “Partners in the Feeding” Rev. Janet Chapman 5/4/25

Have you ever noticed how many stories there are in the Gospels about food? For one who is trying to cut back on my food intake, it can be tough encountering food stories over and over again as a preacher. So one looks for a little bit of levity to break up the heavy influences of people eating all the time. A story is told about a Jewish man who moved into a Catholic neighborhood in New York. Every Friday, the Catholics went a bit crazy because, while they were morosely eating their fish, their Jewish neighbor was out cooking steaks on his barbeque. So they decided to try a new tactic; they would bribe their neighbor to become Catholic, at least on Fridays. They took the Jew to a priest who sprinkled holy water on him and blessed him saying, “Born a Jew, raised a Jew, now a Catholic.” They were ecstatic as no more would they have to endure that delicious, maddening smell of steak cooking every Friday evening. But the next Friday, the same scent wafted through the neighborhood again. They all rushed over to their neighbor’s house to remind him of his new diet. They saw him standing over the grilled steak sprinkling it with water. As he did so, he said, “Born a cow, raised a cow, now a fish.”

The things food will make us do sometimes. In our scripture today, we are reminded that providing food in the form of fish was the profession of some of Jesus’ disciples. It is what they knew and what they were good at. After Jesus’ resurrection, they were waiting in Galilee for him, but he failed to forward them his itinerary. The unpredictable Risen Christ is spontaneous and sudden, unpredictable and uncontrollable. So, doubt began to seep in that he wouldn’t come at all so maybe they should just go back to work? In their minds, he wasn’t present because they couldn’t see him in the flesh. They find themselves facing a serious challenge – what do you do when Christ is no longer physically present? It’s a question we still face centuries later. Whenever we assemble together as Christ’s church, we are confronted with how to foster an awareness of the Presence of Christ. After all, out of sight...out of mind. When that happens, worship becomes more about what pleases us than what pleases God. Jerry Taylor writes that at this point in the Gospel of John, the disciples are

plagued with how will they learn to live without the physical presence of Jesus' body? Will they throw themselves into the spiritual teachings of their master or will they go back to business as usual? Will they dare to become the community of the courageous that speak truth to power in high places? Will they equip with power those who are weak and held captive in low places? Will they become the church of the risen Savior or the consumer church preoccupied with its wealth, stock portfolios, and commercial trade over truth? Will they promote ministry or industry?

Without an awareness of the spiritual Presence of Christ, too often we become vulnerable to uninspired instructions and ideas. Take Peter for example, who says, "I'm going fishing. It's time to get back to business as usual." The Gospel tells us that Peter and the other disciples went fishing, and they fished all night long. Though experienced fisherman, they caught nothing. It was a colossal failure. But sometimes it is necessary for us to experience humiliating failure in order to place us back on the path of humility and in harmony with God's will. The good news is that they aren't abandoned in the grips of failure. Christ shows up as a stranger on the shore of Lake Galilee. He calls out to them, "Friends, Children, have you caught anything to eat?" He speaks to them when they are exhausted and feeling like a failure. He isn't ignorant of what they are lacking in their lives; he isn't like the consumer church which promotes a prosperity gospel being impatient and intolerant of those who lack money, who stumble in failure, and live with doubts. We need more friends like Jesus. Friends like Jesus care about people who have exhausted all their means of survival and still have nothing to show for it. Friends like Jesus care about people who are struggling to find jobs, shelter, and decent living wages. Friends like Jesus care about the Ukrainian and Palestinian people who have to watch the never-ending horror movie being played out in the theater of war. Friends like Jesus care about how the poor in Third World nations are being crushed to death underneath the heavy weight of power-hungry and greedy conglomerates. Friends like Jesus care about the at-risk kids who are being left behind in the rhetoric of politicians who care more for the rich and powerful than they

do for the poor and weak. Jesus says, “Friends, have you caught anything to eat?” “No!” they respond, for they are not about to start making up fish stories.

Once they admit what they lack, Jesus instructs them to throw their net on the right side of the boat. As a result, there is a sudden churning of the water on that side, with so many fish shoving themselves into the net that the disciples had to scramble just to weigh down the other side of the boat lest it tip over. Then a light bulb clicks on in Simon Peter’s head. When scarcity turns into abundance, who is usually present? Thinking he now knows who is yelling from the shore, Peter leaps up and puts on some clothes so he can jump into the sea. In other words, he was fishing naked, which mind you, I’m not a professional fisherperson, but fishing naked seems a bit risky, don’t you think, with body parts that could get caught in the net or a fish’s mouth, not to mention if you happen to be using a hook? But for those of you who know Peter, I guess this sounds just like him. The disciple whom Jesus loved has a different response as he proclaims, “It is the Lord.” It is a beautiful refrain. It is the Lord who hasn’t come back as a see-thru spirit, but with a visible body to share with his friends. He comes back to them as their fishing guide, not with disembodied wisdom, but with provisions to feed his partners. When the stormy trials surround us in the darkness of night, we can proclaim, “It is the Lord.” When we are given hope for life beyond the grips of the grave, we cry out, “It is the Lord.” When we miraculously find clothes put on our back, food on our tables, a roof over our heads, and health in our bodies, we shout, “It is the Lord!” When our heads are lifted out of depression and our hands grasp another’s in times of loneliness, we breathe out, “It is the Lord!” It could be our everlasting refrain!

The story prompts some questions of us – how is your fishing expedition going so far? Have you found what you have been fishing for? Are you exhausted from all the self-contained and isolated efforts of fishing for spiritual food to feed yourself? Maybe you feel like you are the one on a hook being reeled in by a society that values consumerism over generosity, fear over facts, hoarding over sharing, suspicion over trust? The truth is we may fish for all the things of this world, but they will never fill our empty nets. But God knows what we need; God knows what we are fishing for even if

we don't. And the story tells us that Christ was already preparing what the disciples were fishing for. Not only did Christ already possess what the disciples were fishing for, but he was preparing it and inviting them to receive it. Can you imagine what Jesus' cooking would have smelled like, tasted like? It would have put even the best barbequed steak to shame. Are you hungry yet? Jesus says to the disciples, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." But they can see the charcoal fire behind him with fish already on it. Why can't they just eat that? They can't eat just that because they can't become his disciples without becoming feeders as well. Jesus invites them to be a part of the feeding as well as the receiving. So, Peter brings Jesus some fish, Jesus adds it to the feast, and when all is ready, they watch him do what they have seen him do so many times before. He takes the bread and the fish and gives it to them, reminding them that the act of physical feeding precedes any spiritual feeding that may occur. It is how they know it is the Lord, because he feeds them body and soul, not like spiritual babies who can't bring anything to the feast, though there are times when we feel like that, but like grown-up partners in Jesus' feeding ministry.

There are so many ways to read this scripture and with every reading, I recognize something new and fresh. There are so many food illustrations that come out of the gospels that it is hard not to grow hungry when I read them. Like this week when I heard about a religion professor who told the story of Jesus casting out demons from a possessed man and sending the demons into a herd of pigs, to which a student responded, "Is that how we got deviled ham?" So then I had to go find some deviled ham. But that isn't the point of Jesus' stories at all. Jesus isn't promoting commercials for a society which is perpetually hungry but never fulfilled; he is recruiting anyone who has been blessed with a hunger, anyone who knows what it is to be humbled, to come and partner in the ministry of his presence, the ministry of feeding the world. He asks you and I, "Do you love me?" You know I do. "Feed my lambs." "Do you love me?" You know I do. "Tend my sheep." "Do you love me?" You know everything; you know I do. "Then feed my sheep." God knows what we need— It is the awareness of the presence of the Lord! It is the Lord!