

May 5, '19, Anthon UMC, John 21.1-19, "Jesus Restores His Team"

By Pastor Sheryl K Ashley

Jesus' words, "Children you haven't caught any fish, have you?" popped out at me in our second reading today. It sounded so familiar, it took me back to a message I preached back in Feb 10 of this year. (I'm sure you all remember it, right?:-) It was out of the gospel of Luke, where Jesus comes to the same Lakeshore, where the same fishermen were cleaning their nets, giving up for the day because they had caught no fish. Remember? Jesus climbed into Simon Peter's boat, did some preaching from there and then told the men to put out their net again, which this time brought in so many fish their nets were breaking. Two boatloads of fish we're told. Peter and all his partners were so taken by Jesus, they left their nets and their livelihood to follow Him and become as he said, "fishers of people," Whatever that meant they may not have been sure, but since it was with him, they were going to follow. That call from Jesus was 3 short months ago for us. Three long years ago for them. And hadn't they had quite the adventure? Hearing his words. Seeing his miracles. Enjoying the camaraderie. I can just hear the men laughing and discussing the day's successes. So much joy, so much adulation, such a fine strong team of disciples of the famed teacher, Jesus ... up until a couple of weeks ago,

and then things abruptly turned tragically wrong. This miracle worker, this man who claimed to be the son of God, and who had a real “in” with God, was brutally killed. How could that happen? How could he let that happen? And what does that mean for us, they must have asked.

Have you ever noticed, life is full of circles and events and people and circumstances that may or may not have turned out well, but which circle back for a kind of redo, maybe years later? My pastoring at Anthon is kind of a redo. I was an associate baby pastor the first time and now I’m back 30 years later as the only and about as mature in years as they come, pastor, for a kind of redo. Not sure why God brought this around again but hopefully for His glory and our good.

Three years later, when the disciples heard the words, “Children you haven’t caught any fish have you?” it must have seemed like a Deja’ vu. Hadn’t they been out there fishing, catching nothing once before when someone came along and the fish started to flow? Have you ever noticed that the only time we read of these disciples catching fish, it’s when Jesus comes around? When Jesus is there things go well for them, because they are with the one they are supposed to be with and they are obedient to his commands.

But then what were they doing out there fishing again these 3 years later? Well, what else could they do? Yes, Jesus had risen as he said he would, and he had appeared to them, but they on the other hand were a bunch of losers who had gone through trauma. They had deserted Jesus in his hour of need after Peter promised Jesus that no matter what happened he would go with him even unto death but Peter hadn't. None of them had really. They were all alive and while not well...alive for now. But you know, when things are going good, words of promise are easy to speak at the time, but when faced with the reality of persecution or harm to one's self, actions and follow through are totally different things. I find myself careful of what I say and to whom I say it, because this world is at odds with itself right now and just aching for a chance to fight and argue their point of view, even taking what seems to be the smallest thing to court and legally getting any Christian viewpoint limited or eliminated from any place, except maybe your church or synagogue or mosque...and you might even get attacked there in the midst of worship, because what you believe might offend someone with different beliefs.

When Peter was warming himself by a coal fire the night Jesus was arrested and was accused of being one of Jesus' followers, Peter denied he even knew the man. But in Peter's defense he was at least following at

a distance. Where were the rest? Peter was a leader, but not a very good one that night.

There are natural born leaders in every crowd. They rise to the top. You can count on it. Did you notice any in our small group Lenten studies? I used to appoint someone to lead each discussion group. Now I don't. I've discovered a leader will rise to the top and take over, even if you have never done it before, just because you can't stand people sitting there saying or doing nothing, so I just let it happen and it does.

Yes, Jesus had appeared to the disciples but they needed someone to lead them to their next step as Jesus had stopped in with proof, he was alive a couple of times but then he'd disappeared again...where we don't know, but men are not good at sitting and wondering what's next. Give them a hammer and they will build or fix something. Ah then they are in a better place, a calmer, safer, familiar place. But now that Jesus is somewhere doing something they didn't understand and they had just been through the worst trauma of their lives, they no doubt needed to do something tangible to move forward and to remain sane. The women took their spices to the tomb and when Jesus was found alive, they no doubt went back to their daily women's work of cooking and caring for others. But these men, what were they to do? They could no longer roam the hillsides

with Jesus, preaching, depending on the kindness of others to get them through or that Jesus would do some miracle to feed them, could they? They didn't know, so their leader, Peter, rose to the top. He may not have been the best leader but he was bold and daring (most of the time) and he always had an idea. He was the best they had at the time.

"I'm going fishing," he said. And the rest, thankful for leadership to move forward, said, "We're going too." And so, they did. They had to find a way to make sense of life and they had to make a living. After three years of leaving their nets behind somehow, they were able to find theirs or borrow some and away they went to the old fishing hole of the Sea of Tiberias, which is the Sea of Galilee, which is where they first were called to be on Jesus team. They were starting over which is what most people try to do after a trauma of a loss or a failure or a disappointment.

But they were no better at fishing this time than that time 3 years earlier when Jesus came by. They were no better at fishing than they had been as disciples.... It had been another dark failure of a night. Morning was dawning. They were close to shore, giving up, calling it a night, and they are hungry and tired when come the words from a friendly, fairly familiar voice on shore, "Children, you have caught no fish, have you?" "Children?" Who would call these big burly men, "Children"? Especially after a night of

failure fishing? The mood could not have been great. But the faintly familiar voice traveling over the water gave them a command, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat and you will find some." Now obeying this stranger's command made all the difference in how their story and our story turns out. Perhaps in their heads they remembered Jesus' words of three years before, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 3 years earlier Peter had argued with Jesus, but this time when Jesus told them to "Cast the net to right side of the boat and you will find some, they did it and the catch was so plentiful, they couldn't haul it in.

It was John who declared, "It is the Lord!" Of course, it is the Lord. Who else knew where the very fish of the sea swam and who else could know that there would be that many fish so close to shore this time...only about 100 yards out? Peter was so eager he jumped right into the water and headed for Jesus, who by this time had his own fish frying...where did he get them, and a charcoal fire? And his own bread baking.... where did he get that? Even the devil knew Jesus could turn stones to bread when he vainly tempted Jesus to do so in the wilderness. But Jesus never misused his miracles for negative purposes just because he could. Jesus had a reason on this day to be cooking to serve a familiar meal to his hungry and tired team of disciples. Jesus was feeding their bodies so that he could

restore his team and reclaim their souls as fishers of people. This is a good model for those with whom we desire to share the Gospel. Remember the way to a man's (or anyone's) heart is through his or her stomach. And remember that in some cases people are truly starving and hungry people can't hear your spoken words.

After the 153 fish (we don't know why they were counted or why there were 153 although there are said to be 153 different kinds of fish in the Sea of Galilee.) Maybe it was a sign all people of every kind are to be included in God's salvation catch. The fish were dragged ashore, nets not breaking this time as they had 3 years ago, (maybe as a sign that none are to be lost). And the disciples and Jesus all sat together and ate as in the old times...as restored family. Eating together builds community and it breaks down walls to be sitting across the table from someone sharing a meal. Something in the body starts to flow good feelings from the physical to the emotional which affects the spiritual. God wisely made us that way for reason. Remember that when you are taking food somewhere or preparing for a church potluck or especially when you are sharing Holy Communion as we will today. Let the good feelings flow.

So it was that Jesus and Peter, the team leader, got into a personal restorative conversation. Jesus asking Peter if he loved him. Now Jesus

knew that Peter loved him and Peter knew that Jesus who knew where the fish swam, knew Peter loved him. So why even ask the question. He didn't ask the others. The water ran deep in the big fisherman Peter and the waters had been muddied between Peter and Jesus. Jesus does not let the big fish or the small ones get away and Jesus seeks to restore us to himself that our lives may go forward with him. Three times Peter denied Jesus so Jesus is giving Peter the gift of proclaiming his love for Jesus three times. Jesus modeled here for us that when there is a breach in our relationships we cannot be restored to God or to others unless we make the effort to talk it out and find healing, or we will sadly be at odds forever. This is serious stuff and for our own sake we dare not sweep under some rug and go our way with our heart wounded and our division unresolved. And so, they talked, with Jesus persistently asking Peter if he loved him and Peter saying that he did love him. For each time Peter replied affirming his love with words, Jesus gave the command for action, "Feed my sheep." "Feed my lambs." "Feed my sheep." Another way to telling Peter that love is more than words. Love is obeying God's commands to pass God's love onto others in ways of action. Now if we know anything about Peter, and after our Lenten study on Peter's life we should know that Peter was a man of action as well as words. Peter acted on his words of

loving Jesus, never turning back to his old safe life of fishing again but remembering the lessons he learned from it. The circle of fishing had closed and a new life of saving and feeding souls had begun. Peter was told he would have a long life of loving and serving Jesus but it would cost him and so it did with his own crucifixion at an old age. His life and his death would glorify God and the love story of Peter and Jesus would circle back to God as he and the other children of God were restored to the team. Mark these words: This is a team which includes you and me and this is a team which can change the world by loving God and others more than self. Not all are willing to follow. It is getting more costly by the day as Christianity becomes less and less popular in our own country and sharing our faith is not a safe thing to do. If you listen to the news you will find that anything that promotes Christianity or its teachings is considered offensive to someone else without those beliefs, and even to often to some who claim to be Christian and a church-goer, but who never say or do anything publicly to show that their beliefs have gotten from their head to their heart...the most important 18 inches in your body to connect. Jesus has asking us that very important question, "Children you haven't caught any fish, have you?" to "Children, do you love me enough to serve me as fishers of people?" Let us show with our words and our deeds that we are

restored onto His actin team and determined to follow Him where ever he leads us.