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John 21:1-19

## WHEN WE SMELL LIKE FISH

Each week I meet with a small group of pastors from various Christian traditions to discuss the scripture texts for that upcoming Sunday. Sometimes we get off topic. This week we digressed into a conversation about communion and the different rules and requirements our various traditions have regarding this sacrament. One pastor shared that during the pandemic the members of his church could not take communion on their own at home because in his tradition the bread had to be physically touched by the pastor in order to be consecrated. Another pastor shared that her tradition didn't permit them to use non-alcoholic grape juice; it had to be wine. In the Presbyterian Church, since communion is supposed to be part of our corporate worship, I am technically supposed to take an ordained elder with me when I offer home communion to people. In some Christian denominations, only members within that tradition are permitted to take communion. In other traditions, a person must first be baptized or confirmed or go to confession before being permitted at the Table. Some churches I've visited overseas restrict participation in communion based on a person's attendance record at church. I wonder how many people at our U.S. churches would pass *that* test!

But when I read the scripture accounts of Jesus' eucharistic meals with his followers, I marvel at how the Christian churches ever thought *any* such tests or restrictions were necessary in order for a person to partake of Jesus' holy meal. When Jesus sat at the table with his disciples at the Last Supper, or when Jesus shared fish and bread with the disciples on the shoreline in our reading today, he does not say, "you must touch the bread." He does not say,

“take an elder with you.” He does not ask to see their attendance card. What he does say is, “Come and eat.” What he does say is, “Feed my sheep.”

The story we read today from John’s gospel about the risen Christ sharing bread and fish with the disciples on the shoreline is John’s version of the Last Supper. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke which contain the account of the Last Supper Jesus ate with his disciples *before* his death, John’s gospel offers us no such story. Instead, John gives us this post-resurrection eucharistic meal on the beach, a meal comprised of fish and bread. This is a sacramental moment—meaning a holy moment, a moment that points beyond itself to something greater—just as surely as the Last Supper is a sacramental moment pointing beyond itself to something greater. It is clear that when Jesus offers his disciples the fish and the bread, he is doing something much greater than simply feeding them breakfast. Jesus is gathering together these broken disciples in love and forgiveness. He is mending these broken disciples. And he is equipping these broken disciples.

These followers of Jesus are broken people because of all they have just experienced in Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion: their terror at the brutal crucifixion of their teacher, their fear for their own lives, their grief over Jesus’ death, their dashed hopes for the future. These followers are broken with grief and fear and despair.

But they are also broken people because they are ashamed, deeply ashamed of how badly they failed Jesus. Perhaps you also know shame for something you have done or failed to do, for something you have said or failed to say. Shame is a profoundly distressing emotion. Shame is deeper than regret. Shame goes to the core of how we regard ourselves. Shame surfaces feelings of unworthiness and self-loathing. After Jesus’ crucifixion, the disciples confront *their* shame over how badly they failed Jesus.

And Peter stands out in this story as symbolic of all their failures. We remember Peter's great failure—how Peter stood around the charcoal fire the night of Jesus' arrest and three times denied even knowing Jesus. And now, all Peter is left with is his shame.

But the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples on the shoreline after they have been fishing all night without any success. As fishermen, these guys reek of BO mixed with the stench of dead and decaying fish. And as they labored all night in the shadow of their shame, they had time to contemplate how badly their souls also sank like fish.

Jesus stands on the shoreline and calls to these disciples to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. And when they do, they haul in an enormous catch. It is a story about the abundance we can know in Christ. But the real abundance is not found in the catch of fish but in what awaits them back on shore. Jesus summons them to breakfast. He gathers these shattered, terribly flawed people together in love and grace, gathering up all their broken bits together around *another* charcoal fire. Catch the symbolism there? And he breaks the bread and divides the fish and he feeds them with the abundance of his love and forgiveness. And in place of Peter's three denials, Jesus gives him the opportunity to make three affirmations of love and commitment. Peter do you love me? Feed my lambs. Peter do you love me? Tend my sheep. Peter do you love me? Feed my sheep.

Broken people. Broken bread. Broken fish. Jesus takes these broken bits and with them he mends and he equips. In place of shame, Jesus offers love. In place of shame, Jesus offers forgiveness. And in doing so, he equips his followers to feed others with this same love and grace. Feed my sheep. Tend my sheep.

This is what takes place in this story and that is what takes place every time we come to the Lord's Table. Mending and equipping. We come to be mended because we are also broken.

Our lives, our souls, also give off a pungent fishy odor that is not so pleasant. Jesus invites us to come and eat precisely when we don't smell good in body or in spirit. None of us escapes brokenness. But Christ loves us and always will. Christ invites us to the table not because we are saintly but because we are loved and he knows our need.

One might say that Christ loves us *despite* our flaws. But what if, what if it is that Christ loves us *because* of our brokenness. As with Peter, our brokenness becomes useful to Christ in doing ministry. As people aware of our own stinkiness, we can have grace for others, empathy for others. We can serve and love others from an awareness that we too have been loved, welcomed, and forgiven.

It is our human tendency to hide our flaws from others, to try to present a good image of ourselves to others. But every time you and I come to this Table, we are making a public admission that we are broken and smelly and in need of Christ to gather our broken bits back together in love. Here at this table, Jesus offers us an abundant meal for broken people, to mend us—and to equip us for mending others and our world.

The mistake the Christian Church has made is to promote the idea that this table of grace, this table of mending and equipping, is only found within the walls of our buildings. And so the Christian Church takes possession of this Table, and imposes rules and regulations surrounding it. But notice what Christ does. Christ takes the Table on the road. In some parts of scripture, the Table is found in an upper room before Jesus' death. But then today it appears on the shoreline at an informal breakfast around a charcoal fire. In other parts of scripture, the Table is found out in the desert when thousands show up to hear Jesus preach and he feeds them with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Elsewhere, the Table is found when Jesus dines with tax collectors. Jesus takes the Table of love and mercy and healing on the road. And he invites all to come and eat

without qualifications. Over and over again he meets people in their lives, feeds them in body and soul with love and forgiveness. He mends us. And he equips us for service by saying, “Feed my sheep.”

Feed my sheep. In other words, take the Table on the road. Take the Table out of this building and into your life and world. This Table isn't the property of the institutional Church. This Table is Christ's Table. He is the host. And he invites all us smelly people to come and eat. And then he tells us to spread this Table for one another. We carry out this sacramental ritual here in the Church but it is intended to empower us to set the Table everywhere in our lives. And you don't need a priest or a pastor or an elder to do that.

This Table is set anywhere love and forgiveness and healing are offered. This Table can be found on a beach around a charcoal fire or right in your own kitchen. It can be found at soup kitchens and food pantries or in office lunch rooms. Food and drink are helpful elements but not mandatory. The sacrament can take the form of a letter, an email, a phone call. Maybe it looks like marching in a protest, writing a check, signing up to volunteer, preparing a meal, forgiving a neighbor. Feed my sheep. Tend my sheep. Jesus wants us to preside over the Table of love and grace ourselves. *You* are called to preside over the Table. “Feed my sheep” is Christ's mandate to you.

But first, first we must respond to the invitation: Come and eat. Come and be mended. And so we gather around the Table today as those long ago gathered around a charcoal fire. Each one of us gives off our own fishy odor, but we come together at this Table, drawn by the sweeter fragrance of love.