

## Are We Still of Any Use?

John 21:1-19

Third Sunday of Easter, (May 1) 2022

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Sometimes we're so overwhelmed and overwhelmed so often, we simply say, "Forget it! I'm going fishing." Or "I want normalcy." Or "I can't do this anymore. It's too much. I'm going back to what is in my comfort zone."

I wonder if that's what the disciples were feeling in this story from John 21. The previous chapter is full of astonishing experiences of Christ being resurrected and disbelieving disciples believing. John 20 is incredible! The resurrected Jesus is beyond incredible. The world, their world is turned upside-down and inside-out. It's mind-boggling and life changing. So, we turn the page and begin John 21, not with the disciples going out into the wider world with this extraordinary news of resurrection and hope, but with them back home fishing.

Last week, Jane and I enjoyed a couple of days in Galveston. At one point, we were sitting on the beach watching all these families play and swim. One young family had their little boy, probably around two or so, getting used to the water and the waves. At first, he was a little scared but over time, with their patient play and care, he became accustomed to it all. Indeed, he was loving it. But with his dad holding his hand he ventured out to where the water was maybe waist deep and a wave hit him and he didn't like it. Then another wave quickly followed and then another. Soon he was crying and wanted his father to pick him up, which he did.

Being overwhelmed literally means having waves come over us. And these days they come with such increasing frequency, that like that little boy we can't take it anymore.

I don't know. I'm just wondering... I wonder if the disciples are exhausted by too much change, and I wonder if some of their exhaustion comes from feeling helpless. Maybe events have taken on such magnitude that we feel that we're of no consequence. Or maybe we feel like we're part of the problem and not the solution. "I had my chance with Jesus and blew it. And sure, Jesus is resurrected but I'll leave changing the world to him. I can't do it anymore."

At the end of 1942, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an essay entitled, "After Ten Years," in which he kind of takes a step back and looks at his context in Nazi Germany: the failure of the German church and other institutions, moral cowardice, and passivity of the people, what seems like a kind of collective "stupidity," and no matter how bad the Nazis and Hitler are, Bonhoeffer says that people seem to be enthusiastic supporters or else they just go along. He says, "We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds." And goes on to ask, "Are we still of any use?" (p. 30). Is there anything we can do or has our time to make a difference passed?

Between Covid exhaustion and the rise of White Nationalism with what I think is a collective stupidity, I sometimes find myself asking, "Are we still of any use?" I know White male clergy who are retiring right and left with a sense of failure, and even complicity and ask, "Are we still of any use?" and "So what's the use?" And for many of us, clergy or not, we've plenty of failures to go around.

Here, in this story today, in the middle of “what’s the use? And “are we of any use? is the resurrected Jesus. Jesus shows up. In the first verse, John says, “Jesus showed himself again.” The word is “phaneroo” from which we get words like “epiphany” and “theophany,” words which mean “he manifests himself” or “he shows up.” The Living God shows up in all kinds of ways and in unexpected times. Like Christina Banchs-McRae said so well last week, he surprises us, so we had better learn to be on the lookout.

Jesus shows up in the middle of “are we still of any use.” He’s on the beach fixing a meal, breakfast, the disciples are out fishing and, of course, do not recognize him in the early morning darkness. Obeying him and fishing like he says, they haul in an enormous number of fish. Peter figures out who is on the beach and swims to shore. And Jesus is there waiting around a charcoal fire, says John.

A fire, specifically a charcoal fire is no accident. In the entire Bible, there are only two references to charcoal fires: here and back in John 18:32 where Peter denies knowing Jesus three times – while standing around a charcoal fire. Do you think maybe Jesus knows this charcoal fire might be a kind of trigger for Peter? On purpose? No, deflection or ignoring past betrayal and denial, instead the Living God calls us to the very place where we failed and sinned.

The story says, “Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’

Frances Chism, when you used to call out, “Steven Lee” Steve knew what it meant? My guess, Steve, is that hearing your full name, stopped you in your tracks.

Well, here Jesus is using Simon Peter's full name, and I think there is little doubt that hearing his full name called around a charcoal fire, stops Peter in his tracks.

“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Do you love me more than all this? This boat and fishing, the life you've known and the work you've done? Business as usual? Do you love me more than what you're comfortable with?

Hmm... Jesus calls us around a charcoal fire of memories we'd rather forget and ignore and asks us if we care about him more than our comfort.

It makes me wonder if Jesus would be welcome in some states. In places like Florida and in school boards all over the country we don't want anything said, and certainly not taught in our public schools, that make White people uncomfortable. We'll vote for denial and falsehood to keep comfortable. Truth can often make us uncomfortable – both in our White society and in our personal lives, so let's go with denial instead.

“Jesus, we came back to our fishing and comfortable way of life to get away from you. And now you show up here.”

My friend Steve Long, who teaches at SMU, reminded me of an old saying, “Good butchers know what goes into sausage but also know not to tell the customer.” There are some things we're rather not know. It might make us

uncomfortable. And furthermore, discomfort might mean change – both in ourselves and in our world around us.

Jesus is like the butcher who knows what goes into sausage and – but he’s going to tell us the truth. Jesus puts truth higher than comfort because our denial and ignoring the truth keeps us enslaved to lies and deceit and our obsession with comfort and falsehood destroys us and our planet. The Living God calls us to name the lies in our personal lives and name the injustice and violence that is bigger than us in our world and our systems. There is a reason Jesus says back in John 8, “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free” (Jn. 8:32).

Peter had denied Jesus around a charcoal fire three times. And three times around a charcoal fire, Jesus invites Peter to express his love for Jesus. Three times, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” And three times Peter says, “Yes, Lord, I love you.” Jesus pushes us, challenges us, makes us uncomfortable with the truth but in calling us to face the truth, we are also healed and made whole.

And three times, Jesus responds by saying, “Then feed my sheep.”

“There is a world out there, Peter, that is dying. In your healing and wholeness, go out there and serve and embrace. Practice hospitality of inviting and feeding and healing the broken, the tired, the suffering. Put up a sign out front along the road that has a shepherd’s staff showing everyone who passes by that this is a place that feeds lost sheep and hungry sheep.”

Jesus calls us to get out of our comfort zones, face the truth, even if it means facing the truth of our failures and sin and injustice, and feed sheep.

Back to Bonhoeffer. In the essay, “After Ten Years,” he says, “I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are not in vain and that it is no more difficult for God to deal with them than our supposedly good deeds” (p. 25).

Are we still of any use? You bet we are. But not because of how good we are or how hard we work. We are still of use because of the God in Jesus Christ, the Living God, who meets us in our failure and sin, heals us and calls us to go out and feed sheep. God is at work – even in our mistakes and shortcomings. And if we value comfort more than the truth, we’ll miss God at work in the truth of our failures.

We’re coming out of this fog and darkness of Covid. We’re emerging from failures and despair. The light of the morning is shining and there on the shore fixing breakfast for us is the Risen and Living Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.