

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 05/04/2025



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, May 4th

John 21:1-19

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Last Breakfast

After the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to His disciples on two consecutive Sundays (described in the preceding verses), the text reveals no other appearances to this point. The disciples see or hear nothing more from Jesus. With passing time comes growing doubt and uncertainty. As days become weeks, the disciples (seven are mentioned by name) return to Galilee and are on the verge of going back to their old lives and old jobs. It is Peter, "The Rock," who announces he is done! He is going back to work. The rest of the disciples with him decide to follow. So, Peter's denial of Jesus is complete. It is at this low point that Jesus makes another appearance and works another miracle. This final resurrection appearance is replete with symbolism from His entire ministry. At this "Last Breakfast" Jesus redeems Peter and issues His final call to complete and total discipleship.

John 21:1-19

¹ After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

The exact timeline of when this happened is not certain but after the events in Jerusalem, we know at least seven of the remaining twelve leave Jerusalem and return home to the familiar - to Galilee. Peter decides he is going back to work, and the rest of the group go with him. By their own efforts that night they catch nothing.

⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

Jesus shows up on the shore just as it is getting light and inquires of their success. Even though Jesus may have been too far off and in bad light for the disciples to recognize Him, one would have thought the rest of the scene would have triggered some sort of déjà vu (compare to Luke 5:1-11)! Through their own efforts their harvest was

fruitless; under Jesus' guidance their harvest was abundant. It was John, the disciple who Jesus loved, who first recognized it was Jesus.

⁹ *When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.* ¹⁰ *Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."* ¹¹ *So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn.* ¹² *Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."* Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ *Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish.* ¹⁴ *This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

We can only wonder if smelling the aroma of smoke from the charcoal fire reminded Peter of the night Jesus was betrayed. On that occasion Peter stood warming himself by the charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest where he denied Jesus three times. Some commentators have put forward numerous explanations for the number 153. It could simply be this was the total count since fishermen would routinely tally the catch. The abundance of the catch is reminiscent of the abundance of wine from Jesus' first sign at the wedding in Cana (2:1-11). The bread and fish are reminiscent of the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15). Taking and giving of the bread has an echo of the synoptic version of the Last Supper. *Come and have breakfast* is an invitation that transforms the fruitlessness of the disciples' own purpose and efforts to the abundance achieved when cooperating with Christ's will. Note this was not a "free" breakfast! The disciples had to haul in the catch and bring some of the fish to the fire. Christ continues to accomplish His work on this earth through His disciples.

¹⁵ *When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs."*

¹⁶ *He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.*

Jesus then questions Peter about his love for Him three times. All three possible interpretations of Jesus' first question are relevant: Do you love me more than these other disciples do? Do you love me more than these fish (your profession)? Do you love me more than you love these other disciples? The different words to describe love in this exchange may be important. In the first two instances the Greek verb form of *agapē* is attributed to Jesus (underlined). *Agapē* is considered the highest form of love. This is the type of love originating from God to humans and the reciprocal love for God. In both cases, Peter's reply to Jesus uses the Greek verb form of *philos*. *Philos* is considered a lower form of love than *agapē*. For the final time, Jesus apparently comes down to Peter's level and uses the word *philos* which Peter matches in his reply. Modern commentators are not convinced there is any intended difference here based on how John has used these words. It is perhaps only a stylistic reason. In any case, the original conversation was in Aramaic, not Greek!

Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him. Peter was grieved when he was asked the third time and appeals to the omniscience (and thus deity) of Jesus. Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus (18:15-27) and rapid return to his old life are hereby redeemed. Jesus the Good Shepherd (10:11, 14) has transferred His pastoral responsibilities. Peter is transformed from fisherman to shepherd, feeding the sheep with God's Word.

¹⁸ *Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you*

where you do not want to go.”¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Jesus is very clear that the path Peter is being called to will end in his death. It is at this point Jesus extends to Peter the final call to discipleship, “Follow me.”

Reflection and Application

We read how the triumph of the resurrection is quickly replaced with doubt and despair. As a response, the disciples seek the old and familiar. Peter and those with him are on the point of returning to their old lives and occupations. Jesus' plan for the continuation of His ministry appears to be at risk of complete failure. It is at this low point that Jesus intervenes with His final appearance. In this interaction, Peter is redeemed and prepared for his final call to follow Jesus.

In our own path of discipleship there may be times when our hopes are shattered, when our lives are turned upside down, when we are overcome by failure and doubt, when our nets are empty by our own efforts, and when we face persecution from the world. Our lives are in a constant state of tension between continuing down the path of discipleship and feeding the sheep or returning to our old worldly lives. It is during the lowest points in this journey, the failures in our ministry, that Jesus reaches out, restores, and re-issues His call to follow – just as He did with Peter.

This text also emphasizes how the disciples' own efforts resulted in a catch of zero. This highlights how when we rely on our own ideas and efforts, thinking we are doing Christ's work without Christ, our harvest is likely to be zero or at least fall miserably short of our expectations. Yet when Christ shows up and the disciples follow His plan, the harvest is one of abundance. Whose plan are you following?

