

Breakfast on the Beach
John 21
Trey Davis
Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh
May 22, 2022

In my former life as a youth minister, I led students in over 100 different retreats. In any given year, I led middle school retreats, high school retreats, and college retreats. Mission trips ranging from North Carolina to South America. Beach trips, rafting trips, and ski trips. I took multiple retreats with just one class of students, such as rising high school freshmen or graduated seniors. And, for several years, I led a trip colloquially known as “Man Trip” that was primarily deemed a success only if someone came home bloody.

I think that, compared to our weekly activities, the retreats were my students’ favorite events. These trips were where our youth really connected with each other. I thoroughly enjoyed them too, but for me the different travels started to blend together except for the true standouts.

One of my favorites—perhaps my very favorite—was a retreat that we ran with small groups of high schoolers, one or two classes, usually about halfway through their high school experience. It was a retreat designed to help students step into a more intentional role of leadership before their junior and senior years. I sort of viewed it as the sequel to our conversations about baptism: the retreat moved on from encouraging students to claim faith as their own and asked them to articulate and share their faiths, to be proud of the faiths, and to put their faiths to work.

The primary text for that retreat was the final chapter of John that we turn to this morning. It, too, is a story about those who are about to need to do more with their faiths than simply to claim them.

* * *

I’ve said before that the entire gospel of John fits in the prologue, that the first verses of this gospel poetically set up all of the drama and tension, the goodness and truth, the understanding of Jesus. I think it’s possible to read those first eighteen verses and grasp nearly all that is important about the coming of Christ. I think that the same might be true about the final chapter of John, the conclusion in John 21 that we read today. In these verses, through narrative instead of poem, we also find the entirety of the transformative power of Jesus.

The final chapter contains three scenes packed together and carefully arranged to present a gorgeous culmination to the entire gospel. The first of these is the story of the disciples catching no fish, then switching to the other side of the boat, then immediately catching a ton of fish. It is, unlike the rest of the chapter, a story that is mirrored in the synoptic gospels. This is Jesus’ final miracle in John, one last sign to let his followers know that he is who they think he is. Because of this, it is a story with tremendous captivating power.

The ultimate scene in John is the story of Jesus and Peter walking on the beach, a final and personal commissioning for Peter. It is “one of the most popular stories in the Bible,” a challenging but assuring passage that straightens Peter’s path as he moves from the second chair to the first chair.¹ This, too, is a story with tremendous captivating power.

¹ Lewis R. Donelson, “Third Sunday of Easter,” *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* ed. by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 421.

Other than that captivating power, however, these feel like very different stories. In the first story, the disciples are functioning as a group, seven of them listed as gathering together on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias. They begin to fish, which is what they did before they were called to follow Jesus. It's unclear if their fishing is a reversion of sorts, the disciples running away to old habits, or if it's a temporary step into a familiar comfort, or it's just a way of passing the time...but the fishing is something they do as a group, and it seems like a clear reference to the beginning of the gospel when so many of them were called from lives as fishermen to be disciples of Jesus. The first detail of this passage focuses its attention backwards.

Just as Jesus wasn't around when they were fishermen, he isn't around at the beginning of this story either. When he does appear, his is far away from the disciples, so far away that they don't initially recognize him. When they do recognize him, their fortunes are reversed, from catching zero fish to catching 153 of them. Jesus' presence allows them to be successful.

Whereas the first story emphasizes the distance between Jesus and the disciples, the final story accentuates their intimacy. In doing so, it also moves from a larger group to a smaller one, beginning with Jesus and Peter alone having an isolated conversation. Their focus is primarily on the future—Jesus does allude to Peter's denial, but he also instructs Peter to feed and care for "his lambs" and warns Peter about the challenges that will come in attempting to do just that. If the first story was Peter casting nets for fish, his past occupation, then the latter is decidedly Peter as a fisher of men, his future occupation.

There is a transformation that occurs between the disciples fishing in the boat and Peter walking along the shore with Jesus. Actually, there are probably several that occur in this scripture, smaller and individual transformations that occur for Peter and the Beloved Disciple and the others, but there is one big transformation that shifts the narrative from a group focused in the past distant from Jesus to an individual looking forward while walking closely with Jesus.

The transformation in John 21 occurs in the middle, the breakfast on the beach that Jesus shares with his disciples. This is the moment that takes them from the first scene to the last, that transforms them from literal fishermen to Jesus' proxy caretakers. It's somewhat of an easy moment to overlook—most scholars lump it in with the first scene—but there are several critical things that happen at this meal that teach and change the disciples (and therefore teach and change us). In fact, I think there are ten lessons that we can take from the breakfast on the beach.

* * *

The very first thing that this passage tells us about the disciples is that they have gathered together. When I picture the trial and crucifixion of Christ, I picture the disciples scattered. I imagine them in a panic, maybe pointing fingers at each other, hiding, like thieves who had their heist go bad and have to keep distance from one another so they don't get caught. But these men were not thieves, and they eventually do regroup in body and in spirit to figure out their next step.

There is power in their coming together. We see that in the chapters which precede this one, the disciples in a closed room; we see it also around this fire. It's a good thing that when Peter says "I'm going fishing" the others chime in "we'll come with you." It's even better that they all share a meal on the shore. There is a critical sense of unity and community in this middle scene.

It's worth noting that they aren't all there. The beginning of the passage repeats the names of the disciples who have previously stood out in John—Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee—and adds that there were two others. The number who have gathered isn't twelve, which seems significant. It's seven, a holy number, which also seems significant...but it isn't twelve, meaning that this is a subset of the disciples. We don't know where the others are, what they're doing, how they feel...but we do know that they aren't with Peter and his gang in the boat or eating a breakfast of fish and bread.

The disciples gather, but they do so in a group small enough to connect with one another. They gather intimately, help each other out, share stories. This is not a crowd packed in to hear Jesus teach on a mountainside, or a congregation sitting in worship, or even a banquet hall with fifty guests who can't possibly all speak to one another. This is eight people around a campfire on a beach. That is the kind of gathering that reflects and transforms community.

The other important thing about this gathering is that Christ is present. The difference between the group on the boat—toiling, sweating, unsuccessfully fishing—and the group on the beach is that Jesus is part of the group on the beach. The aura of the group changes immediately, from work to celebration, from failure to success. The presence of Christ does not alleviate all suffering—the end of the chapter makes that clear—but it does comfort and cheer these disciples. It, again, transforms them.

The significance of the breakfast on the beach is revealed not only through who has gathered but also through what they do. The beach scene begins with Jesus having already lit a fire and placed fish and bread over it, but the first thing Jesus says to them is “bring some of the fish *you* have just caught.” He wants them to contribute to the breakfast.

In the past, Jesus has given the disciples instructions—“see if anyone has food,” “fetch a donkey,” “reserve a room”—but this is a different request. This is “contribute from your own catch.” This is “give of yourself.” It is a transition to a new way, part of how the disciples are being transformed.

Because they provide some of the meal, the disciples are not merely errand boys but are actually serving. Jesus serves them, of course, by handing bread and fish to them, but this is not the foot-washing from John 11 where Jesus makes it clear that he is serving them and they cannot join in with him. Here, he invites them to be part of the serving. It is an invitation that will continue in the final scene as he talks to Peter and throughout the New Testament.

It seems important that their service in this case does lead to a meal. While it includes a description of the Last Supper, John is the only gospel that does not mention Jesus blessing bread and cup at that meal. By including this breakfast instead, John accentuates the value of eating together.

During the pandemic, we spoke with a handful of single friends who were still trying to date even though they didn't want to go to restaurants or even really eat with strangers. One of the dating rituals they described to us was something called Zoom dating, where you made your own dinner and then ate it in front of a computer talking to someone. We thought this sounded horrifying. First dates are awkward enough as they are, but adding the screen element into the mix seemed like they'd be doomed from the start (even though I know a few folks whose relationships survived that Zoom first date).

The part that sounded the worst to me was this: when you're on a date, you're trying really hard to make eye contact and engage the other person. I think this would be even more accentuated if you were Zooming that date. The thought of watching someone else chew on a computer screen for an hour—or, far worse, the thought of someone else watching me chew—would be enough for me to call off the date right there.

When we eat with someone, we are not only sharing in a time of nearly universal fellowship. We are also unwittingly making ourselves vulnerable before them. This is part of the Last Supper, and it is part of the breakfast on the beach (so much so that the early church would sometimes incorporate fish into its Eucharistic worship).²

With this breakfast of fish and bread, the disciples contribute, they serve, and they eat. All are ways of making themselves vulnerable, of lowering themselves before each other. They are humbled by what they do...and they are equally humbled by what they refrain from doing.

In the first scene on the boat and the final scene with Peter and Jesus, the disciples speak, but in the breakfast on the beach, they do not. The scripture even tells us “they dared not ask Jesus.” Even Peter, who is always quick to speak, dares not open his mouth. Instead, they listen as Jesus speaks. Listening is not an action they are particularly known for, but they do it here, and they do it well. It is another component of their transformation from followers to leaders.

Because they listen, they are—finally!—able to let go of their past. This, too, has been a consistent theme for Jesus and his followers. He tells his disciples to leave their nets and follow him; he tells the rich young ruler to sell everything and follow him; he tells everyone to lay down their lives and follow him. It is no coincidence that these fishermen leave their boat to come eat breakfast with Jesus.

Finally (and I'm cheating just a little here), their letting go of the past includes a reminder to forgive. This is particularly emphasized during the final scene, when Jesus reminds Peter of his threefold denial by repeating three times “Peter, do you love me?” The words sting Peter, but Jesus affirms him by saying “tend my sheep” and “feed my lambs” in response. It is Jesus' way of letting Peter know that he is forgiven.

I can't envision the breakfast on the beach without that forgiveness being a component. Peter wasn't the only disciple to flee, to hide, to abandon Christ in his darkest hour. He's just the loudest. The celebration of bread and fish feels like a meal of atonement. The disciples let go of their past in more ways than one.

Gather together, gather with Christ, contribute, serve, eat, listen, let go of our past, forgive. This is the template for the new church. This is the model by which we attempt to conduct ourselves, individually and corporately, in six verses that are easy to overlook.

* * *

If you were paying attention a few pages ago, you heard me say there were ten lessons in the breakfast on the beach. And if you were counting as I listed them, you only heard eight. The final two lessons come not from the details of the scene but from its overarching altogether existence.

² Donelson 423.

When I took the students on the retreat where we focused on this passage, I had the great idea to feed them a breakfast of bread and fish cooked over charcoal on the shore of a river as our final act. I'd done communion and footwashing services before, but I'd never done a ritual re-creation of this meal, and I couldn't wait to see how it went.

I sent one of the leaders to fix the breakfast while I led the students in a final session. The session went okay, but the kids were hungry and tired, and they kept asking what we were doing for breakfast. I assured them we'd eat soon and that it'd be a special breakfast. After 45 minutes or so, the session had very much run its course, and I told them to wait while I went to check on breakfast. It wasn't ready. The wind was blowing and the charcoal was having a hard time lighting, and the coals weren't hot enough to cook.

I came back inside and said breakfast was still cooking, and we playing some time-killing youth minister games which also didn't go over that great because, again, everyone was tired and hungry. After a little longer, I left the students in the care of another leader and went to check on breakfast again. Still not ready. We blitzed the charcoal with lighter fluid and finally got it to cook okay, but it was a smallish grill, and it still took a long while to cook, even with me and the other leader working on it.

Finally, breakfast was ready. The students all came down from the house where we were staying to the shore of the river, and I made a little speech about how we were eating the same meal Jesus ate with his disciples. About half of them scrunched up their noses at the fish and ate one piece of toasted bread. No one except my supportive wife seemed to find the meal as impactful as I'd hoped. About an hour later on the way home, we stopped at Bojangles.

The model that Christ lays before us is so clean in that scene in John. So much that fits neatly into six verses! But the model of doing church is, in reality, a messy one. We catch a glimpse of that mess in Peter and Jesus' walk, but the breakfast itself would have also been awkward at times, complicated at times, confusing or painful or frustrating at times. That doesn't mean we don't pursue it...but we shouldn't be naïve about it either.

Like most messy experiences, the story of our breakfast on the beach retreat is one I like telling. The scene in John is beautifully told. The stories of our faith experience need to be shared. They need to be repeated and applied, to be inviting and inclusive. Jesus tells us to do all of these things...and then also to share their meaning beyond our walls.

Gather together, gather with Christ, contribute, serve, eat, listen, let go of our past, forgive, be prepared for messiness, and share all of it with others. This is the gospel of Christ. This is what we do with our faiths after we have claimed them. This is how we put them to work.