

**More Than Normal**  
**John 21:1-14**  
**First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**  
**May 17, 2020**  
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Today's story from the Gospel of John has raised many questions over the years. Why are only seven of the disciples gathered together on this day? Was it a normal experience or was it unusual to have a night of fishing where nothing was caught? Why didn't the disciples know it was Jesus when they first saw him? What was it about the act of catching fish that opened the eyes of the disciples and allowed them to recognize him? What might we learn from the fact that John tells us that the beloved disciple was the first to recognize Jesus and it was Peter who acted on that recognition? What is significant about the number of fish or the fact that Jesus, who had already cooked breakfast, asked the disciples to bring some of their fish to the campfire? Why did Jesus decide to cook them breakfast? Why go to the trouble of feeding them? Why not just talk to them? Why, after the previous chapter seems to have a conclusion does the gospel writer or his community add this final story of Jesus' interaction with his disciples?

There are so many questions to ask and details to look at. There is much to be learned from this story.

And yet, I want to take us back to the beginning of the story. Chapter 21 begins saying: *After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and*

*two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you” (John 21:1-3a, NRSV).*

And my attention always pauses there.

See, I am intrigued by the fact that they are going fishing. Not that fishing was new to them. While John’s story of the calling of the disciples doesn’t tell us that they were fishermen, the other gospels tell us so. In fact, in Luke’s call story not only does he identify a number of the disciples as fishermen, but he tells us that their call to follow Jesus came the morning after a night without a catch...on a morning when Jesus told them to throw the net in one more time. Sounds familiar doesn’t it?

So, maybe I shouldn’t be surprised that they are fishing.

And yet, I am.

I am surprised because Peter and the beloved disciple had seen the empty tomb. I am surprised because they had all heard Mary’s witness, not only about the empty tomb, but that she had seen Jesus alive. I am surprised because the disciples, while locked together in a room somewhere, had experienced the resurrected Jesus visiting them, showing them his wounds, and offering them the Holy Spirit along with the power to forgive. I am surprised because most of the disciples had not only seen Jesus once, but had seen him again when he came back so that Thomas could have a first hand experience, too.

So, at this point, at least from our modern perspective, we might expect the disciples to be running through the streets telling anyone who would listen that Jesus was alive and that his work would continue.

But *instead* it seems they don't know exactly what to do with these experiences. *Instead* they are gathered together in a familiar location by the water. *Instead*, perhaps just tired of sitting...perhaps because they still need to support their families...perhaps because they don't know what else to do...perhaps because doing something they know well brings them comfort...*instead* of being on the road with a message of God's love, the disciples climb into a boat together to see if there are any fish willing to be caught.

And, let me be clear...even though I find myself curious about this action, I am not critical of it. Because we know what it is to want that which is familiar. We know what it is to keep repeating our routines because they give us comfort or even just a next step forward. We know what it is to gather with people who know us and share an experience with us. We *especially* know these things when we are grieving, when we are struggling, when the world has been turned upside down.

It's part of why I do better on the days when I work from the church office than from home. It's part of why, even as we make wise choices for safety, we long to share celebrations with family or sit across a table from a friend warming our hands on a fresh cup of coffee. It's part of why so many parents upon hearing that school would not meet for the remainder of the school year wrote up schedules and tried to become teachers. Because we long for that which is familiar. The things that we know give us a little relief from the stress and the grief and the worry.

And I suspect this was as true for Jesus' disciples as it is for us today. So...they went fishing.

There's something else I suspect. See, John, the gospel writer, doesn't tell us the rest of the story. But, other writers do tell us what happened after this. And we, who live some two thousand years later, know that the disciples did not abandon the mission of Jesus and return to fishing without ever sharing the story. But rather, at some point, even though they surely continued to fish from time to time, they were changed in such a way that they lived in this world differently. They went from being fishermen who accompanied a hero, to being imperfect yet willing and empowered people who allowed themselves to be changed by God's love in such a way that they could make a difference for others...in such a way that they could share God's love with the world.

And it seems, in these days, that it is important for us to start to think about how we will be changed by God's love to live differently in the world. While we are a long way from being "back to normal"...while we are a long way from gathering in First Christian Church's sanctuary to worship in shared space...still things are opening back up and expectations are increasing about what people will be able to do and how they will be able to do it.

So, friends, now is the time for us to pause in the presence of Jesus - the one who knows us, who nourishes us, who looks us in the eye and loves us - and to ask how we are called to be different. Yes, in weeks and months and years in the future there will be some familiar things to which we return. Someday our children will board buses and return to school...someday we will worship together down the pew from one another...someday we will sit with family and friends in a restaurant.

But the call on our lives is to never be the same. And, while we will continue to practice washing our hands and wearing masks and keeping our distance as long as we need to, the changes I am talking about are deeper and just as impactful.

So now is the time for us to consider how we will return. It is the time for us to make commitments to live and love in the ways of Jesus. It is the time for us to be moved to be more patient and more compassionate, more generous and more forgiving, more just and more loving.

Friends, life will never be the same again. And, though this time is difficult, that might just be okay. Because here as we long to return to that which we called normal, Jesus meets us and Jesus asks us, not to be normal, but to be better, to more just, to be more whole, to be more loving.

May it be so.