

St Mark Sermon:
April 23, 2023
“The Fish Roast Restoration”
Rev. Stephen P. Greggo, PsyD

Lectionary Readings

First Reading Acts 2:14a, 36-41

“With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’” (Acts 2:40)

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19

“Then I called on the name of the Lord: ‘Lord, save me!’” (Ps 116:4).

New Testament I Pet 1:17-23

“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” (I Pet 1:22-23).

Gospel John 21:1-17

“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 all things; You know that I love You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend My sheep.’” (John 21:16-17)

Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon in a Soundbite

In this Resurrection appearance, Jesus interrupts a fishing crew reunion, reenacts the disciple’s call to follow him, and serves a seaside breakfast. The big reveal occurs during a quiet conversation where a fallen disciple is restored to faithful service. Peter experiences a *deep cleansing* and *divine commission*.

Peter’s preaching and pastoral ministry combusts on the day of Pentecost. The elements for the unleashing of the Spirit are put in place during this tender restoration. Profess love for the Lord with courage; proclaim the Word; and, remain open to the Holy Spirit. This is how to feed his lambs.

Here’s a spoiler on the take-home lesson: we have a part to play in the proclamation of the Word of God. Congregations impact preachers and the preaching we hear. The elements that turn hearing the Word into a powerful transformation are as dynamic in our day as when Jesus hosted that seaside fish roast.

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Pray

I. Introduction: Return to the Scene of their Calling

Our worship service Scripture readings have steadily followed the Gospel of John since Christmas and consistently throughout Lent. John shows us Jesus as the Word made flesh- the Son of God as Human Being. “In the beginning was Word and the Word was God and with God.” The Fourth Gospel leaves no doubt that when we call Jesus “Lord,” it is the recognition that by his deeds, teaching and resurrection from the tomb, Jesus is much more than another prophetic messenger. On Easter, we became witnesses to his resurrection appearance to Mary Madelene. Last week, we read about his appearance to the disciples behind closed doors that was detailed enough to convince doubting Thomas that the grave was no match for this Messiah.

Today’s passage, the epilogue to this Gospel, brings us alongside a reunion and restoration that is as beautiful as it is strange.

When the disciples explored the empty tomb and encountered the risen Lord, they were on the verge of hope. The reality is that they were overwhelmed and crippled with concerns for their lives. The shock of watching your Rabbi arrested, put through a phony trial, and marched off to public crucifixion, is not a trauma that will easily fade. The disciples go ‘low profile.’ None of them make plans to teach in the temple courts or revisit the site of the Sermon on the Mount. Peter knows what he needs: a taste of the familiar and a return to the ordinary; “I am going out to fish.” The disciples grab onto Peter’s plan and sign on for the all-night charter expedition. This is where I connect with Peter’s sentiments. There is no unrest in the soul that can’t be settled down by taking in the soothing scent of sea, listening to the silence of a lake, or quietly seeking fish that hide quietly beneath the surface. Nice plan Peter; I’m in.

The outcome? No fish. This feels familiar. It is so easy to imagine that perhaps while casting the nets out for the 10th time that Peter recalls the day when Jesus told him to push off from shore to fish. Jesus asked him to fish during the day in the same spots where he had wasted an entire night. Peter was exhausted and the request defied common sense. Fishermen were only paid when results were in the net.

On this morning, three years later and far from the controversies of Jerusalem, the sun gets brighter and the mist over the water begins to clear. A noisy observer from shore instructs the downcast fishermen to throw their nets yet again but this time on the right side of the boat. Those in the know point out that the style of fishing in that region made net casting from the left side more natural and common. At this point, the disciples did not even have enough confidence to respectfully decline this naïve and foolish advice. The weary crew did the craziest thing...they put down their nets one more time and on the *wrong* side of the boat. The nets began to fill...and fill...and fill. Now the scene becomes vividly clear. Peter hoped for a return to the simple life. Once you encounter Jesus; your life mission takes on a new direction.

Peter puts on his outer garment and leaps from the boat into the water. This ‘putting on’ a garment is the opposite of our thinking. Peter may be impulsive, but he was not so brash as to meet his Lord improperly attired. Fishing in one’s undergarments is perfectly acceptable; but not so much for sitting with the greatest Rabbi ever. This swim would take him back to the Master. Peter would not jump in unprepared for that honor. Peter gets to Jesus first. The others are not far beyond. These disciples were far too sensible to do a major catch and release. Why let 153 good fish return to the waters? The fish count details are so much fun. The recording of a precise catch cuts back on the age-old fish story tradition: narrative expansion of size, length & limit is perfectly acceptable. All fishy storytelling aside, these disciples were tired & hungry. As it turns out, Jesus offers a fish roast. A few additions from their catch of the day make this meal even more satisfying. As Jesus blesses the fish, breaks bread, and gives thanks, another memory comes back to life, if only for a second.

For the disciples, the awkwardness of meeting Jesus near the place of their first calling begins to fade. It is wonderful to sit with Jesus and bask in this fellowship. This was the familiar experience of sacred shalom that they were seeking. Their souls were not yearning for the feel of the nets in their hands but for the voice of Jesus in their ears. The warmth of the sun reflecting off the water, the smell of the fire, and the taste of the fresh fish: these wonderful experiences did not give the disciples the safety, security, and satisfaction they needed. Their quest was to be in the presence of their Master. Jesus is here. All is fine.

II. Restoration and Recommissioning

Cleansing: Jesus turns broken lives into vocational servants.

If a survey were taken to ascertain if Peter is a good choice to become the lead pastor for an upstart new ministry; one could easily predict the results. On the one hand, Peter could make expressive statements and stand boldly in his faith. He is truly the “walk on water with Jesus” kind of guy. On the other, he is also the one who once he is in gear, questions the wisdom of the risk. Sinking Peter had to be pulled back into the boat. Most recently, Jesus warned Peter of his upcoming denials. Peter was so sure of his steadfastness. He rejected Jesus’ admonishment. The follow-up: Peter denies his Lord, not once; twice; but three separate, painful times before the rooster crows at the break of dawn.

Cleansing. Peter is desperately in need of re-creation. His problem is not a single incident, an odd bad decision, or a rare error in judgement. No. Peter’s issue is a pattern of enthusiastic boldness followed by abandonment and denial. Peter’s hot and cold personality profile makes him ineligible for pastoral ministry. Jesus sees it otherwise.

Jesus hosts an intensely intimate but uncomfortably public, fish roast debriefing. Peter is forced to confront his failures, his flagrant renunciations. Notice that this is a personal dialogue; but other disciples witness the exchange. Jesus is preaching to all as he enacts the Gospel in their midst. This is a painful and layered conversation. Jesus asks Peter to gauge and declare his level of love. One rehearsal of the facts should be enough; but Jesus repeats his line of inquiry three times. Significant? Most definitely. Three semi-public denials require three semi-public affirmations.

Pastoral positioning. Each time Peter declares his love for Jesus; a charge is given regarding his new vocation. Love Jesus; tend my sheep. This involves guiding, guarding, and nurturing his lambs. Jesus positions Peter to be the pastor and spiritual leader for this team. The disciples readily follow Peter fishing, but the upcoming journey would contain more risk and demands.

Peeling back layers of excuses. Facing yourself and looking at self-defeating patterns closely can be a traumatic examination. The language of John indicates that Peter was a hurting disciple as this conversation struck deeper and deeper into his shame. Finally, Peter throws himself open. ‘Lord, you know my heart. I cannot hide it from you.’ There is no further denial, blame shifting or side-stepping his faults. Peter is an open book in front of Jesus and his fellow disciples. When Peter was called to follow Jesus after the first huge fish harvest, he threw himself at the Lord’s feet and called himself a dirty rotten sinner. Now, with no show or attention seeking. Peter lays his very core at the feet of Jesus. “Lord, look here. You who can see beneath the surface of the waters to gather a school of fish; take an image of my heart and see how it is bound to you.” Peter is ready for this commission.

Commission: The primary duty of an under-shepherd is to guide, guard, and feed sheep.

Peter becomes an under-shepherd to care for disciples old and new. The Word made Flesh selects a leader to be a trustee of the Word. The key to this ministry is not only loving those who are called to the

kingdom but maturing them. Feeding is teaching/preaching, and it is all about making the Divine Logos alive and thrive in human hearts.

Peter is ready to move forward with humility and holiness. It takes pastors with humility and holiness to fulfill this charge. When ministry leaders do not live up to his standards -and we won't- the Lord's grace must be welcome to fill the gaps. One side point here as we make an application from this passage: the disciple team heard and saw everything that took place between Jesus and Peter. They were participants in this cleansing and commissioning. There would be no question of Peter's role going forward. Peter would be accountable to the risen Lord, and to his fellow disciples. His call was their call.

Combustion: Heathy sheep have a hearty appetite that the Holy Spirit is ready to fulfill.

Since Good Friday, the lectionary has used its first reading to deliver part by part the entire sermon of Peter on Pentecost Sunday. In that message, Peter reviews the ministry of Jesus, the meaning of his death and resurrection, and the need to receive him as Lord and Savior. It is this Fish Roast Restoration that readies Peter to step into his new role as spokesmen for the Jesus movement. The great Comforter unleashes the power necessary to have Peter's message make an impact. He is a ready servant.

This is something for the congregation here at St. Mark. Great worship happens not when the pastor is ready to preach but when your heart's appetite is ready to devour what is served. When Peter finally says to the Lord: *"Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You."* He is open, vulnerable and speaks from his deepest self-awareness. He sets an example for the other disciples and for us. Out of such transparency will come the Lord's invitation to serve.

Great preaching flows not when the pastor has found sound words to penetrate defenses; but when the congregation comes with open hearts and gives the Holy Spirit the right to rule. This is a prominent Fish Roast Restoration principle.

Tips for Application: Read Scripture during the week and before worship. Review passages from the lectionary prior to the service. When you enter worship, ignore the announcements on the screen for at least part of the time to ready your heart for worship. Ask the Lord what surprise he has for you from his Word. This may come from the Scripture readings directly or perhaps from the Word proclaimed by the pastoral servant.

III. Application: A Mountain Top Fish Roast

The scene of this great cleansing, commissioning, and preparation for a ministry is a seaside fish roast. My sense is that for all the disciples, those fish tasted great. The best tasting fish I ever ate came with a Rocky Mountain high and I'd like to close with this streamside family story.

Sue and I have lifelong friends, Terry and Becky, who were part of the congregation where I ministered when I was but a fledging student at Denver Seminary. Terry & Becky were our age but did not have children. We had twins and were happy to share. We enjoyed their company. Sue and I were light hikers from the east coast; the steep peaks of Rocky Mountains outside Denver were far too daunting to tackle.

Terry & Becky encouraged us to go camping. Not RV style or glamping but an 'authentic' scout certified wilderness survival venture. This requires a backpack, plenty of bug repellent, and it means carrying everything you need way out into the woods. In order to get to the trail, we drove a couple of miles along a dirt road until even the truck did not want to go any further. We put packs on our backs; and on our kids, then off we went up the mountain. Once we crossed the main stream, the trail proceeded as a steady

ascent winding its way up the ravine and towards the peak. It was nearly dark when we reached the open camping spot alongside a series of streams. We landed below the timberline and the night air had none of the heat from the day. The campfire felt good, that is, after we finally got it going.

The first morning there was much to do. One important task had me concerned. We carried in a minimal amount of food. The main item on the menu was fish and there was no market in site; just this stream with its cold water from the melting snow on top the peak. We never took fishing quite so seriously as when the main course of our next meal rested on the results. Apparently, according to Rocky Mountain Scout tradition, breakfast, lunch, and dinner depend on catching fresh fish. Terry was a fine guide and showed us how to rig a simple line, find bait, and get into position to fish the stream. Fortunately, he and Becky were accomplished at attracting those small Brook trout. We learned to catch our fair share. From creek to campfire, we turned those flashy, active little fish into a tasty treat. Maybe it was the simple pleasure of this stream to table experience, or the sight of snow-capped peaks further up the trail or the cold wind coming down the hill. The plain confession is this, at least in my memory, no fish has ever tasted better before or after. What's the lesson from this streamside fish roast? Fresh roasted fish tastes superb when you have worked up an appetite to crave this delicacy.

Application: The Word of God can thrill us and warm the cold spots in our hearts when our appetite is ready to push aside all other life/mind distractions to crave its nurture. Our complex lives today and media appeals for our attention are a competitive challenge to make worship appealing and the ministry of the Word attractive. St Mark, cultivate an appetite for the Word of God; pray for the preacher who prepares their heart and thought to bring you the Word. Sit down to the feast as if you had been hiking the mountains all day or up all night fishing with no results. Somehow when the appetite is ready, the path to cleansing, commission, and openness to the Holy Spirit is easy to reach.

Pray

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.