

DO YOU LOVE ME?

First Congregational Church – Oshkosh, WI
Sunday, April 3, 2016 - Second Sunday of Easter
Revelation 5:11-14 and John 21:1-19

After the appearances of the risen Jesus in Jerusalem, seven of the disciples - for whatever reason we may speculate - have returned to their home and their old work (though we know what their old work was from other gospels, not John's). Peter already is their leader. He decides to fish at night and the others go out with him. They work all night and catch nothing!

Dawn comes and they see a stranger standing along the shore as they are returning to port. In their village, strangers are rare. He calls to them, "Boys, anything to eat?" They shout back to inform him their mission failed. The stranger suggests they cast their net to the other side of the boat. They humor him - and, they catch numerous fish. At this point, the disciple whom Jesus loved says to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

Now frankly, I don't know how these men ever survived as fishermen before they met Jesus for nowhere in the gospels do they catch a fish without his help! Six of the men stay aboard to pull the net full of fish in while Peter jumps over board virtually naked and swims for shore where there is already a charcoal fire with fish cooking and bread keeping warm. Peter then goes back to help his colleagues with the net that now holds 153 fish.

Jesus then calls them to sit down and eat. He takes the bread and gives it to them - also the fish - and then what follows is the interchange between Jesus and Peter. What is so extraordinary about this final resurrection appearance in John's gospel is that there is no ethical demand, no exhortation to spread the word, no great commission - just an intimate and directed conversation between Peter and Jesus. John's gospel presents the risen Christ acting after the crucifixion in the same way as he acts before. He speaks with Mary, he satisfies Thomas, assists a failed boatload of Galilean fishermen. The great *I Am* is simply there with them. And, he continues talking about love and

service! That really seems to be John's message to those who read his gospel at first and to believers who read it today. The risen Christ asks us to love him by being involved with caring for others! Can this be what it means to live in Christ?

I know that most of you in this room would not be at all surprised to hear me say that I've spent most of my life among academics, progressive Christians, and others, many of whom are skittish about any references to the mystical moments, the prescient dreams, those *thin places* my Celtic ancestors spoke of so often, telepathy, visions or inexplicable healings. Even those whose faith is solidly based in scripture shy away from such conversations about *boundary experiences*.

What do you do with angels, visions of animals on a sheet coming down from heaven, fiery chariots, withering fig trees, demonic voices? Resurrection? Bodily, physical resurrection? Jesus, a few days after being killed by the state, cooking breakfast on the beach, walking through

locked doors, looking like a stranger to virtually everyone who sees him and then suddenly being recognized, confronting Paul on the road to Damascus? - most of us pause and ask *how can these things be?* (a question our modern world likes to ask based on our knowledge of our five senses). A better question is *why are these stories being told?*

In Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, the Danish prince reminds his philosopher friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Post-resurrection stories in our gospels my friends are not simply be put before us as fact but as hypotheses that there are more things in heaven and earth than we generally take into account. There are ways of being that lie beyond the limitation of our five senses. We know, not just from theology but also from science, that our senses account for only a limited part of what is actual. Our senses depend on our bodies and they are finite. To reach beyond we need mathematics and particle physics, bioenergetics and biogenetics, poetry, music, art, a good

biblical theology. We need people whose callings take them to those borderlands and *thin places* and who deploy their imaginations in the service of barely conceivable truth.

Poets and artists help us imagine those other dimensions of being. Van Gogh's painting gives us a visible reminder of how matter verges on energy and how energy gathers into form. In his paintings mountains appear as waves of the ocean and trees turn to light at their edges - and, stars - Stars grow and dance, swim and glitter, through Van Gogh's nights, as we are only now beginning to see with the aid of the Hubble telescope.

On our tiny planet, seemingly alone in the universe save for our imagination of a God of Creation, in this segment of cosmic history that lies between God's self-revelation in Christ and the fulfillment and end of history, our assignment seems to be to find our way around this thin layer of breathable air and arable soil - stewarding, noticing, and narrating what we see in ways that keep us humbly attentive to hints and guesses that may lead us

toward a wider world where more things are possible than any dreamt of in our philosophies - and where a meal is being prepared for us.

Raymond E. Brown is recognized as one of the world's foremost scholars of John's gospel. In his volume entitled *The Gospel According to John*, he writes that chapter 21 is really an epilogue to the original. It was most likely added to this gospel well after it had been written - possibly as result of discovering a copy with this alternative ending? The chapter was added by use of the typical Greek words *meta tauta* (which means "after these things"). This additional chapter to the John's gospel is similar to Luke's accounts of the call of Peter and the miraculous catch of fish (found in Luke 5). Brown's conclusion is that Jesus reveals himself to his disciples in order to reinforce his call to them to be "fishers of people." Brown believes that the catching of 153 fish signifies the all-embracing character of the mission of Jesus' followers. The unbroken net means that in spite of the inclusion of such a vast diversity of people, the community represented

by these disciples is not torn by schism, not broken by diversity. What an image for a progressive church!

Brown has another thought on this morning's text that intrigues me. He points out that the writer makes no judgment regarding what and where these seven disciples are found in the story. They hadn't given up on Jesus. They weren't returning to their earlier occupations. Peter and the others were here fishing for people just as they had been fished for by Jesus earlier in Galilee. However, until Jesus directs them from the shore to cast their net on the right of their boat, they catch nothing. It is from Mark and Matthew's gospels that we glean there was, during the first century, a Jewish east side of the lake. Brown wonders if John's telling of the story isn't aimed at casting our eyes on the west side of the lake where the vast majority of the population was not Jewish? The apostles weren't fishing to fill their bank accounts but to build congregations. Jesus directs them to the gentiles, the Greeks, those of this world who are beyond the walls of our community of faith.

In the dialogue after breakfast Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. Perhaps this harkens back to Pilate's courtyard where Peter denied Jesus three times before the dawn? Feed my lambs, Tend my sheep, Feed my sheep. The lambs are children of the wider world who need to be nurtured and cared for until they are adults. The sheep need protection from predators and illness, wind and weather until they are nurtured to health and wholeness. Feed and Tend. Nurture and Care. These verbs are directed to those outside the faith but who are the Lord's also. Peter knew, even if we fail to grasp it, the implication comes from the heart of Hebraic faith found in Psalm 24 where the Psalmist says, "The whole inhabited earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and all those who dwell therein..."

If we love the risen Christ, our call, as was Peter's, is to serve all people. Nothing more and certainly nothing less.

Amen.

