

One of the things that I love the most about studying the Bible is how situations in my life will help me to find ideas and truths that I'd never noticed before in passages that I've read before hundreds of times. Today's reading from John's Gospel is a good example of that. As I read this story earlier in the week, with last week's sermon still fresh in my memory and keeping in mind that today is Earth Day, a whole stream of potential interpretation opened up for me. It doesn't negate any of the other things that I've heard or read or thought about this passage, it merely adds a new layer. I'm not sure whether to call this serendipity or divine inspiration but whichever it was, it has certainly been fun to follow it. I hope you think so, too!

For starters, there is the miraculous catch of fish. Over the years, I've almost always heard this story linked to the passages in Matthew and Mark in which Jesus tells Simon Peter and his brother Andrew that they should follow him and that he will make them "fishers of men." Making that connection, it is then easy to interpret John's story as a renewal of Jesus' call to Peter. One might say that it is the beginning of the rehabilitation of Peter, following his abandonment and denial of Jesus in the crisis of Maundy Thursday night. Combined with Jesus' conversation with Peter on the shore, at which we'll look in a minute, this story seems to be John's record of how Peter regained his leadership status among the Twelve. Jesus begins the process of renewing Peter's call by encountering Peter where Peter is most comfortable, in a fishing boat. He then challenges Peter to see the familiar in a new light, just as he did in the original meeting. Whether it is the call to go from catching fish to catching souls or the simple instruction to do things a new way, there is an implicit challenge to Peter to see his life from a new perspective, with a new focus. The usual interpretation, and quite a valid one, I think, is one of evangelism, that the large catch of fish represents the numerous souls brought to the faith by Peter and his fellows and that the untorn net symbolizes the unity of the Church in the face of opposition during persecution and stress. While we might not find that latter image particularly convincing, given the conflicts that have plagued the Church over the centuries, it would have been comforting to the initial audience of this Gospel, who were likely suffering under one of the less tolerant Roman emperors.

There is another, simpler way of looking at the image of the miraculous catch of fish. It can also function as a reminder to us of the abundance with which God blesses us and which so often seems to accompany the presence of Jesus, particularly in John's Gospel. As this is the last miracle that John records Jesus performing, it's worthwhile to recall the first. Do you remember? It was another miracle of abundance – the turning of six large pots of water into an equal quantity of the most excellent wine. To be around Jesus, to be one of his followers, is to be continually exposed to the wellspring of life. It is John's Gospel that records Jesus as saying, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." As I've said before in this place, we might do well to replace the metaphor of the kingdom of God with the image of the banquet or party of God. For those of us who do not think of looking to a king to secure a stable and joyful life, the joy of life in Christ and the abundant life may be better equated to that great party thrown for the return of the wandering son, or for the wedding of the King's child. The abundance of life in Christ is an abundance of the Spirit. The Jesuit scholar, Fr. John Bucki writes, "The Risen Life which we share in Christ helps us to see the abundance of God's Spirit that is present in the whole world and to share that abundance."

It's also appropriate, I think, to spend some time reflecting on the story at it's most basic level, as a story about Jesus meeting his old friends going about their daily routine and feeding them breakfast. As I mentioned last week in reflecting on the post-resurrection appearances recorded in Luke's Gospel, Jesus always seems to be interested in meeting the most immediate needs of his friends for physical food and comfort as well as for spiritual nourishment. Jesus is someone just like us, someone who likes a nice hearty breakfast after a morning's fishing and knows his friends do as well. It is always easier, isn't it, to contemplate how we may go about following in Jesus' footsteps when we recall that his strides were no longer than ours, that his feet got just as tired, that he left the same tracks in the dust as we do. And it's important to remember that every part of our lives is blessed by Jesus, our work-a-day lives as well as our Sunday-morning-worship lives. Jesus is present in every place where we are, all of our lives belong to the Father and all has at least the potential to be sacred. I particularly enjoyed this week the reflection of the Episcopal preacher, Paul D. Allick, on this theme: "This is where Christ meets us now. He meets us in the movements of our life. We need to eat; we need to work. And the risen Christ is there among us. God chose to come among us, and even after the miracle of the resurrection, God chose to make us breakfast... After the resurrection, Christ could have entered the cities and by-ways in glory and light. He could have really amazed the crowds and gotten more people to take seriously what the apostles were preaching. But he didn't. He kept entering into everyday life. Everyday life is blessed."

The abundant catch experienced by Peter and friends through the intervention of Jesus was miraculous to them 2000 years ago but it might be even more miraculous today for fishermen using the same gear. Over the past several decades, naturalists have recorded a decline in fish populations in the Sea of Galilee, due in large part to the presence of agricultural chemicals from run-off. Particularly affected has been the species known locally as "St. Peter's Fish," which might be better known to Northwest shoppers as tilapia. The lake which was so vital for Jesus' companions is, in this way, a microcosm for a larger issue. In November of last year, a team of scientists published a report in the journal Science warning that "If current trends of overfishing and pollution continue," the populations of nearly all types of seafood face collapse by the year 2050. Voice of America reported that "(the) team arrived at this conclusion after reviewing many studies that monitored the impact of species loss on smaller, local scales and by checking historical archives to track changes in species diversity over the past one-thousand years in 12 coastal regions around the world. They also compiled seafood catch data from 64 large ocean fisheries and analyzed fisheries databases compiled by the United Nations and the University of British Columbia." The scientists also found a decline in the overall health of the oceanic ecosystem, with harmful algae blooms up by 450 percent and areas of oxygen depletion increased by over 300 percent. The report's co-author, Steve Palumbi of Stanford University, said, "Unless we fundamentally change the way we manage all the ocean species together, as working ecosystems, then this century is the last century of wild seafood." Perhaps unsurprisingly, the National Fisheries Institute, a trade association for the seafood industry, pooh-poohed the scientists' alarm, pointing to improved fishing technology and aquacultural methods for farming fish as the answer. But Joshua Reichert, head of the Pew Charitable Trusts' environment program, pointed out that for more than 1 billion people, many of whom are poor, fish is their main source of protein. For those who rely on the strength of their own arms or the wind from the heavens to propel their little boats into the deep to take advantage of the ocean's bounty to sustain their families, I doubt that the tender mercies of investors in aquaculture will

provide an answer. The poor of the world will once again bear the brunt of the results of the appetites and carelessness of the well-to-do.

There are other parts of this morning's story that are open to different levels of interpretation as well. There are at least two very appropriate meanings, for example, attributed to Jesus' question to Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" For some, the question is Jesus asking Peter to compare himself to the other disciples. He, after all, had been very vocal in his declarations of love for Jesus, as John records it, asking Jesus to wash not just his feet but his head as well, saying he would lay down his life on Jesus' behalf. But then, like the others, he had fled, and worse than the others, he had publicly denied knowing his Master. So perhaps the question would be appropriate. Using his full name (and in my house, that was and is always a sign of someone in trouble) Jesus may be saying "So, Simon Bar-Jona, do you still think you are the most loyal of my friends?"

But I've always thought the question was about something else. I've always thought (and smarter people than me have also thought) that Jesus was asking, "Simon, do you love me more than fish? Do you love the kind of life I've introduced you to more than your old, safe life as a fisherman? Will you take the risk to follow me again, or would you rather go back to how it was before I came along?" It's a question that many of us can relate to, I suspect. This whole "following Jesus" thing can be difficult, it can push us out of our comfort zones. Following Jesus can require a lot of things from us we'd just as soon not do: forgiving wrongs done to us, loving our enemies, caring for people we don't know and probably wouldn't like if we did know them, watching out for other people as earnestly as we watch out for our own needs and desires. Good grief! Who needs it? Well, we do, but we don't always realize it. It's a question that Jesus asks us often. "Which is more important to you, doing what you know is right or doing what is comfortable?" As more and more of the world's leaders and authorities agree that climate change is a real threat and that humankind is responsible, tougher and tougher choices about how to reverse the damage and sustain our planet are being called for. All of us are going to face changes in our lifestyle. We are going to give up the freedom of individual cars for public transportation. We're going to have to reduce our energy consumption in our homes and offices. Our diets will need to change and our spending habits. Undoing the damage that our species has done to the planet isn't going to be easy just as following Jesus isn't easy. But to honor God means honoring God's creation. If it is true, as many believe, that global warming will have the greatest negative impact on the poorest countries, then care for "the least of these" is going to have to mean tackling climate change head-on. Do we love Jesus, the Jesus we see in the faces of the poor, more than our comfortable lifestyle and our usual way of doing things? Or will we chuck it all and go back to fishing in the lake where we are comfortable?

I think that caring for each other, for "the least of these" wherever we may find them, is at least part of what Jesus meant when he told Peter, "Feed my lambs." I do not hear in Jesus' charge to Peter a special mission that sets him aside or above his fellows, as some might. Instead, I hear a responsibility that is shared by all believers. We are always to look out for those who are weaker than we are, we must always be prepared to protect the vulnerable, even at our own expense. John records that Jesus has referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. Now, he asks Peter and, by extension, us to take on the shepherd role. On the wall of the office is one of my few mementos of my brief term as Director for Communications of the

Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children. It's a poster promoting the Thanksgiving Offering taken in Baptist churches across Kentucky in support of that agency. The poster depicts a young girl, one of the least of these, clutching a ragged stuffed animal, a lamb. Above her is the inscription, "Feed my lambs." It's a good reminder to me of the imperative with which Jesus left us.

But feeding the lambs means more than just giving an annual donation to support work with orphans and troubled families. Underlying Jesus' admonition to Peter to feed his sheep, I also hear God's charge to the first man: that he was to dress the garden and keep it. Caring for the least of these, for the vulnerable, must surely include all of the vulnerable parts of God's creation, the animals and plants, the water and sky, the very Earth itself, all of which have been negatively impacted by humankind's thoughtlessness and all of which await a final consummation in Christ. The Old Testament prophets were very clear in the message that human failings were felt in the environment. Hosea brought Israel this word from God: "Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing." And hear these words from the prophet Amos, explaining the famine and hunger that plagued the land: "Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way... I gave you cleanness of teeth (hunger) in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me, says the Lord. And I also withheld the rain from you when there were still three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city, and send no rain on another city; one field would be rained upon, and the field on which it did not rain withered; so two or three towns wandered to one town to drink water, and were not satisfied; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord. I struck you with blight and mildew; I laid waste your gardens and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees and your olive trees; yet you did not return to me, says the Lord." We might not equate the sins Hosea lists with environmental degradation and famine, but it is clear that the disregard for the poor and taking advantage of their situation has led, just as Amos said, to hunger, climate change, crop failure and famine. The industrialized nations have the financial power to end hunger around the world. We simply do not have the will.

But this state of affairs cannot, will not last. As the Body of Christ on Earth, the Church, moves towards fulfillment of Christ's mission, towards bringing Good News to the poor and release to the captives, we also move toward the day when our good Earth shall be healed. Paul saw it in the blessings of the future. Remember what he wrote to the Romans: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." John the Revelator saw it too: "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!'"

This “Earth Day” that we celebrate today is not a holiday that springs from a particular religious tradition but I find it absolutely appropriate and significant that, this year at least, it coincides with a Sunday in Easter. It is the power of the resurrected Christ, in which we all share, that promises the final consummation of redemption for all creation. With the Psalmist, we affirm that the Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof and the beauty as well. As we see our campus in bloom, as we look to the mountains that surround us in their majesty and the sparkling waters of the Sound, we give witness to the glory of God’s creation. And as we do, we are called to remember that human sinfulness has put the abundance of God’s gift of nature to us in danger. Just as come together for feeding with spiritual food, so too must we come together as the Body of Christ to dress and to keep, to heal and to renew the glorious Garden in which we live.