

John 21:1-19

May 5, 2019

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

Growing up, one of my favorite sports I participated in was basketball. I would spend hours in the driveway pretending to be Dr. J of the Philadelphia 76'ers, or Larry Bird of the Boston Celtics, or Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls or one of my favorite Hawkeye basketball players counting down the clock from 10 and hitting the game winning shot. There was one problem I encountered as I got older. My size. I seemed to be shortest kid on the floor, which created some challenges when it came to shoot the basketball. It seemed my shot would repeatedly get blocked, which greatly frustrated me. During junior high (middle school) one of my coaches began to tell me repeatedly, "Jump shot Whaley!" A jump shot is essentially just that. You use your legs to jump and then shoot the ball at the apex of your jump giving you a few extra inches of height prior to releasing the ball forward toward its intended target, the basket. Previously, my shooting style had been more of a set shot. That is, I would release the shot while my feet were still fairly planted on the ground.

It wasn't just practice, but it was also in the hallway as he passed me, "Jump shot, Whaley." Or, during class he would write it at the top of returned papers and tests, "Jump shot, Whaley." Yet, I resisted to change something that I had just always known. That was comfortable. And, the frustration continued to mount until finally I had enough of, "Jump shot, Whaley" and began to work on the jump shot. It took a while to find the rhythm and timing of that shot but when I did something happened. More shot attempts that didn't get blocked, which ultimately led to more made baskets.

I imagine the disciples may have experienced some frustration after a long night of fishing on the Sea of Tiberias (aka Sea of Galilee) having caught nothing. These were, after all, excellent and gifted fishermen whom made a living through their craft prior to Jesus calling them into a life of discipleship. I wonder if they may have been ready to throw in the towel and call it a day. Go back and try it again later. One can only imagine the heartache they were still feeling following Jesus' death. Perhaps, even loss of direction on where to go now that their teacher was gone. Perhaps, even a loss of identity. So, they do what they know. They go back to where it all began. Galilee and back out onto their boats.

But then a man appears on the shore and suggests they cast their net on the opposite side of the boat, which resulted in the catch of many fish, 153. So many they struggled to haul in the net. A rather simple piece of advice led to great success. In many ways, I view this aspect of the story, applicable to the church today. Where do we need to change in order to fully receive the abundance of what God offers it? When have we continued to fish primarily on one side of the boat and need to take a chance of fishing on the other side – trying something new in order to fish for people? Taking a jump shot rather than a set shot. Casting our net on the right side rather than the left side. Where do we encounter the risen Christ continuing to meet us in our frustrations, fears, struggles and grief calling out to us and guiding us forward?

I wonder if this isn't the reason Chapter 21 may have been an addition to John's gospel as many think it was. Following Jesus' resurrection at the beginning of Chapter 20, his appearance to Mary Magdalene and then two times to the disciples, the chapter concludes with these words:

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (NRSV)

This seems to conclude and summarize the entire purpose of John's gospel - to reveal who Jesus is through the retelling of "signs" that Jesus had done throughout his life. Recall, there were seven: turning water into wine (2:1-12), the healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54), the healing of the paralytic at the Bethesda pool (5:1-17), the feeding of the 5,000 (6:1-15), the healing of the man born blind (9:1-41), and the raising of Lazarus (11:1-46).

But then we get chapter 21, which does seem to be an addition later, but why? Why did John or perhaps, a disciple of John, feel the need for this addendum if that indeed was the case? I can't help but think the young church in John's context needed a reminder. They needed reassurance they were not alone. Years after Christ's death and perhaps beginning to think his promised return may not come, they may have grown weary, frustrated, despondent, and fallen prey to simply going through the motions. Perhaps, the Easter joy had worn off and they were in a rut of fishing from one side of the boat and needed their eyes opened to the newness God offers day after day in the risen Christ. Perhaps, they needed a reminder, a sign, of their calling as disciples and the mission of the church.

Thus, this story was recollected and retold. The risen Christ is alive, and he continues to call out to people of the resurrection. There is yet kingdom work to be done. Fish to be caught. Sheep to tend. Meals to share together. You are still my disciples he seems to remind them. Be Easter people! Living into the abundance of life in me. John refers to the Sea of Galilee as the Sea of Tiberias only here and in Chapter 6, which is the feeding of the 5,000, the 5th sign. Recall, how the disciple's perception of scarcity gave way to the abundant feast provided by Jesus. Their eyes opened once more to who Jesus is. And in this miracle Jesus uses each of them to gather up the food that was left over. They were partners in the work Jesus was doing.

Notice in our passage, it was the disciples working together that enabled them to finally haul the abundant catch of fish ashore. This is a story John's young church may have needed to hear and it's a story the church continues to need to hear today. The risen Christ continues to meet us, call us, commission us, send us, and provide for us. He makes himself known in the meal we share. Jesus Christ is alive! He is risen! Alleluia!