

John 21:1-19

Have you ever felt like you didn't belong?

Maybe you were with your family or your friends, but things weren't the same?

Maybe you *did something* they didn't know about, and they wouldn't approve of – something you felt guilty about.

Or *maybe* you did something that MAYBE some of them DID know about – but you were afraid to admit it.

Or maybe you DID admit it, and they dismissed it, and reassured you with some measure of kindness – but you didn't know if they REALLY meant it.

Maybe you wondered if they talked about you when you weren't there.

Your "place" in the group changed – or maybe you didn't feel you even HAD a place there anymore.

Sin and guilt have a way of doing that. Alienating us from friends and family who love us, making us retreat into ourselves, making us look only to ourselves to save ourselves.

I wonder if this is how Peter must have felt over the days since that night Jesus was taken and then crucified. Because after all that BIG devotion he had displayed and talked about with the Lord, and in front of the other disciples, *it had all been undone*, it seemed, not once – but *three times* – the three times he had denied knowing him on that dark and fateful night.

Is that why Peter lagged behind the “beloved disciple” when they ran to the tomb after three days? The guilt weighed him down? The fear that if Jesus truly WAS raised, he, Peter, was no longer welcome as his disciple?

And when Jesus had come and appeared to them all – Peter hadn’t confessed the sin of his denial, and Jesus hadn’t brought it up. So it still hung around his neck.

And now in today’s text, Peter is ready to just return to his former life. He goes fishing. Maybe he just belongs in that fishing boat after all – maybe there he will be able to shed that weight hanging on him.

But when Peter returns to the familiar, to what he knows, he isn’t rewarded for his own efforts by a nice catch – by their own efforts, they caught nothing. It’s *Jesus’* direction that allows him and his friends to haul in 153 fish.

When Peter sees and understands that it is Jesus who has done this – not his own efforts – he is beside himself; he seems just *ecstatic*. He jumps *out* of the boat to get to shore faster than the boat – *the opposite of what he had done when running to the tomb with the beloved disciple*.

If Jesus would do this for him – or maybe *as a sign* to him – perhaps he could be forgiven. Perhaps he could belong again!

Excitedly Peter helps drag in the fish from the boat, to add to the fish Jesus already has cooking on the charcoal fire. There are so many fish! It’s amazing the net didn’t break.

But something else, not the net, is in need of mending: Peter and Jesus' broken relationship.

Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him; by the third time Peter was feeling hurt – didn't the Lord *believe* him when he answered that he did love him? Had his three-fold denial of Jesus, once at the gate and twice by the charcoal fire in the courtyard made Jesus lose all faith in him?

Did Peter make the connection between Jesus' three questions and Peter's three denials?

Each time, Peter responds that he does love Jesus, and each time Jesus tells him what to do about it: Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

Peter's slate is now wiped clean – three for three; he can belong again. He is forgiven.

But he also now has instructions for his mission – the mission he shares with the other disciples – the believers with whom he belongs. Their mission, together, is the same as ours today:

- To feed God's people, the young and the old, those fresh to the faith and those mature in their faith.
- To tend to them all – to pay attention to their needs, both physical and spiritual.

By feeding, I mean both with material food and the spiritual food of the Gospel. And by tending to their needs I include healing hurts that might be physical, emotional and spiritual.

Like Peter, we are a forgiven people. Whatever we have done, Jesus forgives. And as God's forgiven people, we make up God's church, here at this church, and across the globe.

When we focus on our mission, the mission given to the church through Peter – which isn't confined in these walls or confined to the sheep in this fold – we are carrying out our co-mission from God.

And when we use the gifts God has given us -- whether it's human resources or financial resources, or time or space, or expertise or hard work -- like those hundred and fifty-three fish the disciples hauled onto the shore, Jesus will add to them a hundredfold and more.

When we remember our mission, when we remember who is really in charge, when we listen for the voice of Jesus in all we do, we will be ready for that big catch, whenever and whatever it is.

Amen.

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