



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “THE NET WAS NOT TORN”

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 148; John 21:1-19

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, May 5, 2019  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

**People:** *Thanks be to God.*

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Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week we talked a little bit about how, through the voice of an angel at the empty tomb, God let it be known to the followers of Jesus that he would meet them back in Galilee – back in their community / their neighborhood – and we pondered what it meant that it was in the midst of their regular ordinary lives that Jesus would connect them.

Not surprisingly, the disciples have done as they are told, and, in John chapter 21, we find out what Galilee looks like for at least seven of Jesus' followers...it looks like fishing. It looks like the kind of task from which they were called when their journey of faith began. We are told it was Peter who first decides to go fishing, and six others choose to go with him at the last minute...and all night long they fish...and all night long they catch nothing.

Mary Caroline and I went fishing off the dock under the Ravenel Bridge a few weeks ago. We bought one of those temporary fishing licenses and I thought we might be out there for an hour or two; however, about 25 minutes without a nibble proved to be long enough for our first expedition. Imagine how frustrating it would have been for Peter, who was a fisherman by trade, to have spent the whole evening out on a boat, only to come up woefully short.

"Children, you have no fish, have you," declares Jesus from the shoreline. He tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat – says that they will catch some fish. It turns out they caught so many fish that they could not bring in the net.

We may recall another fishing story which often gets confused with this one. It is the one that occurred at the beginning of Jesus' ministry rather than here at the end. According to the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, after having taught the crowds from a boat, Jesus asks Simon – whose name had not yet been changed to Peter – asks him to push the boats out in the deep water and let down their nets – this after another long and uneventful night of fishing.

In Luke's story, the disciples again do as they're told and the Bible tells us that they catch so many fish that the nets began to break and the boats began to sink...and at the sight of all of this, Simon Peter fell down at Jesus' knees and said: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." And he was right. He was a sinful man...and we are sinful too! Oh, be we old or young, women or men, poor or rich – we all have this one thing in common...we all sin and fall short of the glory of God!

But on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Easter, our Lectionary reading from John's Gospel effectively reminds us again that our sin does not have the last word; and John accomplishes this through a kind of ordinary experience, such that we have heard a story very much like this before. Now in this case, though the disciples have known Jesus for some time – they do not recognize him

on the shore for some reason. But in verse 7 we read that the “disciple whom Jesus loved” – figured it out: “It is the Lord!” he exclaims!

Perhaps you’ve been excited on the water yourself. Let’s say you pull up to a favorite spot or maybe you have gone to the beach for the day and you arrive at the water’s edge. When I would show up at station 28 ½ on Sullivan’s Island from time to time as a child, I would run right up to the water and then kick off my flip flops, nearly rip off my shirt – if I had my wits about me I would reach for my wallet and throw that on top of the pile – and then I’d run and I’d jump in – and I’d splash and I’d play.

The reason I bring that up is because our inclination before jumping into the water is often to take things off, whereas Peter’s inclination was to put things on. The Bible tells us that Peter was naked, though that could have meant that he was down to next-to-nothing; regardless, he put on some clothes...and then he jumped into the sea.

I wonder – I wonder if what we are seeing here is that perfectly human Peter, which, perhaps like us, when confronted with the grandeur of Christ and our brokenness, on the other hand, that we may respond in a similar way as Adam and Eve. Remember when they realized they were naked? What did they do? They put clothes on. That’s partly perhaps what is going on here. He realizes how broken he is. But Peter is not without hope; he is not a crushed spirit at this point in the gospel – he is not acting the coward as he had been doing just hours and days before. And notice that he does not say what he said in Luke chapter 5, which was: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

No! Peter is living boldly in this instance, if not ecstatically, and he responds to the reality that it is Jesus on the shore by jumping in the water, clothes and all...and he swims some hundred odd yards in order to close the gap – in order to draw as close as he can to his Savior. You see, the resurrection has brought about a profound change in Peter’s life, for we see in Peter, not a perfect person, but a sanctified person – that is, someone whom God has gotten a hold of and is making better and more faithful every day.

And such is the journey of faith, for neither are we ever a finished product. In fact, God is constantly at work in our frail and human lives, taking that which is broken and fragmented, and, by his grace, putting the pieces back together – making us whole!

There is a phrase in this morning’s New Testament Lesson which stood out for me and birthed today’s sermon title, because, in contrast to the nets that began to break and the boats that began to sink in Luke’s similar fishing story, in this story - in John’s Gospel - we are told that “the net was not torn.” Even with a hundred and fifty-three fish, which must have been an extraordinary catch, otherwise, we probably wouldn’t know about it. So, in light of the resurrection, not only do we have an ever-maturing Peter, but, now, it seems as though even the apparatus of the human experience is proving to be stronger and more resilient.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there – he is not finished with Peter, and he is not finished with us. What follows may well have been Jesus’ final personal and earthly lesson for Peter...and Jesus sets the stage for this most important teaching by inviting the disciples ashore, where they find

a charcoal fire and some fish and bread. In a beautiful way, Jesus is once again modeling servanthood - he is providing daily bread for his followers - but notice also the charcoal fire. It's interesting, I know of only one other place in the New Testament where that kind of fire is referenced. In John 18:17-18 we read: "The woman said to Peter, 'You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?' He said, 'I am not.' Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was warming himself."

I don't think that it is of small significance that a similarly described fire is where Peter denied Jesus three times, and now yet by another charcoal fire, we are about to experience Peter's threefold affirmation of faith. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" and three times Peter responds by saying that "yes" he does! Then "feed my lambs," Jesus says. He goes on to say, "tend my sheep," and "feed my sheep." In effect, Jesus is telling Peter, if you love me - if you love me more than these - perhaps indicating that so great was Peter's shortcomings in the denial of Christ, that so much greater would now be Peter's love and devotion to his Savior. If you love me, Jesus says, "feed my lambs," "tend my sheep," "feed my sheep."

In other words, take care of my children, my church, my people...feed them with food for their bodies, absolutely, but especially feed their spirits with the very Word of God. Isn't it wonderful to know that this, Jesus said to Peter. You see, Peter's witness did not end with his denial, nor does it end with ours or any of our other shortcomings. No doubt, our lives can be filled with immeasurable highs, but they can also be filled with immeasurable lows...occasions when we have honest doubt; times when we feel that others may not appreciate us...situations that leave us feeling inadequate - or unworthy.

But consider how the church has marveled at Peter's faith over the years...walking out on the water, expressing a willingness to build three booths at the time of Jesus' transfiguration, so willing to stand with Jesus at the time of his arrest that he cut off a man's ear. And yet the church also watches as Peter loses his focus and begins to sink; we watch as his suggestion about building booths is interrupted and overshadowed by a heavenly voice; we watch as Peter, just a few hours after brandishing his sword, is scurrying around in the shadows denying Christ.

I think it is safe to say that Peter's life was an exceptional blend of success and failure - but Jesus chose to use him nonetheless! And so it happened that Peter was for Jesus and Christ's Church a rock, and he would go on to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles - with the world, and Peter's leadership would prove to be foundational for the emerging church. Ah, but lest we forget...Peter himself was not the foundation / he was not the cornerstone - these were not Peter's sheep. No! It was Peter's confession of the Gospel upon which God would build his church; and in this way the Gospel has always functioned as food for the lambs - food for the sheep. And in so many ways, that task has fallen to Christ's Church today...imperfect though we are, ours is also the task of tending and feeding the lambs and the sheep...and one wonderful example of how this happens is through our Confirmation Class.

For months these students and their sponsors, and, of course, James, they have been growing closer to God and to one another, and they have done so through a variety of means, not least

of which has been through studying God's Word. And so today, we celebrate that they have been fed – they have been nurtured in the spirit and the faith, and today, and this morning, in context of worship, they profess that faith for themselves.

And I reference the context of worship, because worship is one of the most important ways by which we, as God's sheep are fed. Yes, worship is directed to God and God is undoubtedly the object of our worship; yet everything we do from the prayers we offer, to the hymns we sing, to the sermons we preach - they are about the proclamation of the gospel...they are about the business of feeding God's sheep.

I think this is partly why we as traditional Presbyterians typically leave politics out of the pulpit because this is not a podium from which we champion our personal agendas nor is this a place where we address feel good sentimentalism. This is a pulpit...and this is where, by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, our souls are fed; this is where we affirm that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

And praise be to God, the successful distribution of this food is not ultimately dependent upon us. To be certain, God has determined to use people like Peter and people like you and me to feed his lambs and his sheep, but, at the end of the day, we are talking about God's Gospel, and God's work, and God's sheep...not our own. For "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;" says the Lord, "it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

In other words, dear friends, God's food does not disappoint. God's net which first caught us and now by God's grace we are called to cast out - that net does not tear.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, use who we are, the best and worst about us, and fashion us into instruments of your love, that through our witness, individually and corporately, we would feed your lambs...that we would tend your sheep...that we would feed your sheep. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*