

May 5, 2019

John 21:1-14

Who here likes to go fishing? Who likes fishing stories? I know some of you just light up when you get to talk about fishing. You can tell us the when, the where, the bait you used, the how many and how big - and those lunkers ... they keep on growing, don't they?

Today, we have a fishing story. It's a good one, but as far as fish stories in the Bible go, it's not the biggest. Jonah getting swallowed, saved, and spit up on land by a giant fish - that beats this one. Jesus splitting 2 small fish and feeding 5000 ... the time Jesus gave Peter, James, and John - the professional fishermen - a lesson on fishing, and then told them - "You will be fishers of men" - those fish stories beat this one. Then there's the question - was this a miracle? A miracle sighting, a miracle catch, a miracle fish on a miracle fire? We're not told, but if it was a miracle or miracles, it's not the biggest or the best of Jesus' miracles. Any of those other fish miracles beat these. As far as fish stories go, as far as miracles go - this one doesn't seem to be the biggest or the best, does it? That's why I haven't ever preached on this before. But there is something in this fish story that is so good to hear, too good not to share.

Remember, this isn't a "once upon a time" story. This is real Easter history. Put yourself in the place of the disciples. For three years your life has been following Jesus, watching Jesus, soaking in Jesus' words, his life, his love, his power. You've heard Jesus say big things - **"I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for my sheep ... and I will take it back up again. ... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."** You've heard Jesus promise you big things - life, a purpose, a place in his kingdom, a place in the big things of God. You've been part of Jesus' big things; you've been there for Jesus' big miracles; you've worked miracles yourself. And then what? Just when things were coming together, Jesus was arrested, and you ran. Jesus was nailed to a cross, crucified, and you cowered. Jesus was buried, and you hid in fear. Your Jesus, your life, your purpose, your place in the big things of God - all dead. Until you heard the impossible: "Christ is risen!" Until you saw, until you heard the unbelievable: Jesus standing right in front of you - "Peace be with you." Now what? Jesus says: **"Go to Galilee and wait for me there."** You go to Galilee. You wait.

But now what?

The Peter in you says: “I can’t just sit. I’ve got to do something. I’ve got to do something useful. I’m going out to fish.” A half dozen of you join him. You do the hard work of a professional fisherman. You get up off your bottoms. You work the boat; you work the nets; you do the work. And what do you get? Nothing. It’s not supposed to work that way, is it? But so often it does, doesn’t it? You step up, you step forward to do something useful with your life. You do the work. You cast the nets. You invite for Easter. You make phone calls for a work project, a ministry project. You step up, you step forward to do something useful with your life. And what do you get? No response. No response to your invitations. No response to your phone messages. No response to your encouragements. No response, just an empty net. Oh, that can be so discouraging - “Why bother?!”

Why bother? The empty net might not stay empty. There’s more than just you. There’s more than just the few of you. Watching off to the side is some guy. He wouldn’t have to be there; he wouldn’t have to be watching you. He’s got a nice, cozy place where he could sit back and relax. But he’s here; he’s watching; he’s interested in you and what you’re doing. He sees the empty net, but he doesn’t give up. At just the right time, in just the right place, he nudges: “Try again, on the other side of the boat.” I want to say: “I’ve already tried and tried and tried. And look what it’s gotten me. I’m tired. I’m done. Just let me go home.” But you don’t. You don’t get snarky. And you don’t quit. You try again, on the other side of the boat. And what do you find? More fish than you can haul into your boat. Not just small ones, biggins. One-hundred-fifty-three big ones.

Why? Was it finally the right time, the right place, the right way? That’s what I’d like to know. John, the disciple John, tells us something else: **“It is the Lord.”** And he doesn’t just fill our nets. He has something cooking for us on shore. He has time for us. He has a place for us with him. He has a place for what we do, a place for us to bring our something to the table.

Have you ever been swallowed by a fish and spit up on shore? Me neither. Have you ever had you and 5000 of your neighbors fed by 2 small fish and 5 loaves of bread? Me neither. Have you ever caught so many fish

that your boat almost sank? Me neither. Have you ever got up, stood up, stepped forward to do something useful, something useful with the time Jesus is giving you? And then hauled in an empty net? Me too. That's why I'm preaching on this fish story. There are times we might haul in an empty net like Peter and the others. But like Peter and the others, we have someone watching us, someone interested in what we're doing, someone nudging, encouraging - "try again." That someone nudging isn't a bother; he's Jesus Christ.

When he nudges us, he's not looking to guilt us into doing this or that. He's not looking to guilt us into stepping up or returning that phone message. No, instead of piling on the guilt, Jesus took our guilt. The guilt that says, "Too little, too late," the guilt that says, "after what you've done, you think Jesus has a place for your stuff?" the guilt that says, "after what you haven't done, you think you get to nudge?" ... instead of guilting us, Jesus took our guilt. He took your guilt and mine all the way to the cross where he paid the price to set you right with God - right for life with God, right for life in heaven, but not just that. Jesus set you right with God to live a useful life here on earth - a life doing the things of God, a life working the work of God, a life sharing the heart of God. Today, that Jesus - who gave his life for you - he lives! He's here, and he's watching us and what we do. Watching us and the way we step up to do something useful.

And what does he want you to know? Sometimes when we step up to do something useful, we might bring in an empty net. Sometimes when we step up to say something useful, we might get no response. But what does Jesus do? He nudges us to try again. And when we try again, what might we find? Jesus just might fill our nets in a way we'd never expect.

I almost didn't preach on this text. There are bigger fish stories in the Bible, bigger miracles. But driving around this past week, I heard Jesus' nudge, and it was good for me. "Don't let the empty net get you down; step up and try again. Don't let the empty net get you down; who knows how or when Jesus might fill it." Don't let the empty net get you down; step up, speak up, give Jesus the opportunity to fill your nets. Amen.