

Canterbury United Methodist Church
New Traditions
July 26, 2015

Text: John 21:1-19

Focus: This text is one of a string of stories told in John's Gospel about how Jesus appeared to the disciples after his death and resurrection. The setting of the story has shifted away from Jerusalem, and the disciples appear to be trying to get their lives back to normal by doing what they did before they met Jesus...fishing in the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel.

The Sea of Galilee is really a large lake and the disciples had made their living fishing from this body of water. Yet despite their years of experience in fishing, they came up empty-handed. Jesus shows them where to fish in order to be successful, and even before they come to shore, he has a fish breakfast cooking for them on an open fire.

Function: This story is the Biblical equivalent of comfort food to me. At the point where things seemed lowest for the disciples, God's **grace** and **abundance** come shining through. The image of Jesus, appearing out of the dark mists of our life, welcoming us to firm ground and preparing a warm meal for us despite our own lack of success is a very powerful one. The subsequent story of Jesus' restoration of Peter completes our own image of our need for **forgiveness**.

Prayer: Gracious and Almighty God, we come before you this morning worn out by the struggles of this world...by the violence and killing that seem to have no end...by the hatred we hear in our words for each other...by the lack of concern we seem to have for each other and in our endless focus on ourselves. And yet, over and over again, you teach us the lessons of your grace and abundance and forgiveness toward us. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear so that we will have the strength and courage to follow you...even in the face of a world that seems to be going in the opposite direction. And that in following Him, allow us to reflect into the world the love of your Son, Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Grace and Abundance and Forgiveness on the Beach...

This is the third week in our sermon series called Stories from the Lake. And that's so appropriate I think because so much of our summer leisure time is spent near the water...for many of us one of Alabama's many lakes like Lake Martin, or the Gulf Coast with its beautiful beaches...are the place where we

naturally gravitate. For example, I spent all day yesterday at Lake Martin tubing Mike and Julie Holly's kids and Stephen and Mary Liz Ingram's kids until they literally screamed with pleasure (?) and collapsed into our boat happy to have survived! It was a great day at the lake yesterday, and there is something about being near the water or on the water that recharges me...maybe the same is true for you too!

The Sea of Galilee, where this morning's story takes place is really not a sea in the way that we think of it...this body of water is really a lake in northern Israel. It's freshwater, fed by the snowmelt from Mount Hermon in southern Lebanon, running down through the gushing backwaters of the Jordan River that feed the lake...which is Israel's natural water supply. The lake itself is not huge...it's about eight miles across from east to west at its widest point (you can see across into Jordan from the western side) and about thirteen miles across north to south. What the Bible calls the Sea of Galilee was also called Lake Ginnasaret or Lake Tiberius, and this lake at 64 square miles, is just a little smaller than our own Lake Martin, which is about 68 square miles in size. And, it was on this lake that several of Jesus' disciples made their living as fishermen.

On the western shore of this lake, there is a little settlement called Tabgha. Nestled on the shore behind a big wide gray gravel beach, there is a

little church that is open to all who stop there. Inside the cool recesses of this little church is a huge flat rock, that is said to be the place where Jesus built the charcoal fire and fixed breakfast for the disciples that morning long ago.

I'm not sure why the story of breakfast on the beach has such appeal for me, but it does...its like spiritual comfort food for me. Think about how the disciples must have been feeling...after the crucifixion of their Teacher...the disciples had seen what must have been like visions of the resurrected Jesus while they were still holed up in Jerusalem...once when all of them but Thomas were present, but then a second time when Thomas was there...Jesus appeared to them, spoke to them, he ate with them, and they touched his hands...and then he had vanished. After a while, when he had not appeared to them again, there seemed like nothing else to do but get back on with their lives, and so they made the journey northward, back to the lake where they had earned their living before they had met the Teacher.

Peter, who just a few weeks ago had denied that he had even known Jesus beside a charcoal fire in the courtyard of Caiphas' house, now told his friends that he was going fishing...and so go fishing they did. All afternoon into evening...and even all night long, these professional fisherman caught nothing...the lake which had been the source of their livelihoods produced no

fish...and they were tired and exhausted and demoralized. Nothing seemed to work any more...and they felt lost...and hopeless.

Through the gray misty light before dawn, they saw a figure on the beach at Tabgha. They were a ways offshore, but they could hear him as he called out to them and asked them if they had caught anything. They called back and said no, they had caught nothing all night...and so when they heard the figure's words echo back to them to cast their nets on the starboard side of the boat, they must have been incredulous...how can this guy know more than we do? But when they did as he suggested, their nets were so full of fish that they struggled to bring them into the boat. And then it began to dawn on them who this figure on the beach might be...

By the time they got the boat to shore, they could hear the crackle of the fire that Jesus had built, and the delicious aroma of the fish he was cooking for them on the fire. They were exhausted and famished from their work all night, and only moments ago had felt hopeless and full of despair. How all of that had changed in the moment they came into His presence...

I've often wondered how delicious that breakfast of fish prepared by the Lord of the Universe must have tasted that morning. I do know how after a

long day on the trail or paddling on the water, how a meal cooked over a fire tastes so good...partly because you're outdoors...partly because you are exhausted...partly because you can feel the food rush into your bloodstream and begin to nourish your tired body. My guess is that the disciples felt all of these things...and even more because they were in the presence of their Teacher...again.

And so what does this story teach us? For me, it says that even at the points where our lives seem darkest and most hopeless, that God's unconditional love and grace for us is still there. Even though we have struggled all night through the darkness and frustration of whatever we are up against, the gray misty light of morning tells us that the dawn is coming and the voice from shore speaks to us of grace and unconditional love.

For me, it speaks of God's abundance in our lives. Just as the disciple's nets were so full of fish that they couldn't get them all into the boat, God's abundance for us surrounds us...overflows us...so many blessings that we can't even get them into our boat...if we can let go enough to throw our nets on the other side of the boat. And then, because Jesus had fish cooking on the fire before the boat and its load of 153 fish ever made it to shore, it tells me that God's abundance goes far beyond anything that we can understand or accomplish on our own. This God that we follow has fish on the fire before we can even stagger to shore.

And finally for me, the story speaks so clearly of God's forgiveness for us. After the fish breakfast had all been consumed and the disciple's bellies were full...Jesus asked Peter: Do you love me? Not once...not twice...but three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. And for each of the three times that Peter had denied even knowing Jesus, much less admitting that he was a follower...Jesus restored Peter with unbelievable forgiveness. He met each occasion of Peter's unfaithfulness with an overwhelming dose of unmerited and undeserved forgiveness. And Jesus meets each occasion of our own unfaithfulness with an overwhelming dose of unmerited and undeserved forgiveness.

After Peter told Jesus that he loved him, Jesus told Peter that he had sheep that needed to be fed and tended to. And then Jesus' last words to Peter in this story were: "Follow Me." Jesus tells us this morning that he has sheep in this world that need to be fed and tended to. And his last words to us are: "Follow me."

Grace. Abundance. Forgiveness. That is the good news for us this morning from the story of the breakfast on the beach at the Lake. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.