

0286

The Last Breakfast

John 21:1-14

May 29, 2022

Text

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ 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.

⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶ He said to them, “Cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Prayer

Introduction

We're on the home stretch of the Gospel of John.

We come to a scene where seven disciples have had an unsuccessful night of fishing and Jesus approaches them and enables them to have a miraculous bounty.

But this isn't really a story about fishing.

In John's Gospel, we've seen other stories where there's so much underlying symbolism that there's more to the story than what's on the surface level.

The first miracle in the Gospel of John was when Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding feast. But it's not primarily a story about wine.

Because Jesus turns water in jars which were used for Jewish ceremonial washing into wine. The point of that miraculous sign is that Jesus points to something greater than the old covenant.

Yes, the wine is significant to the story but it's not the ultimate point.

In John 4, when Jesus tells the woman at the well about streams of living water, he's not really talking about water. He's talking about the Holy Spirit (John 4:10).

In John 9, when Jesus gives sight to a man who had been born blind, yes that miracle is significant in itself. But it's also pointing to the deeper spiritual reality that the whole world is blind to God.

In our passage today, yes, the catch of fish is a nice thing yet the passage is not ultimately about fish. It's pointing forward to the mission of God and the fellowship of the church.

It's a fun passage this morning as we come near the end of our time in this gospel.

Bridge

And this morning, we'll look at this story today in three scenes.

Empty nets, the catch of the day, and breakfast with Jesus.

First scene - Empty Nets

Verse 1:

After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way.

From the last event in John's Gospel, when Jesus appeared to Thomas in chapter 20, an undetermined amount of time has passed. It can't be more than a few weeks because Jesus ascended 40 days after the resurrection.

Jesus comes to the Sea of Tiberias. We've already seen this body of water in John's Gospel. Also as a brief note, the Sea of Tiberias and the Sea of Galilee are the same body of water. And while it's called a "sea," it's actually a large lake.

It was on this sea that Jesus had fed multitudes in John 6 and where he later walked on water. It was also on this sea where Jesus called his first disciples.

The fact that they're at the Sea of Tiberias also means that the disciples are no longer in Jerusalem. They're in Galilee.

Galilee is the area where so much of the ministry of Jesus had happened and where so much life had been shared between Jesus and his disciples.

In Christ's resurrection appearance at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, when he appears to the women, he tells them that he would appear to his brothers in Galilee (Matthew 28:10).

And so after the resurrection, after they've seen the risen Jesus, we see a group of the disciples in Galilee. But it's not all of them.

Verse 2 mentions the disciples who were present:

² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together.

It's interesting: the first two disciples who get mentioned here.

Simon Peter, a man who had denied Jesus at his arrest.

Thomas, a man who had just been a skeptic of the resurrection before seeing that Jesus had risen.

Nathanael gets mentioned. The only other place where he appears in this gospel is chapter 1. In that passage, Jesus makes statements about Nathanael that are so striking to Nathanel that Nathanel immediately believes that Jesus is the Christ.

John also mentions the sons of Zebedee. Those are John - who wrote this gospel - and his brother James. As always, John never mentions himself or his brother by name in this book.

And John also has two unnamed disciples. There is no way to determine who they are.

So we have seven disciples total.

Verse 3:

³ 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.

Perhaps they're just trying to pass the time. Perhaps they're going back to work to earn a living. We know that Peter and several of the other apostles - including John and James - had been fishermen.

So they're going out onto the water.

The sea and the fisherman

In other places in the gospels, we see fishing given as a metaphor for reaching people with the gospel message.

At the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, when the Lord is calling his first disciples, he meets Peter and his brother Andrew fishing.

Matthew 4:19-20:

¹⁸ While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen.

¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Jesus is calling them to be his disciples and instead of simply catching fish, they will be catching people for the gospel.

That event is also recorded in Mark and Luke.

In fact, Luke's gospel goes into even more detail. In Luke's gospel, Jesus does a miracle where they catch so many fish that their nets are tearing.

So in the other gospels, fishing isn't really about fish. It's about mission and evangelism and reaching people with the gospel.

And on this same sea where Jesus had first called Peter and Andrew, Peter has again gone fishing.

Verses 4-5:

⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No."

Just as day was breaking

The disciples had apparently fished throughout the night.

That was normal. It's fishing when the fish are more active and feeding.

Light and darkness are common metaphors for good and evil in this gospel. Some commentators don't see any significance here to John's mention of day breaking and take it simply as a reference to time.

I take the language to be intentional. That after an unsuccessful night of fishing, the daylight is breaking in at the same time as the light of the world - the Lord Jesus is stepping into the scene.

From the darkness of the night, the light is coming who will point the disciples to truth and purpose.

Jesus is standing on the shore but John informs us that the disciples did not yet realize that this was another visit from the risen Lord.

He asks them if they've caught anything and the disciples tell him no.

The fishermen have been unsuccessful at fishing.

We come to our second scene.

Second scene - catch of the day

Verse 6:

⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish.

They still don't know it's Jesus but he gives them an instruction.

Application - following the wisdom of Jesus

I think this is where a lot of the symbolism of the passage starts to take off.

The fisherman had gone out and used their own abilities and intelligence to try to catch fish.

And they couldn't do it.

But we see their work blessed once they listen to Jesus.

I appreciate Richard Phillips' commentary on this issue. He considers the struggles of churches in America to reach people with the gospel¹.

So often, churches try to rely on what's catchy or trendy. So many churches try to be "seeker sensitive" and focus on the newest and most popular worship songs. So many churches focus on "practical" sermons that don't want to turn people off by talking about

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *John*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, 1st ed., vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 697.

sin and the importance of repentance but want to give people tips on parenting, finances, and marriage.

I'm not saying those subjects should never be discussed in preaching. But that shouldn't be all that there is.

In a modern world with so many constant distractions, spiritual disciplines like prayer and devotional time are often seen as inconveniences and not prized means of communing with the Almighty.

And we are reaping that terrible harvest now as our country is becoming increasingly secular.

To address these crises, so many churches and "experts" try to reinvent the wheel and give different models for evangelism. In the process, so many churches and Christians are distracted and led in the opposite direction from the beautiful simplicity of what evangelism and reaching people for Christ really involves.

All it is is knowing people and making Jesus known to them. Doing it as Christ's ministers to the world, empowered by the Holy Spirit, sharing the one message that truly brings life and grace.

I say this a lot in our Sunday night Bible study but there has never been another time in human history where there were more free resources available to study the Bible. Almost any church you can think of records their sermons and those are free to listen to. Countless podcast and youtube channels that are dedicated to teaching from God's Word. For free. Some seminaries post classes online that you can access for free.

And yet our cultural literacy of the Bible is terrible.
We've tried to go fishing by our own devices and the nets are empty.

Meanwhile the nets are bursting in the southern hemisphere. Parts of Asia and Africa, and Latin America, people are coming to Christ in droves.

So many of the richest countries in the world are dying spiritually while the church is flourishing largely in poorer countries.

In many of those places, they don't have all of the bells and whistles. They don't have whatever is trendy or the newest and most innovative sound systems.

What they have is the gospel.

In the pursuit of reaching people with the gospel, it is following the words of Christ which leads to success.

The disciples do this and they're overwhelmed by their catch.

This isn't some prosperity gospel idea. It's about being faithful to Christ for the purpose of mission and reaching people with the gospel and catching the fish.

Verse 7, the identity of Jesus is revealed and the disciples realize that it's the Lord.

⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.

We see the haste with which Peter goes to Jesus.

Verse 8, the rest of the group makes their way to the shore to be with Jesus:

⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off.

We come to a third scene.

Third scene - breakfast with Jesus

Verse 9:

⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread.

Notice that the text says that Jesus had **fish laid out**.

He already has fish as well as bread.

They're on the shores of the same lake where Jesus had previously fed thousands with bread and fish. But on this day, as they're in a more intimate setting, Jesus makes that same meal for his disciples.

Even though Jesus is the risen Lord, he is still serving².

Verse 10:

¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 671.

I love that.

Bring some of the fish that you just caught.

He doesn't say "bring some of the fish that I just miraculously allowed you to catch." Jesus allows the disciples to have some credit for what they've caught³.

It's also noteworthy that - based on verse 9 - Jesus already has fish. He doesn't need their fish.

He has his own fish, yet he still allows the disciples to bring some of what they have before the Lord.

Mission

But as I keep saying, this story is not primarily about fishing, it's primarily about the mission of God.

What the disciples caught was because it had been given to them by Jesus in the first place. And Jesus allowed them to give back from what he had given them, and Jesus blesses that.

Once again, this isn't some prosperity message where if you give money, Jesus will bless you back sevenfold.

It's a passage about mission.

That we are equipped and gifted to serve and build up the Church and when we use the talents, abilities, and gifts that Christ has given to us, when we put that to work for Christ and for the glory of God and in the name of Christ and for the kingdom of God, that Jesus will bless that.

Jesus is all powerful. He could have had all of the fish he wanted, he could have caught everything. But he allows his followers to participate in the meal by helping to supply the bounty⁴.

For us today, Jesus still allows us to participate in his world as his missionaries and ministers of his gospel.

In the beginning of our time, I talked about the first miracle we saw from Jesus. When he turned water into wine. That miracle set the tone for his entire ministry and pointed forward to the new covenant that Jesus would usher in.

³ Edward W. Klink III, [John](#), ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 900.

⁴ Ibid.

This is his last miracle in John's Gospel and it again points forward. It points forward to the life of his disciples and of his Church after he's gone.

In this passage, we see the bounty that he will provide for his church as it faithfully goes into the world to serve the mission that he has for us.

Verse 11:

¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn.

Perhaps a secondary miracle that the nets themselves don't tear.

153

The passage mentions 153 fish.

Commentators have gone to great lengths to try to understand any significance in the number 153.

A lot of times when we see numbers given in the Bible, there is a symbolic significance to them. There are a lot of numbers we see often in the Bible. 3, 7, 12, 40.

But 153?

I thought some of these attempts at explanations were amusing.

Jerome, the great fourth century theologian argued that there were 153 different species of fish in the world and so it represents totality and perfection.

But even in Jerome's day, it appears that ancient zoologists had cataloged more than 153 types of fish⁵.

Today, there are over 34,000 species of fish that are known.

Some have tried to find different theologically significant phrases in Greek or Hebrew and assign a numerical value to each letter.

If it were English, A would be 1, B 2, Z 26. And add up all of those numbers to get to 153.

I'm never a fan of this approach and think it reduces the Bible to a Ouija board.

153 is the triangular number of 17. Some have tried to find meaning in that.

⁵ D. A. Carson, [*The Gospel according to John*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 672.

By the way, a triangular number is when you have a number. Let's say 4. You add up the values of $1 + 2 + 3 + 4$ which would equal 10.

If you add up 1, 2, 3, all the way to 17, that equals 153.

But 17 is also not a theologically significant number either.

When Jesus feeds the 5,000, John 6:13 mentions that they had 12 loaves of bread and five fish leftover. $12+5$ is 17.

Augustine, who was a great theologian of the fourth into the fifth century saw 17 as combining the numbers of the 10 commandments and the sevenfold Spirit of God in Revelation 1:4.

I think that's a reach.

And there have been other suggestions.

I think 153 is simply the actual number that was caught and that the number itself is of no symbolic value. The disciples caught a lot of fish.

And it's another one of these little details that John's Gospel mentions that I believe are examples pointing to the historicity of this gospel.

We've talked about this before but things like women discovering the empty tomb, various geographical details that John gives which are specific to the region. Details about the temple that he gives which modern archaeologists have confirmed such as placement of various gates.

For people who try to argue that John was written way later, well the temple was destroyed less than 30 years after the time of Christ.

Mentioning the name of Malchus, a Roman guard when it adds no value to the story.

John gives all sorts of specific details in his gospel. And here we have an obscure detail such as a specific number of fish that were caught.

All of these things I would argue point to the historicity of this book. And lots more examples.

Continuing in the passage. Verses 12-14:

¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and

took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

As we've already mentioned, Jesus invites the disciples to join him for a meal that he has prepared.

Meals are important in the gospels.

Obviously there's the last supper, where Jesus instituted communion. In the gospels, there are other meals where Jesus is invited to dine. In the Gospel of Luke, it's over a meal where Jesus reveals his identity as the risen Lord to the two travelers. Jesus has done miraculous meals where he's fed thousands.

Jesus' ministry began with a wedding feast. Here it's ending with another feast among the Lord and his disciples.

Jesus provides for his disciples and he provides for his church. And he is inviting these disciples to enjoy the meal that he has provided.

In Revelation, heaven is depicted as a great wedding feast. For those disciples that morning as they sat near the Sea of Galilee, eating a meal with Jesus, it was just a foretaste of what would come later.

A simple meal, but in that moment, they had everything they could ever need. They were in the presence of the Lord and were in fellowship with one another.

The promise for all who believe in Jesus is that we too will one day come to his table and dine with him.

As the disciples helped to supply this meal, he invites his church to invite guests to the next meal, the wedding feast in heaven.

The verse says that **none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.**

It's a bit cryptic. I think Grant Osborne is probably right when he points to the awe of the disciples in that moment. Jesus had been their friend and teacher. But now he's their risen Lord and savior⁶. The disciples are experiencing the glory and majesty of Christ in new ways.

At the end of the passage, John mentions that it was Christ's third time he revealed himself to the disciples, John is linking this episode back to the previous appearances when he appeared to the disciples and then to Thomas.

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *John: Verse by Verse*, ed. Jeffrey Reimer et al., Osborne New Testament Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 481.

Conclusion

In this passage, we see the mission of the church in reaching people symbolized in the catching of the fish.

That all of us are called by Jesus to go out onto the waters and go fishing. To bring people to Jesus.

But we also see in this passage that the success of our efforts is not based on us, or our ability, or our strength. It's following the great fisherman and being faithful to him.

Evangelism is something we've talked more about these last few months. I'm sure for some, it goes in one ear and out the other.

Kind of like my repeated encouragement to get baptized if you haven't done so.

But this is something that matters to Christ. We have people in our lives with whom we have opportunities to witness to and to share the love of Christ and the good news of Jesus.

In his goodness, Jesus has given us the privilege of serving him in the world for his gospel purposes of reaching people. It's not meant to be a chore. It's a blessing.

My generation. The millennial generation is in an existential crisis with work. A major factor in job satisfaction is feeling like you're making a difference. That's an admirable goal.

And it taps into one of the great longings of the human soul. We do want to make a difference. We do want to be part of something significant.

And that's why Christ's call upon the church to serve the world through spreading the gospel is a blessing to the Church. Because it is being part of something significant, something that matters, something that gives purpose.

It's serving something with eternal purposes.

That is what Jesus invites us to do.

Not alone, but with Jesus and his Church. That is the last thing that we see from this passage. That Jesus is connected to his followers in meaningful ways when we are gathered together in his name.