

Breakfast on the Beach

Henry Millstein, 5/26/19

Is there anybody else here who likes to have a big breakfast? I mean, a heap of eggs, potatoes, and sausage, maybe with a pancake or two or three by the side? I confess that's one of my weaknesses. In fact I fixed myself such a breakfast as part of my preparation for this sermon. So I feel a certain affinity for this story. In fact, I once had a very fine breakfast of trout and eggs in a cafe up in West Marin. So I wouldn't have minded being a guest at that breakfast on the beach that Jesus offered in our Gospel passage this morning. We'll find that he offered a lot more than just the roast fish and the bread that the Gospel writer mentions.

The final chapter of John that we just heard has some definite peculiarities. The great majority of scholars hold that it was an addition to the original version of the Gospel, which at first ended with chapter 20. And there's good reason for accepting that view. Can I give you a bit of homework for the coming week? I suggest you crack open your bibles and read John chapter 20. You'll see that that chapter ends with what seems to be a genuine close to the whole Gospel, so coming upon chapter 21 after the last couple of verses of chapter 20 is more than

a bit of a surprise. So I'm going to deal with this chapter on its own terms, as an independent story that was tacked on to the original draft of the Gospel—but tacked on for good reason, as it contains important material and teaches us something vital about Christian discipleship.

Let's look at the beginning of the story. This scene is one of the literary masterpieces of the Bible; in just a few words, it paints a powerful picture. The disciples are back in Galilee. You can almost see them hanging out listlessly on the shore of the lake. Out of nowhere in particular, Peter says, "I'm going fishing." You don't get the feeling that it's out of any urgency to catch fish; he just doesn't know what else there is to do. The other disciples present apparently feel the same way, as they say, "Well, guess we'll go with you."

It's pretty clear from the setting and the dialogue here that Peter and the other disciples are at loose ends. So it's not difficult to see what their situation must be. Jesus has been crucified. Their hopes for a renewal of Israel have been shattered. So, however reluctantly, they don't see anything to do but go back to their old lives.

In other words, this is a story about the *first* resurrection experience. Whoever added this chapter to the Gospel has confused things somewhat by saying that it happened "after these things"; in fact, the writer describes it as the *third* resurrection appearance, following two recounted in the previous chapter.

(Actually, chapter 20 describes *three* resurrection appearances, starting with one to Mary Magdalene, but, in line with his patriarchal culture, the author doesn't count the one appearance to a woman.) But it's not really believable that the resurrection experience recounted in chapter 21 could have followed those in chapter 20. Again, I suggest you look back at that next-to-last chapter. In Jesus' first appearance to the male disciples in that chapter, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them and orders them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And the second appearance a week later is the story of doubting Thomas, who at the sight of the resurrected Jesus exclaims "My Lord and my God!" Now it's hard to believe that after experiences like that the disciples could be back in Galilee wondering what to do with the rest of their lives. Clearly, chapter 21 presents the *first* time that the resurrected Jesus appears to Peter in the company of the other befuddled disciples. This in fact is one of the chief reasons that most scholars consider chapter 21 an addition to the original draft of the Gospel.

This also may explain *why* the author felt it necessary to add this chapter to the Gospel. There was clearly a tradition in the early church that Jesus' first appearance (at least, his first appearance to a male disciple) was to *Peter*. That's what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, and remember that Paul's letters are *earlier* than any of the Gospels. But, curiously enough, aside from this passage here, none of the Gospels recount that supposed first appearance to Peter; there's a bare mention of it, but no full narration, in Luke. And that probably was a problem for the early church, because most New Testament scholars, including Protestants, agree that Peter had some sort of leadership position within the apostles. So whoever added this chapter must have felt the need to do so to give Peter his due as the first of the apostles to see the risen Christ.

And how quickly Peter's whole attitude flips when "the disciple whom Jesus loves"—of whom we'll hear more later—that the stranger standing on the shore is the Lord. With Peter's usual impetuosity, he "throws himself"—that's literally what the Greek says—into the water—but not before putting *on* his coat, which one would think is rather a backward way of getting ready to swim.

Now it's important to pay attention to what happens before Peter's mad dash to Jesus. That stranger on the shore—whom the disciples don't recognize, as is some other resurrection accounts—asks how their fishing has been going, and they tell him they haven't caught anything all night. The stranger then tells them to cast their net off the right side of the boat and they'll find some. They follow his direction, and they find, not just "some," but a load that they can barely haul ashore. That's when the "disciple whom Jesus loved"—whom we'll call from here on by the traditional title of "the Beloved Disciple"—bursts out with his identification of Jesus. In other words, Jesus is recognized as he performs a miracle of feeding—for the author clearly wants us to understand the catch of fish as miraculous. This part of the story should remind us of the feeding of the 5,000 and also of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus recognizing Jesus as he breaks bread with them; undoubtedly this story is also meant to invoke the communion meal we celebrate, the Eucharist. So there are many layers of meaning here.

And there's one layer of meaning that's particularly important. A haul of fish is used several times in the Gospels as an image of the disciples fishing for human beings and bringing them into the Kingdom. As if to underscore this point, the

Greek word the author uses here for "haul," *helko*, is the same word used in John (6:44) for the Father "drawing" or "hauling" people to Jesus and for Jesus "lifted up" on the Cross "drawing" all people to himself (12:32). In other words, this huge haul of fish is symbolic of the huge haul of humanity that Peter and the other disciples will bring into God's Kingdom.

By the way, in case you're wondering about the number 153, the number of fish that the disciples hauled in—well, so is everybody else who's ever tried to interpret this passage. You might think that the number 153 has some symbolic meaning. So have a lot of people—the trouble is, *what* symbolic meaning? It's been pointed out that if you add all the whole numbers from 1 to 17 you get 153, so maybe the 153 is pointing us to 17, and everybody knows that 17 is a deeply symbolic number—right? Anybody got an idea what 17 symbolizes? Neither do I, though there've been lots of attempts. Personally, I think the best explanation is that this story goes back to a real incident, and somebody really counted all this fish—and made sure it got remembered. Why? I don't know that either.

Whatever the explanation, I think it is clear that 153 is a whole lot of fish, and it points to the fact that Peter and company have a whale of a task ahead of them.

Now I want to step back for a moment and reflect on what all this might mean for us. I think we've all been, at least at times, in Peter's situation, wondering where to go from here, asking ourselves what's the point of going on. Perhaps it's at a time when we, like Peter and the other disciples, have seen great hopes collapse and find ourselves right back where we started. Or perhaps it comes at a time when we've had some real success but are left wondering, "Is this all there is? What's the next stage in my journey?" And this text provides us with an answer, though it's an answer that will lead to more questions. The fishing trip that Jesus sends Peter and the other disciples out on is our fishing trip too. We are *all* called and commissioned to build the Kingdom and to bring people into it. There's a huge haul of humanity to be brought in, to be nurtured, cared for, built up into a beloved community and equipped and commissioned so that they in their turn can go forth and build God's Kingdom.

Now that's all well and good, you may be asking, but how am I supposed to be doing that? I think the second half of this chapter addresses that, though again it will lead to more questions.

Once breakfast is done—how many of those 153 fish do you think were left?—

Jesus turns to Peter and asks, "Do you love me?" Peter answers yes, and Jesus

promptly tells him, "Feed my lambs" and then asks the same question again.

Peter again answers in the affirmative, whereupon Jesus gives him the same

command in different words and asks again whether Peter loves him. Peter, hurt

and also probably somewhat exasperated by this point, bursts out, "Lord you

know everything you know that I love you"—and Jesus gives him the same

commission again.

This threefold interrogation, with Peter's threefold affirmation of his love for

Jesus, is undoubtedly meant to echo and undo Peter's threefold denial of Jesus. In

other words, Peter, like the rest of us, needs to clear out the dead wood from his

past in order to take up his mission for the Kingdom. So that's a start toward the

answer to our remaining question: to find our mission for the Kingdom, we need

to clear away, to the extent we can, and always with confidence in God's grace

and forgiveness, whatever baggage from our past may be holding us from God's

embrace.

But then Jesus adds a prediction: "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will bring you where you do not want to go"—in other words, Peter, like his Master, will die a martyr on the cross. This is not a prophecy of doom; on the contrary, as the Gospel writer tells us, it is a way of glorifying God; and the early church regarded martyrdom with respect and awe. It was—and for that matter is—a sure road to glory. Think of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romero.

But it's not a road that most of us are likely to take. Despite complaints from some Christians on how Christianity is despised and belittled in today's culture—complaints that I personally think are usually somewhat excessive—we're not likely to be martyred for our faith. And so the conclusion of this story speaks to our condition. After Jesus concludes his conversation with Peter by saying, "Follow me," Peter turns around and sees the Beloved Disciple following close behind, and asks, "What about him?" The context makes it clear that Peter is asking whether this disciple will share in the glory of martyrdom. And Jesus responds, "If I want him to stay until I come"—that is, if he lives out his life in peace and is not martyred—"what's that to you. You, follow me." To grasp what's happening here, we need to know something about this "Beloved Disciple." The

Gospel of John frequently refers to, but never names, a "disciple whom Jesus loved," and it's clear that this disciple is the source of the traditions on which the Gospel writer relied in writing this Gospel. Obviously, the reference is to the Apostle John. And throughout the Gospel, this Beloved Disciple is shown closely associated with Peter. He, like Peter, had a special status within the early Christian community. And so people naturally asked if he would be granted the honor of dying for his faith. Or perhaps the Beloved Disciple had already died peacefully in his bed, and people were asking why God withheld from him the glory of martyrdom. Jesus' response is two-fold: first, it doesn't matter—in other words, we're all called to build the Kingdom, and there's really no one way of doing that's intrinsically better or more glorious in God's sight than another; and, second, really following from the first, keep your mind on me and follow.

So how does that answer the question, "How am I to haul people into the Kingdom?" Well, it doesn't, at least not with any specifics. And that's part of the point. We all have to find our own way and our own place on the Gospel fishing boat. This story does suggest, however, that most of us most of the time are called, as they say, to "bloom where we're planted." True, we should be open to a call for a radical break in life like a call to a distant mission—or to seminary, which

can be even more distant from our present life and circumstances than an island in the Pacific—but more usually we are called to find our role in building the Kingdom in the circumstances of our current lives. We need to be asking ourselves, "What does it mean, here in Willow Glen, to follow Jesus? How can I, and how can we as a congregation and community, find our place in building the Kingdom?" Jesus both promises us and challenges us with a huge haul out there; it's up to us, with the help of His grace, to find out where to grasp the net.