

**FAILING FISHING,  
FEED THE FLOCK**

**John 21:1-19**

*We are filled by Jesus to feed his sheep.*

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Fishing is not one of my hobbies, and there is a reason for that. I have nothing against fishing, and I admire those who enjoy fishing and do it well. But for me, fishing is normally an exercise in frustration. I can count on two fingers the times I have had successful fishing trips. Usually there is little or no return on my investment of time, energy, and money. And my mind, instead of achieving some nirvana-like detachment, continues to spin with thoughts of more productive ways I could be using my time. I will admit, when it comes to fishing, I fail.

The disciples who went fishing on the Sea of Galilee in our Scripture text today were well-acquainted with failure, both in fishing and in life. They had fished all night and caught nothing. Sounds like one of my fishing expeditions! They were all followers of Jesus, who had a nice run for a while, teaching and working miracles. But then he ran afoul of the authorities, and he ended up on a cross, then in a tomb. As things were going south for Jesus, just when he might have needed support, Peter, the lead disciple and lead fisherman, denied three times that he knew Jesus. But Peter wasn't alone; all the disciples forsook Jesus and fled. Epic fail!

But then, after three days, Jesus appeared to them alive again! A week later, he appeared to all the disciples again, including Thomas, who doubted, but then believed. There is some scholarly doubt about chronology here, but if you read it straight through, it appears that even after Jesus appeared twice to the disciples, they still went home and went back to fishing. Seriously? They respond to the risen Christ by going home and going fishing? This was not just a fishing failure; it was a discipleship failure.

Henry David Thoreau, the American author and philosopher, once said, "Everyone must believe in something; I believe I will go fishing." Thoreau is also famous for saying that most people lead lives of "quiet desperation." I think that is even closer to where the disciples were that night. Raymond Brown, Bible scholar, calls this fishing expedition "aimless activity undertaken in desperation."<sup>1</sup>

Into this depressing, desperate experience of failure comes a ray of light and hope and joy. There's a guy on the seashore. He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and being fishermen, they will try anything once. When they do, the nets are breaking with a boatload of fish. The

beloved disciple (John, we suppose), thinks, “You know, that was just like that time before when Jesus told us to cast our nets, and we hauled in a boatload.” Then he looked in the dim morning light and realized and said, “It is the Lord!”

John was the thinker and perceiver; Peter was the man of action. He grabbed his clothes and jumped into the water and swam ashore. The other disciples brought the boat and the net full of fish. When Peter came up out of the water dripping wet, Jesus was sitting there by the fire. He already had a few fish, but he asked them to bring more.

In the Holy Land today, there are two historic sites right next to each other. One is a church that supposedly sits on the site where Jesus made breakfast for the disciples in John 21. A few hundred yards away, there is a church built on the site where supposedly Jesus multiplied the bread and the fish and fed 5,000 people. It’s not an accident. As the disciples gathered around, Jesus took bread and fish and gave it to them, and they remembered who he was. John says, “*none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.*”<sup>2</sup>

As they were finishing breakfast, Jesus turned to Peter. He had some unfinished business with the disciple who claimed “*I will lay down my life for you.*”<sup>3</sup> Jesus said, “*Simon, son of John, (remember, Peter was a nickname Jesus had given him) do you love me more than these?*” I don’t know if Peter thought it, but I did: more than these *what?* Do you love me more than these boats and nets and friends? Do you love me more than these other guys do? But Peter simply replied, “*Yes, Lord, you know I love you.*”

Jesus said, “*Feed my lambs.*”<sup>4</sup> Three times they go through this conversation: Do you love me? Yes, Lord. Feed my sheep. The three times is of course related to the three times Peter denied Jesus. With each profession of love, Peter is peeling back a layer of guilt that has separated him from Jesus. Finally Jesus is satisfied, and he says, “*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.*”<sup>5</sup> Of course, John’s Gospel was written around 90

A.D., and the writer knew that about thirty years earlier, Peter had indeed been crucified by the Romans. The tradition has it that Peter was so humble in his death that he asked to be crucified upside down, because he was not worthy even to be crucified like Jesus was.

Finally, Jesus ended the redemption of Peter with these words, “*Follow me.*”<sup>6</sup> The words he ended with were the words he began with three years earlier, by the same lakeshore, when he first called Peter. “*Follow me.*” Peter had not always been faithful. He was prone to over-react. He had failed a few times. But from that point forward, he served the Lord for the rest of his life.

I think Jesus asks the same question of his disciples today: “Do you love me more than these?” Do you love me more than the insulated security of your comfort zone? Do you love me more than the materialistic paradigms of success that world throws at you every day? Do you love me more than fitting in with your friends and going along with the crowd? Do you love me more than these?

This is a wonderful story and a great ending to the Gospel. What can we take home with us today? What does it mean for our discipleship where we live?

I think we learn from this story that **our failures don't determine our future.** We never get it perfect. We're going to fall and fail sometimes. So did the disciples. They denied; they ran and hid; they left even after the resurrection and went home to fish. Even Jesus appeared to fail, as he died and was buried in a borrowed tomb. But Jesus rose again. And the disciples found forgiveness and redemption and a new purpose in life. They moved from Jerusalem outward, “*turning the world upside down,*”<sup>7</sup> according to the Book of Acts. The Gospel spread, and the Church grew, and within four centuries Christianity was the religion of the Roman Empire. Their failures did not determine their future.

One of my favorite movies is *Hoosiers*, about a small-town high school basketball team from Hickory, Indiana. One of the side plots concerns an alcoholic named Shooter. He was a great player back in the day, but he has failed at most things in his life—especially as a father. But his son is on the

team, and he has an extraordinary knowledge of basketball and a passion for the game.

The coach tries to give Shooter a second chance. He asks Shooter to be his assistant coach, and soon Shooter is on the bench. He promises to stay sober if the coach will promise not to get thrown out of any games. Shooter doesn't believe in himself enough to take charge of the team.

A few games later, the coach deliberately gets himself tossed from the game. Shooter is terrified. The end of the game is near, and the score is tied. The Hickory players call a time out. In the team huddle, all eyes are on Shooter, including his son's, who never thought his dad should be in this position in the first place. Shooter is paralyzed. He can't speak. Finally, his son says, "You reckon number four will put up their last shot, Dad?" That seems to jump-start Shooter, and he haltingly calls a play. The team goes back on the floor and gets a rebound. Suddenly Shooter calls another time out.

Now he is completely engaged in the game, and his knowledge and passion for basketball have overtaken his fear. He lays out the strategy for the next play with confidence: "All right, now listen to me. This is the last shot that we got. We're gonna run the picket fence at 'em. Merle, you're the swing man. Jimmy, you're solo right. All right, Merle should be open swinging around the end of that fence. Now boys, don't get caught watchin' that paint dry!"

The players are with him. They return to the floor, run the play to perfection, and sink the game-winning basket. Shooter runs onto the court with his arms held high in celebration. Then he runs into his son, who looks into his father's eyes and says, "You did good, Pop. You did real good."<sup>8</sup>

Shooter had failed at many things. But the coach believed he needed another chance. When his moment came, Shooter came through. He proved himself. He got a shot at redemption.

We're no different. Our records are spotty at best. We have known our share of failure. But Jesus died and rose again so we could have a shot at redemption, too. We can be forgiven. We can overcome our failures and live into our future free of the past and filled with the Spirit. That's the whole point of Easter.

**Then, having been hungry, and having been filled, we are called to feed the flock.** The disciples had gone all night without a catch, the latest in a long line of failures. But with the help of Jesus, their nets filled up with fish. They came ashore and ate their fill. Finally things seemed to be going right again. Then Jesus told Peter three times, if Peter really loved him, he was to feed the sheep. Take care of the lambs. Now Jesus didn't have a literal flock of sheep on the hillside needing care. But he had lots of lambs, people, children of God, who were lost and lonely and hurting and hungry and needy and broken. These are the sheep of Christ, and if we say we love God, feeding the sheep is our job, our ministry, our responsibility, and our opportunity.

When Dr. Fred Craddock was on the faculty of Candler School of Theology, he used to have retired ministers come and speak to his seminary classes. One of these was Oswald Gotler. He and his wife were missionaries to China back in the 1940's. After World War II, they were placed under house arrest by the Communist regime. Finally they were released, and someone from the States sent them money for tickets to come home. They were going to get to make their first trip home in years, just in time for Christmas. They had to travel overland to India, and from there catch a plane to America. When they arrived in India, Gotler learned that the city was home to thousands of Jews, refugees from Hitler's concentration camps. After the war, nobody wanted these Jews, so they had ended up, of all places, in India. They were living in attics and warehouses all over the city.

It was Christmastime, so Oswald Gotler went around and asked them, "What do you want for Christmas?"

They answered, "We're Jews."

He said, "I know that. What do you want for Christmas?"

"We don't have Christmas," they said again. "We're Jews."

"I know, but what do you want?" Finally Oswald got out of them that what they would really love would be some German pastry, the kind of delicious pastry that made the holidays so special back home in better times.

So Oswald Gotler and his wife cashed in their tickets to America and found a bakery in the city that could make German pastry. They used their

money to buy tons of pastry and deliver it around to the warehouses and attics where the Jews lived. At every stop, they would wish everyone a “Merry Christmas.” Then they went back to China.

When Oswald Gotler told that story to one seminary class, a very zealous and stern-looking seminary student said, “What did you do that for?”

Gotler replied, “It was Christmas!”

The student said, “But those people didn’t even believe in Jesus!”

And Gotler said, “No, but I do.”<sup>9</sup>

Let me say a word to our seniors today, although I think it applies to all of us. You are on the verge of a new chapter in your life. You have not done everything right so far. You have made mistakes. It’s part of growing up. But no matter how serious your mistakes have been, your future is not determined by your failures. You can be forgiven for the mistakes of your past and overcome the obstacles on your path. You can make a great life, with the help of God.

We have tried to fill you up. You have been filled with education for 13 years. We have tried to teach you what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Having been filled, your purpose, your mission, your joy from this point forward will involve feeding the flock of Jesus, serving others in the name of your Lord.

The question Jesus asks us is the same question he asked Peter by the lake, “Do you love me? Do you love me more than these? Do you love me more than anything else?” As we come to the table today, that is the only question that matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Brown, *John*

<sup>2</sup> John 21:12.

<sup>3</sup> John 13:38.

<sup>4</sup> John 21:15.

<sup>5</sup> John 21:18.

<sup>6</sup> John 21:19.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 17:6.

<sup>8</sup> *Hoosiers*, Rated PG, written by Angelo Pizzo and directed by David Anspaugh, produced by Hemdale Film Corporation, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> No source, previously used in sermon.