John 21: 1-14

The Deep Waters

Sunday April 30, 2023

Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell

First Congregational, Appleton

On a tip from one of you this week, Friday afternoon Peggy and I drove to the damn on the Wolf River in Schwano to see the sturgeon run. We discovered the water temperature was cold for sturgeon yesterday. So while they’d been plentiful two weeks ago when we had weather in the 80’s, this week there were a lot less sturgeon trekking upstream to spawn. But still we sat next to that vibrant patch of river and spied some large fins and even caught sight of a few fish jumping and arcing over the foam at the base of the damn. Other people we met there told us of thousands of fish so think and tightly packed you could stand there and imagine walk across on their backs.

What is it about fish? What is it that beckons you to the banks of a river or the shores of a lake? What is it that makes us anticipate lazy days afloat for hours on a stretch of lake? Its more than just the fish. It’s the whole experience: the breeze on your brow, the churn of the water seeping into your muscles, the sky’s expanse. As we melt into nature humbled to witness the ancient order to life, like the sturgeon spawning we join creation, not as dominators but as pieces of a complex puzzle, ourselves. We find a peace that passes all explaining. So it was for the disciples.

After Jesus rose from the dead, Christ appeared, but not often enough. So they wondered about the future, who they were without him, and what to do with their lives. As Peter and Thomas, James Andrew and John tried to acclimate themselves to this new normal they found comfort in the sea. Jesus found them in a fishing boat in today’s story, a tale rich in symbol. Let’s take a closer look.

In the first place, the story says you can’t really ever go back. When Peter and the others went fishing they were returning to their old life. You can’t blame them. They were trauma victims. They’d not only lost Jesus; they knew he was tortured to death. They sought their safe place on the water, but even that proved to be a disappointment. They could not catch anything. Nothing was right. Nothing was the same. The Bible says, you cannot go back, in life. You cannot re-wind the story and re-insert yourself. You cannot go up stream and jump in. You cannot erase what has happened. You can’t ignore what you’ve experienced.

I learned that lesson when I returned to St. Louis not too long ago for a high school reunion. I had been living in Boston for a long time, but I had never left St. Louis in my mind. The paths I walked or rode on my bike as a kid were ever in my mind. I re-visited the halls of my high school in my head, and the rooms of my house with some regularity. Yet when I arrived in the real places actually walked around I was shocked. The whole town had shrunk. In truth, everything was much smaller at times, unrecognizable. This capsuled place I carried in my mind was only an old fabrication. Since I graduated I’d travelled, living in other states, visiting in California and Europe, the Holy Land and South Africa. Any thoughts I had about moving back to Clayton Missouri had to be re-evaluated. It was not the same. I was not the same. We’d both moved on.

In the research for our book about clergy experiences in the pandemic, one of the prominent themes in many churches is that pastors everywhere are trying to navigate their congregation’s expectations. People just want to “get back to normal”. For most churches that means re-instituting everything we remember from before the pandemic. passing the plates, dipping the bread in the cup, removing the masks on the choir. But we cannot ignore that we’ve had a pandemic. The virus is not completely gone. We mold the past, in our minds, but even if it were gone completely, we can’t ever go back, not really. We’re different people than we were three years ago.

Like the disciples we are transformed by what we’ve experienced, and endured. If we try to get back in our old boats and put our nets in the water just the way we remember, we’ll come up empty too. Our old shoes won’t fit because our feet have grown. It’s hard to acknowledge but life goes one way – forward.

Secondly, the story says that Jesus meets us in times of change. He seeks us out in times of transition. That’s why he appeared on the beach that morning in our story. Jesus comes close to us in life’s hinge moments. You can feel Christ’s presence when a child is born, and when she get confirmed. He’s there at your son’s wedding, and at your retirement party. Jesus is among us at the birthday parties, the family reunions and the funerals. He comes to re-assure us that even when life is hard and the way ahead unknown, we don’t have to fear. He gives us signs of his presence.

 On our first trip to the Holy Land in 2007 we will never forget this very spot in the Sea of Tiberius. We rode in a van with clergy from all over the country. We came to this small place on the beach. As we approached the water, our leader Rick, a Methodist pastor from Iowa, how Jesus cooked breakfast for his friends, right here. He recounted how the disciples could not find any fish until Jesus told them to put their nets into the deeper waters on the other side of the boat. Then they brought up a huge haul of fish. It was not my first time hearing the story; I’d preached on it. I don’t know what happened but I pushed the story away with a skeptical comment to a youth minister standing next to me. I remember saying “Yeah, what are the chances that really happened or happened here?” He chuckled and nodded knowingly. As I live and breathe, I will tell you that what happened next will stay with me for the rest of my life because it certainly shut me up that day. The words of doubt were barely out of my mouth when a school of fish burst into frenzied action right there, just yards from where we stood. They began to jump out of the water by the dozens, leaping in tall arcs in the sunshine of that sparkling morning. The timing of this display was so uncanny we pastors stood there silenced in our wonder. Something enveloped our group in our confusion, that felt like prayer as we hiked back to the bus.

 As I keep drawing wisdom from the deep well of that day what I see is that Christ comes when you least expect it. He comes to remind us that he’s there with us on this journey. What I keep learning is to try not to write these moment off as coincidence. I have learned not to squander a good sign.

Finally, Jesus always points us to the deeper waters. What does he tell his disciples? Christ says, Don’t skim the surface in life. You will be disappointed. You won’t find your treasure on social media. Plunge into the deeper waters. When they do, they found an abundant haul, almost more than they could take in.

 That’s not just a fishing tip. When we go through life, the Bible says, if we put our faith in the shallow things we will come up empty. We will be going through the motions but never hitting pay dirt. It is those experiences that call for upmost courage that shape us. It’s the hardest questions that mold our character. It’s the times when nothing superficial will do and we are forced to plunge so much deeper than we wish we had to go that change the course of life.

 Yesterday the world lost a great light as the soul of Rabbi Harold Kushner entered into Life. He was 88 but when he was a young rabbi he and his wife had a son who was born with a very rare disease that affected his growth hormones so he aged prematurely, lived his whole life and died at 14. It was unbearably sad for the family. But Rabbi Kushner did something remarkable with his enormous grief, he went public with the hardest questions he knew and wrote a book about the question Why. What do bad things happen to good people. He touched millions of people who were wrestling with their own impossibly agonizing questions. Why do we suffer things we don’t deserve. He wrote 14 books in all with title like Who Needs God? How Good Do you Have to be?, Conquering Fear. Time and again he dug in the deep wells of scripture and plunged into the heart spaces of life’s darkest questions, to share the wisdom he found. The result was a life of touching other lives. Never along, really Rabbi Kushner became an international sage by putting his nets into the deep waters of life.

 Jesus met his disciples on the beach one morning and told them to put their nets into the deeper waters to find the best treasures life has to offer.