

Fish for Breakfast
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: May 18, 2014

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So I spent ten summers working on a farm and running a farm stand for family friends. When Dale, the farmer, like a second father to me—needed help with baling hay and straw I was sometimes part of the crew and experienced the torture of stacking loads of hay on hot summer days. Working with a bunch of guys on the farm was mostly fun—I was like their little sister they made fun of all the time.

One day we were haymaking. Thomas was unloading the bales from the cage attached to the tractor and throwing the bales onto the ground. Dale would then pick them up and put them on the “elevator.” The elevator, an old rusty conveyor belt, would shimmy those bales up into the barn where Kyle and I stacked them. So I grabbed my next bale that fateful day and felt something slimy. Low and behold, a snake had been in the field among the uncut hay and had somehow become a part of that hay bale.

Naturally, I investigated and saw this gross deceased snake and screamed. Not a short scream either, more like a prolonged banshee call. Simultaneously, I released the hay bale into the air and fell over backwards. So Thomas, Dale, and Kyle just heard me scream and saw me throw a hay bale and fall over, so they thought I got hurt somehow. Bad accidents happen on farms when you’re working with all this heavy machinery more than you might think. So those guys all ran to help me only to discover that I had fallen over and screamed bloody murder over a dead snake. Never lived that down—they laughed so hard they cried and began wheezing with all the hay dust in the air—the story of Lauren and the snake never got old, for them.

Now as much as those guys teased me, both before, during, and after the snake incident, I couldn’t fathom the care and protection they actually had for me until they thought that I got hurt and came running to help. In retrospect, their concern for my well-being was really sweet. Part of what I love about our story today from the end of John’s Gospel is Peter’s reaction to Jesus—it’s also really sweet. Peter jumps off the boat and runs to shore as fast as he can when the Beloved Disciple realizes and proclaims that Jesus is right over there. Peter can’t keep his excitement contained; he has to run to see Jesus on the beach now. No, Jesus isn’t in trouble or hurt. It’s just this beautiful moment of Peter in action—jumping, swimming, and running to see his teacher and friend, to tend to him somehow, to be next to him.

But what does Peter discover when he finds Jesus on that beach? Jesus with a fire going making some breakfast for him and for the other disciples.

Growing up in the Midwest with cows and corn and family farms and working on a farm for years, I know how difficult farm life can be. But it’s hard for me to fathom what life on the oceans and seas must be like. How difficult it must be to fish not for leisure or sport, but because it’s your job, it’s how you feed your family. New England’s fishing industry was dealt a huge blow just last year when the New England Fishery Management Council voted to slash the legal harvest of cod by 77% in the Gulf of Maine. Researchers at the University of New Hampshire maintained that cod stocks declined by 90% because of overfishing and changes to marine ecosystems, some of these changes caused by climate change. So right now there are fishermen all across New England that once made 100 trips out to sea and now only make 15-30 trips. What has always been an unrelenting job is now becoming nearly impossible for some folks to perform and actually make a living. Fishermen are literally selling their boats and walking away from these waters that their families may have fished for generations.

Let's remember that some of Jesus' disciples were fishermen, out on choppy, unreliable waters trying to catch some fish to feed their families. Today we hear how hard it is to fish sometimes, even back then. The verse we missed today by starting at John 21 verse 4 is that the disciples were out fishing the night before and they caught absolutely nothing. Peter had said to his buddies, "I am going fishing" and they replied, "We will go with you." And they had no luck. No fish in their nets. They spent the night in that boat and they came up empty-handed.

Let's orient ourselves for a second, the disciples are in the middle of these life-altering and world-altering events, you know the crucifixion and resurrection, and they apparently just want to go fishing. Why not? After all, cook someone fish and you feed them for the day, but teach someone to fish and you can get rid of them for the whole weekend! Peter just declares "I'm going fishing" and the disciples chime in, "We'll go with you!" Maybe and especially in times like these they needed the distraction, to get back to something that made sense again.

As Episcopal Priest Gary Jones points out, isn't this exactly how human beings deal with emotional overload—by trying to go back to the familiar, returning to our former lives as best as we can? The disciples try to retreat from the crucifixion and resurrection by going back to their known trade—fishing. And yet what they discover is that Jesus is already there! Jesus is there waiting to serve and nourish them once they get out of their boats and get back to shore. There is no going back to the way things were. We can't flee from the presence of God; we cannot go where God is not.

For just after daybreak, Jesus is standing on the beach. A new day has dawned. Jesus tells them to lower their nets on the right side of the boat. And their nets become so full of fish that they can't even hardly haul in that catch. And it's in that moment that Peter springs into action. Apparently he was fishing naked, kinda weird, but then he puts on his clothes and jumps into the water and comes ashore to find Jesus already cooking some fish for him—this man who already taught Peter how to fish for people is calmly making him food.

Jesus says, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught . . . Come and have breakfast." To receive care and nurture and receive it abundantly, so abundantly that their fishing nets could barely hold the catch of the day, well if this doesn't point to how God can work in our lives, I don't know what does. Sometimes we fish all night and our nets are empty. In my case, sometimes we find a gross, dead snake in our bales of hay, okay?

But maybe compassion and nurture are right there on the horizon. And maybe we meet those grace-filled moments with child-like vigor and energy and delight like Peter leaping into the water and running to have some breakfast with Jesus on the beach. Jesus does call out to us, ready to feed us in the midst of our daily labors. But let's have the courage to get out of our boats and jump at the chance to experience God in our lives, to accept new life and abundance freely offered.

Never forget that in John's Gospel Jesus begins his ministry by attending a wedding and turning water into wine to keep the party going. And Jesus ends his ministry with a fish breakfast on the beach with his friends. For Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God, Amen.

Jason McLure, "New England Cod Fishing Quotas Slashed Amid Dwindling Stock," January 30, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/31/new-england-cod-quotas_n_258680...

John 21:3, NRSV.

Gary D. Jones, Pastoral Perspective of John 21:1-19 in Feasting on the Word, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., Year C, Volume 2, 422.

John 21:10 and 12, NRSV.