

Easter III, 2013
The Parish of St. Clement
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But we, little fishes, after the example of our ΙΧΘΥΣ¹
are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way
than by permanently abiding in water;
so that most monstrous creature,
who had no right to teach even sound doctrine,
knew full well how to kill the little fishes,
by taking them away from the water!

--Tertullian (160-220 AD)
On Baptism

Tertullian (2nd-3rd Century) once wrote in the treatise *On Baptism* that we are little 'fishies' - that our true home is in water. We are both fish and fishers of people, just as Jesus is both lamb and shepherd. Baptism is, on some days, becoming my favorite Sacrament, though Eucharist is so central to our regular Sunday practice.

Baptism is often seen as a gate – but gates are not just for keeping people out. Gates are places where welcome is offered and God is discovered (especially when we welcome strangers). I think we need to stop thinking of Baptism as membership, and instead see it as a gift of grace, life, and resurrection, and a deeper commitment to and for (and a richer share in) the community of faith – giving ourselves over to the journey of faith. Instead of thinking of Baptism as a solemn rite of entitlement, maybe we should see it as our playful running through the sprinklers of God's grace – giving as much attention and finding as much joy as many little children do in playing in water sprinklers!

I'm going fishing. Peter goes back to a place and a task that he knows: fishing for fish. Faced with the intensity of the recent events: Jesus' passion and death, Mary's discovery of the empty tomb, and the recent string of Jesus sightings, which Peter had also experienced, must have left his brain overloaded with questions. So he went back to what he knew.

Maybe it was because he needed to do something familiar, or because he was lost as to what he might do next; or maybe it was because, as fishermen for centuries have known, sometimes fishing is not so much about catching fish as it is about finding some peace and quiet and having time to think. Maybe it was all of these.

¹ | ΙΧΘΥΣ is a Greek word that translates fish and is also an acronym for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior"; it has been used by Christians since early times.

I suspect that this story found its way into the gospels because the community of early Christians searched their memory and understanding to try to come to terms with a changing world – especially as they sought to define and differentiate their emerging worldview in light of reimagining a God who was no longer concentrated in one temple in one city, who no longer required animal sacrifice... a God who had suddenly expanded for them the notion of *chosen-ness*.... In the light of this significant interruption in religious thinking, the Christians living during the time from which this Gospel of John emerged surely needed this story of the resurrected Jesus who appeared to the disciples in the early morning – good fishing time – and taught them where to cast their nets.

Many sermons I have heard on this text sought to explain in a sort of scientific way how Jesus' view from the shore might have given him a perspective on where the fish were – perhaps he was slightly elevated and could see a school of fish. That sounds good – I've stopped on the trail leading down to Hanauma Bay and could see the turtles from above, so it's not that implausible (I always wanted to shout to the snorklers "just swim over there and you'll see these wonderful turtles!") But I don't think that really matters so much in the empirical sense – because perhaps it's not so much about fish and fishing as it is about Jesus calling us to look at the world in a different way, and then calling us to go out into a world that has been unknown, or neglected, or forgotten. A side of the boat from which, for whatever reason, we have yet to cast our nets.

That early Christian community must have been struggling with seeing things in a new way, and there were plenty of conversations (as we know from the Epistles). Some wanted to root themselves in more ancient practices, whether the dietary laws or rituals of initiation, like circumcision; to others, perhaps, who were looking for ways to carry forward these old traditions with new understandings: Jesus as priest and sacrifice, communion as Passover. Others were trying to find ways to fit in this emerging religion though they did not come from a Hebrew background; do I have to become Jewish to be Christian? Do I have to give up my culture to be Christian?

A fundamental question behind this Gospel story is, I think, "who do we let in?" "Who do we invite in?" "Now that we are more than just a sect of the ancient Hebrew religion, now that we are something new, who gets invited?" Can Romans? Can Samaritans? (Tongue-in-cheek: Republicans or Democrats?) All those gentiles – are they welcome here? And in this story Jesus helps them discover the answer. Cast your nets on the other side of boat, Jesus says, look differently, with fresh eyes, and in new places, and among other peoples.

This story speaks to our interior lives: when is the last time we you evaluated what you are doing to foster your spiritual life? What works, and what doesn't; what are you missing? This story can invite us to reassess what brings balance to soul's journey. But more so, I think this is about our exterior lives, and about our common

life: whom do we exclude? Do we forget to look at folks from other socio-economic backgrounds, or who have a different level of education from us? I think we need to be more than just a welcoming church, we need to be an inviting church (that is, we don't just wait for folks to come here to welcome them, we go out and share the joy we have found with "others"!).

The vocation of the community is to follow Jesus, that he might make us fishers of people. That call is not as explicit in John's gospel, but perhaps it is implicit in this story, a mixed metaphor as it extends into the shepherding language ("feed my sheep" says Jesus). This is a story that invites us in our wildest imaginations to ponder the great commission – that reminds us discipleship is more than worship, it is also sharing the good news with others, inviting others to take their share in the joy that we have discovered.

Baptism can be cute, but it is important - it's serious business. Baptism is about life and grace. It's a little easier to welcome a family that has come to be part of our 'ohana, that we have gotten to know a little and gotten to love. But it's not enough to pass our faith down to our children. That is certainly part – and an important part - but faith isn't just inherited, it's shared (and our notion of friends and family needs always to be expanding). Jesus wanted more than that for us and for the world. Jesus wanted the blessings of life to be known through our service – by dedicating our lives – not only for those we already love, but to all who are poor, sick, in prison, in the hospital, homeless – Jesus wanted us to cast our nets to the other side of the boat, to see those whom we have failed to see, to hear with our hearts the hurt in this world, and to do something about it. That includes the spiritual pain and spiritual poverty as much as the physical pain and physical poverty.

Today's Gospel lesson is a great one for a baptism, not only because it is set around water, and not only because Peter, as always the rash one, leaps full body into the water (that's full immersion!), but because in this Sacrament we enter into a life of promises that challenge us not only to pick up a different set of nets (that is, to become fishers of people), but to cast them on an entirely different side of the boat. In order to do that, we have to tune our hearts again and again to the will of God in our lives. That is not easy when there are so many voices competing for our ears and our affections; being followers of Jesus means we necessarily will be, at times, counter-cultural. If the essential question behind this text is who gets invited in, perhaps the question we should be asking ourselves is whom have we neglected?

We are still celebrating Easter, and this story of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance offers reassurance – something the early Christians must have needed as much as many of us do. The thought of all those fish pulled up by those nets is a sign of abundance that resonates with the sense of the fecundity of spring and newness of life, all of which are part of our theological Easter baskets. But even as we celebrate, Jesus is here prodding at us with his staff, good shepherd as he is, reminding us that he wants from us more than celebration at the triumph, reminding us that true

celebration is sharing that joy with others, and not only those who are in our normal line of vision.

In the week ahead, I invite you to continue Easter – continue to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ by praying that we may hear that voice from the shoreline, helping us notice the side of the boat we have neglected so that we can discover the vast grace of God at work in us for the life of the world. Amen.