



“REFLECTIONS”

Genesis 1:26-27, 31a

John 21:1-19

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Note: This sermon was preached at the Berkley campus on April 15, at Birmingham Traditional Worship on April 22, and at Shine Contemporary Worship on April 29.

Several years ago, when I received my first appointment after seminary, a retired teacher in one of the churches, named Don, approached me and asked if I'd like to go fishing. I love fishing and it had been a little while, so I was more than willing to go. We decided that we'd go out early one morning on a beautiful inland lake which was stocked with splake, a hybrid of brook trout and lake trout.

Don had a nice aluminum fishing boat. When we got on the lake, we started fishing at a spot that looked good. After a while, it didn't seem like we were even getting a nibble. Don looked over at me and said, “Preacher, you might need to say a few ‘Hail Mary’s’ and ‘Our Fathers’ to get them to bite.” I laughed, knowing that I didn't command that type of authority, but still I prayed a little nonetheless. It couldn't hurt, right? Still, it seemed as if nothing was biting.

As I sat there, I remembered several fishing trips with my grandfather when I was younger. He would always remind me to focus on the beauty of the scenery around us. I remembered him telling me that sometimes you just have to be patient when you're fishing.

After a little while, Don said, “I don't know about you, but I'm not out here just to go fishing. When I go fishing, I intend to catch something.” With that, Don opened up a bag he had brought with him and pulled out a fish finder. Fish finders scan the bottom of the lake and tell you where the fish are. Dropping the sensor into the water, Don said, “This should help us catch something.”

Watching the fish finder's screen, we went around the lake and eventually found a school of splake. In no time, we caught our limit and went home with a beautiful fish supper for that evening. That day, Don became my favorite fishing buddy. When he went out fishing for the

day, he meant business. He was always determined to do more than just waste bait. He went out to catch something.

Our gospel lesson takes place shortly after the first Easter experience. The disciples have already seen the risen Christ. In fact, they have returned from Jerusalem and are back up north along the Sea of Galilee, which is also called the “Sea of Tiberius.”

Back home in their old stomping grounds, Peter decides to go fishing. Several others decide to go along with him. Many were originally fishermen and it’s what they know best. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, it seems somewhat normal that these disciples returned to what was comfortable. They had journeyed with Jesus for three years by that time. Without his constant presence, it’s only natural that they might return to their original occupations as fishermen.

After fishing all night, however, they catch nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus calls out to them from the beach, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They don’t recognize Jesus, but answer back nonetheless that they haven’t caught a thing. Can you imagine, fishing all night long with nothing to show for it. How frustrating!

Jesus encourages them to throw their nets out on the right side of the boat. I mean, really, does it make a difference? Either the fish are there or they are not, right? Who was this guy giving advice from the shoreline, anyway? But what do they have to lose? So they do it. Before long, they find themselves dragging in nets filled with 153 large fish. Clearly someone counted every last one! Where else do you come up with a number like that? Actually there seem to be almost as many theories about what that number might mean as there are fish.

In that moment, John realizes that it was Jesus, so Peter puts on some clothes and jumps into the sea. Talk about *Caught Fishing with Your Pants Down!* Now that’s a sermon for another day!

You can sense Peter’s excitement to be the first to get to Jesus. Yet, I wonder what he felt the moment he stepped up on land. As everyone is excited about the catch, the gospel writer notes that on the shore, there was a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. When they arrive, Jesus invites them to breakfast. It takes a long time to make a charcoal fire, doesn’t it? I wonder if Jesus was watching them all night long.

Not only that, but the last time that a charcoal fire is mentioned in John’s gospel was on the night before Jesus was crucified. As Jesus stood before the high priest, Peter remained out in the courtyard. Do you remember the story? Warming himself with some others around a “charcoal fire,” Peter denied knowing Jesus three times before the cock crowed.

I wonder what went through his mind as Peter stepped onto the shore to discover that fire. Did that fire remind him of his own brokenness and denial? Did his heart sink as he saw it? Was he speechless?

After breakfast, Jesus brings Peter’s sense of loss to the foreground, as he calls him by his birth name, Simon. Jesus had given him the name “Peter” by this point in his life. Yet Jesus asks him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” You can almost feel the weight in

Peter's heart as he rushes to answer, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus tells him, "Feed my lambs."

Whew! That's over, right? Nope! Jesus presses a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Have you ever had someone ask you that question more than once? This has to be crushing. Does Jesus not trust his answer? What's with this? Can Jesus read his thoughts? Does Jesus know what happened on that night not too long before this?

Still, Peter responds a second time, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And Jesus tells him, "Tend my sheep."

If that's not crushing enough, Jesus asks him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Even the gospel writer tells us how "hurt" Peter is at this point, but you can almost sense it in his response. Peter says, "Lord, you know EVERYTHING; you know that I love you." A third time Jesus tells Peter, "Feed my sheep."

In this post-Easter encounter, Jesus meets Peter in his brokenness and redeems his experience. For guilt and shame, Jesus seems to offer mercy and grace. Around a charcoal fire before Jesus' death, Peter shivered in the cold and denied knowing Jesus three times. Around a charcoal fire on a beach, Jesus met Peter and the others with food and grace, reminding them of a time when he fed over five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish not too far from there.

When they had abandoned the task of "fishing for people" and returned to what they knew, they came up empty handed after an entire night of fishing. At the shoreline of their defeat, Jesus meets them and fills their nets when they had gone back to business as usual.

After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus as if cancelling out his former denial. This is what redemption and restoration looks like, friends. This is new life. Jesus meets Peter and the disciples where they are and reminds them who they have been created to be.

Speaking of the whole story, we hear in Genesis that in the beginning, God created humans in God's image—in God's own likeness—and God called us "very good." When the image doesn't seem to shine through because of our own brokenness, God meets Peter and us in Jesus Christ to restore that image, that we might better reflect who God is for the world around us. When we forget who we are, Jesus meets us to remind us of the "very good" image that God sees in us no matter how deeply we hide that image.

More importantly, Jesus doesn't leave Peter there. Instead, he reminds Peter that to love Jesus is to feed and to tend the lambs and the sheep. To love Jesus is to care for the sheep and lambs.

Throughout this past year, our FORWARD team has been at work to help us discern where it is God is leading us in the next three to five years. We believe that God often speaks to us as a gathered community. That's why so many of you participated in a survey during worship last September, several of you participated in listening circles throughout October and November, and some of our leaders gathered in January to discern what God may be saying to us through

your voices. We reflected on our history as a church as well as demographic studies of the areas surrounding Birmingham and Berkley. Stepping into this process, we remembered who we are and have been as we sought to listen intently for who God is calling us to be.

At Birmingham and Berkley First, “our purpose is to gather, nurture, and equip disciples of Jesus Christ for ministry and mission in the world.” Gathering is not simply getting together the family for a fish supper along the seashore. When we talk about gathering disciples for Jesus Christ, we also mean “intentional evangelism.” When we say we’re going fishing, we intend to be catching. If somehow we’re seeing empty nets, then it’s time for us to throw them out on the right side of the boat. And when our nets come back in full, we’re not throwing a few back, but we’re making sure that every last one is valued.

As a part of the body of Christ, we recognize that all human beings are created in God’s good image. When others see us at Birmingham and Berkley First, we hope they see a full reflection of who God is. We realize that in our diversity, we more accurately reflect who God is for a world that needs to know that they, too, are created in God’s good image. In our diversity, others are able to recognize more easily what God looks like and discover that they, too, are reflections of that good image in the world.

Jason Gray, a Christian musician, wrote a song entitled *Remind Me Who I Am*. The lyrics begin with “When I lose my way and I forget my name, remind me who I am. In the mirror all I see is who I don’t wanna be. Remind me who I am. In the loneliest places, when I can’t remember what grace is, tell me once again who I am to you. Tell me lest I forget, who I am to you; that I belong to you.” He goes on later to sing, “If I’m your beloved, can you help me believe it?”¹

Throughout the song, Jason is singing to God about how easy it is to forget that we are beloved. He asks God to help him remember his sacred worth as “beloved” when he loses his way; when the world causes him and us to forget that we belong to God. Is this not also our work as the body of Christ? God invites us to be so reflective of God’s good image that others not only see God at work in us, but are able to see that they, too, are “beloved,” created in God’s good image with intrinsic worth.

Many of you might know that currently the United Methodist Church, similar to other mainline denominations in recent years, is struggling around issues of biblical interpretation, especially in regards to theological understandings of human sexuality, sexual identity, and gender expression. Some of you might know that in February of 2019, there is a special session of our general conference, a global gathering of United Methodists from around the world, which has been called to help our greater church discern a way forward as we are a global church with differing thoughts and approach our dialogue from different cultural perspectives.

As a denomination, we have been divisive at times and harsh with one another. Sometimes our dialogue has been similar to the political discourse and division within our own nation. At Birmingham and Berkley First, however, we are committed to praying for the unity of the greater church while expressing openness to diverse perspectives. Many people who disagree are striving to be faithful together. “We affirm a way forward that strengthens and expands Christ’s mission in ways that value and enable the Church at large and our congregation to reach more

people with the good news of Jesus Christ in a variety of contexts with faithfulness, humility, creativity, and generosity.”

We know that whenever we talk about these issues, we are talking about more than issues. Rather we are talking about someone around us, or someone’s son, daughter, grandchild, mother, father, but most importantly, we’re always talking about God’s beloved child.

We realize that we are on this journey of faith together, but our faith journeys are not exact replicas of one another. Together, we honor one another as faithful Christians on the journey. Sometimes we’re going to get it right. Sometimes, Jesus will meet us on the seashore when we’ve returned to what we know rather than who we’ve been called to be. In it all, however, we will love one another.

We need one another, in all of our diversity (socio-economic, racial, political, theological, sexual orientation, gender, age, class, education, career choices, and so much more) to fully reflect who God is for our world. Recognizing our need for one another grounds our strategic initiatives over the next three to five years.

That being said, our first initiative is: “Growing in Relationship with God through Discipling Ministries.” If we are to grow in the next several years, we know that we need to better define and develop paths for discipleship as we reach out to those who are new to the Christian faith. Regardless of where people are on their journey of faith, we are committed to offering a variety of opportunities to support spiritual growth, faith development, and fellowship. A key to our growth is expanding the regularly occurring points of entry that people experience in our church across our campuses with a comprehensive and transparent plan for adult discipling ministries. Those opportunities will be varied in site, location, and setting as well as format and content.

Small groups provide key avenues for growth. I belong to a few key covenant groups that keep me accountable and help me to grow in my Christian faith. My friends and colleagues in those groups don’t always tell me what I want to hear, but they always love me and help me to be who God is calling me to be. We pray together and lift one another up even when we disagree.

Our second initiative is: “Building Relationships with those in their 20s and 30s.” This is not to say that other age groups have become less important. When we look out over our current population in across our campuses, however, this is an area where we need to expand our outreach. We are committed to reducing and removing barriers to develop authentic relationships and pathways for worship, discipleship, and fellowship focused on the needs and preferences of those in their 20s and 30s.

Currently, across our denomination, this is a demographic that is not being reached well. Frankly, this is the initiative that feels a little like a God-sized dream. If very few are reaching this demographic well, what will it take for us to expand our ministries to reach this demographic? This is an area of challenge that stands before us as a congregation where we are committed to providing leadership.

Finally, our third strategic initiative is: “Extending Relationships through Multi-Site Ministry.” Together, as we seek to be all that God has called us to be, we realize that the call to more accurately reflect God’s image for the world around us in all of God’s diversity will not happen in one location. To reach other demographics, we must expand our vision to the horizon. There is not so much diversity within a two- to four-mile radius of Maple Road and Pleasant Street in Birmingham, Michigan. Yet, as we set our sights on the horizon, we can realize an expanded and diverse mission field in the areas beyond us. While not every site will look like Birmingham or Berkley First, and some could be found in storefronts or homes or a variety of other locations, God is calling us to continue to extend our relationships beyond these horizons that we might embrace and reflect a fuller view of the image of God.

Our initiatives are grounded in who we are as we seek to “gather, nurture, and equip disciples of Jesus Christ for ministry and mission in the world.” So what would you tell your unchurched friends about us and who we are trying to be through these initiatives?

Simply put, at Birmingham and Berkley First, we are the place where you belong. We know that God loves you and so do we. We love you as you are. We’re going to help you get connected and grow into who God is calling you and us to be. We’re going to be the church that makes sure there is room for you so that together we might witness what God looks like for the world.

So let’s go fishing, friends!

¹ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/jasongray/remindmewhoiam.html>