

Why Jesus Interrupts The Disciples' Fishing Trip

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John 21:1-14 NIV

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. 3 "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

5 He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?"

"No," they answered.

6 He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread.

10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught."

11 Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Introduction

Bill Ennis, trainer for Transitional Pastors, began our three days together by reminding us:

God's church does NOT have a mission. God's mission has a church.

That is, Jesus calls people together to be part of something greater than themselves. When those people forget that larger purpose, or get preoccupied by other things, they may continue to be friends. They may continue to be a community. They may even continue to do good in the world together. But they cease to be the church.

Things to notice:

- This is more than a story about a fishing trip. John clearly intends for it to be symbolic, pointing to a larger reality. Seven of original twelve are on this fishing trip. Seven is a important symbolic number that represents wholeness or completeness. John is likely saying, this group equals the church. Then John says the number of large fish they caught was 153. There have been one lots of theories about what the number 153 is supposed to symbolize. One ancient believed it represented all the known species of fish, and thus pointed to mission of reaching every nation of people with the gospel. Another explanation connects this story to the feeding of the multitudes in John 6. In that story, 5 loaves of bread end up generating 12 leftover baskets of food. $5 + 12$ equals 17, and 153 is a multiple of 17. When Jesus is present, the success of the mission is not reckoned by addition, but by multiplication!
- Peter is now clearly the leader. The others take direction from him.
- Peter has clearly worked up a sweat. Their lack of success was not due to a lack of effort.
- When all the disciples come together on the shore, Jesus again presides over the meal as he did at the Last Supper.

We shouldn't be too hard on Peter and the others for going back to fishing, any more than we should be hard of Thomas for his doubts. The gospels do a wonderful job of depicting the disciples as utterly, beautifully, human. God created real people. Jesus calls real people. The Holy Spirit indwells in real people, not idealized, perfect or perfectionistic people. In the face of uncertainty, Peter and the others went back to what they knew.

“When the pause comes and the vision begins to be less vivid, we are not to be idle or despondent. We are to go with the obvious tasks of everyday... How wise were these disciples who calmly went back to their fishing!” - Footnote from Morris, NICNT 760 quoting Lloyd

Sometimes we go back to the familiar, to what we know, in the midst of uncertainty and distress. Not necessarily a bad thing, but it does raise questions about where our trust lies – in ourselves or in the Lord who has revealed himself to us?

So why DID Jesus interrupt the trip?

Jesus cares about what we care about. He blesses them with fish (occupation), even though what will come next is a conversation about sheep (vocation).

Jesus cares about what we care about, but he is still calling us to look beyond ourselves. We are meant for more than occupation. We have a vocation, a calling, and purpose beyond ourselves.

God's church does NOT have a mission. God's mission has a church.

Good questions

- Why do you think Peter decided to go fishing? Why did the others join him? What might they have been feeling at this time?
- What does Jesus' question to the disciples in verse five reveal?
- What projects are you currently trying to accomplish on your own strength apart from Christ's involvement?
- The miraculous catch was a sure-fire way for Jesus to get the disciples' attention and capitalize on a teachable moment. How does Jesus get your attention when you fall back into old routines? Where does that usually happen?
- For fun, replace "Simeon Peter" with "the church." What do you see when you do this? What does John want to teach us about ourselves through this text?

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