

“Continuing to Feed”

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**Sunday, April 10, 2016
Third Sunday of Easter**

Readings from Scripture: Psalm 30:6-12 and John 21:1-19

As for me, I said in my prosperity, “I shall never be moved.” By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: “What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!”

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Psalm 30:6-12

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time, he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

John 21:1-17

Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images, concerns and thoughts that we carry within, the words that we have heard read from sacred scripture, the words we have offered in song and in prayer, and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch and transform all of these into the word of God, and let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

Several times throughout the year, someone will come up to me and ask, "How is it that you come up with a new sermon week after week? Doesn't it get hard to do? Isn't it hard to find something to say week after week?" Something along those lines is what they ask. And my response is almost always the same. I tell them that in some sense I am preaching to myself. While I'm mindful and attentive that as your pastor I need to pay attention to what the needs of the church might be, I often just engage the scripture as a starving sinner in need of God's amazing grace. I read and pray over the text and listen for the voice of God because I, too, at times am that person clinging to the fringes of my faith. I come to my quiet time in the morning with doubts and fears and frustrations with myself and with others. And I need to quiet all those competing voices in order to hear again that I am loved and cared for and appreciated and blessed and that all I have is intended to better the lives of my neighbors. And today I am mindful that I come to the text this week afraid.

On Tuesday surgeons at St. Luke's will fuse together five of my vertebrae in order to release pressure on my spinal cord. This week I have sat quietly with the reality of undergoing a six-hour operation on my back and I've wondered what it would be like to die. I've talked with my spiritual director about my fear and when he asked, "What is it that you're most afraid of?" I said, honestly, that I would not walk again. While most all of me is highly confident of a very positive outcome, there is a small part of me that's now, with thunder, even more scared. But I realize that this is why I preach. Because I, like so many of you, need to hear again and again and again and again the good news of God that is available to all of us through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We need to be reminded again and again and again and again that we are loved and cared for and blessed. We need to be reminded that God's abundant blessing did not stop with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We need to know that God's active presence in our midst, while we may not recognize it, did not leave us when Jesus or the stories about him came to an end. God's empowerment of us to carry on doing good works and inviting others to participate with us continues on beyond one amazing moment on an Easter morning. We all need to hear again and again how God's redeeming grace wipes away our denials, our mistakes, our fears, all the harmful and hurtful things that we've ever done and it entrusts us sinners to carry on a ministry of loving presence to our enemies and service to our neighbors. This is why I preach, because when part of me is afraid, I need to remember the abundance, presence, empowerment and redeeming grace of God that is available to us and to all people.

I'm indebted, this morning, to the insights of Tom Troeger, who in his commentary in Feasting on the Word, talked about this passage. He reminded me this week that in this amazing epilogue of the Gospel of John, it is not just feeding people that Jesus wants to continue into the future. This whole story about Jesus interacting with fishermen who struggle all night in the dark and don't catch a thing until an unrecognized Jesus instructs them to throw their net on the other side and who then invites them to join him for breakfast and then says "Bring some of what you have caught" and then says to Peter three times, "Do you love me?" and then instructs him to feed and tend the followers--this story is about so much more than simply continuing to feed people. The story is about how we as the people of God can continue to trust in God's abundance, presence, empowerment and redeeming grace that send us sinners out into the world to carry on the ministry and mission of Christ. If we have wrongly concluded that Christ's abundant generosity belongs in the past and it is not in the present, we miss the point of the story with the fishermen fishing all night and then finding an abundant catch. This story gives witness to the risen and unrecognized Christ continuing to bless all of us abundantly. If we are tempted to think

that we could never be so obtuse like the disciples in identifying Christ, this epilogue warns us to be careful. Once again, the disciples did not recognize the risen Christ immediately. And just as Mary at the tomb thought Jesus was the gardener, and the disciples did not recognize Jesus when he first appeared to them behind locked doors, we, too, may not recognize the presence of the risen Christ in front of us. The story also invites us to remember that Jesus is about inviting or inclusion and empowerment. He invites the disciples to join him for breakfast on the beach. And to me what's most amazing about this story is that he wants them to bring some of what they've caught and add it to the fire. Jesus does not prepare everything for us. Instead he gets things ready and he invites us to contribute what we can in order that we will be empowered for ministry and know that when we come together, good things happen.

In this story we also hear Jesus ask Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Three times. Peter denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed. But in this story we need to appreciate the power of God's redeeming grace. Jesus entrusts Peter to carry on the ministry and mission of Christ, to feed and to care for those who come to follow the Lord. The one who denies Jesus is the one to whom the risen Christ entrusts with carrying on his ministry and fulfilling that ministry on earth, to make sure that all are cared for and fed in body, mind and spirit. Sinners are entrusted with the mission of Jesus Christ.

Troeger reminds us that in this story there is a powerful witness to the enduring reality that God is still at work in our world through the presence of the risen Christ. God's abundance, presence, empowerment and redeeming grace is always at work in your life and in mine. As I mentioned, and the thunder exaggerated, I've been a little scared this week. I've sat with the reality of what's about to happen and wondered about this and that, but it was on Friday that I had an experience that reminded me that God is continuing the work that God is about and that God's presence is still active in our world.

Some time ago Ed and Irene Travis contacted Karen because they wanted to do something for the church in honor of Ed's sister, Anne O'Connell's 90th birthday which was last Wednesday. In conversation with Karen and then with me, what we settled on was that they would like to find a new bowl and a new pitcher for the baptismal font. In conversation with Irene I sent information about a potter in North Carolina who does wonderful work. After a few days, Irene called and said she thought glass might be a better medium for the sanctuary and informed me that she and Ed had gone to Third Degree Glass Factory to look at some pieces. They were very impressed with the beauty of the glass bowls and invited me to go along last Friday to see if anything caught our attention.

For about 20 minutes we wandered around looking at all the different exhibits of amazing work. Some of it seemed like it might be a good fit while other pieces were obviously too fancy, or tall, or not stable enough to use as a baptismal bowl. Finally, at the exhibit farthest from the door, a beautiful purple and blue bowl caught Irene's attention. While Ed and I continued to look, Irene kept coming back to this bowl: it was stunning! I asked her what it was about the bowl that grabbed her attention. She said, "It just speaks to me." I told her in my business, that is something to pay attention to.

So then we began to look for pitchers that might work with the bowl, something to pour the water from. We found glasses of all sorts, vases, but nothing seemed quite right. Since we were standing at the farthest exhibit, the one nearest to where the artists work behind a wall of glass, I wondered out loud if Aaron Quigley, the gentleman who made the bowl, might be one of the artists working that day. As Irene and Ed stayed with the bowl and continued to imagine its use as our baptismal font, I walked to the front counter to see if Aaron Quigley was working. The receptionist informed me, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Aaron doesn't work out of our studio any more. He's moved somewhere else to make his glass." It was a long-shot but I thought nothing ventured, nothing gained. I then asked, "Can you Google search Aaron and tell us where he works? If it's in Missouri we might

still be interested in working with him.” She said, “sure” and I began walking back to Ed and Irene, still marveling at the purple and blue bowl with the bright orange rim.

Just as I arrived back to join Ed and Irene, the receptionist tapped me on the shoulder. As I turned around she said, “You won’t believe this, but this is Aaron Quigley,” and she introduced us to the artist. On a fluke he had returned to Third Degree that afternoon to pick up some materials he had left behind. I think all of stood there in awe. The man who made the piece which spoke to Irene and who no longer worked at Third Degree happens to come by at the exact moment when we say, “wouldn’t it be great if the guy who made this was working here today.”

I looked at Ed and Irene and said, in amazement, “this is Holy Spirit stuff. Confirmation that you have found the right piece and that this is it!”

As I’ve reflected back upon the amazing events of this past Friday and the coming events of this Tuesday, I say to myself, "Thank you Lord! Thank you for reminding me that You are at work in this world in ways that continue to surprise and stun us. Thank you for continuing to be at work in ways which remind us all that You are Present - Right Now - Right Here.”

And so this is why I preach: to stand as a witness to all the ways the Lord God is at work in our lives and watching over us. I preach because when we are afraid, we need to remember that God is with us. I preach because all of us (sinners) need to be reminded again and again: we are loved! And today I preach because, while I am afraid, I’m also very sure that the Good Lord is with us all! Amen.