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24th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Saints At The Table”

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John 21:9-19

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11 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. 12 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. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. 15 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." 16 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." 17 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. 18 Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." 19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this, he said to him, "Follow me

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Saints At The Table

Grief is a funny thing. It's unpredictable and completely non-linear. Sometimes it hits all at once at a time that makes sense like at the funeral or in the very moment you hear the news. Other times it comes out of the blue when you least expect it. Standing in line at the store you see someone across the way, and for a moment, your brain thinks it is the loved one you lost but then you realize it's not and grief hits like a wave. Or you see a name or a picture or hear a song, and suddenly the loss returns as if it happened this morning, even when it was decades ago.

This story in the gospel of John is a post-resurrection story; it is one of the few stories we have of the disciples encountering Jesus after God has raised him from the dead. But it begins as a story about grief. Jesus has died, and although he has appeared to the disciples twice, they are still in shock, not sure what to do. So they go back to what they know fishing. But as is often the case, when we have been through a life-changing event, the things we knew, the things that once brought us satisfaction and purpose, are no longer the same. The disciples go back to fishing, but it doesn't work like it used to. They catch nothing until a stranger on the shore gives them some unsolicited advice.

It is the abundance of the catch that clues them into the fact that the stranger is their beloved teacher. And when they make their way to the shore, Jesus feeds them. He calls them by the fire, he breaks the bread and cooks the fish, he gives them food that nourishes their bodies and heals their hurting, grieving souls.

It's funny, isn't it, how much food figures in our experiences of grieving? When my grandfather died unexpectedly, there weren't enough surfaces in my grandparents' house to hold all the food that people brought us. I don't remember being hungry, but I do remember eating and hoping that somehow all that comfort food fried chicken, green bean casserole, macaroni and cheese, pound cake – hoping that somehow all that food would absorb the grief. It didn't, but the love and care it represented from those who brought it to the house and handed it to us with words of empathy and compassion, that made a difference. That brought some measure of comfort.

On the beach that morning, Jesus offers the disciples food for their bodies and souls, and he invites them to contribute to the meal they will share. "Bring some

of that fish you have just caught," he says. It is as if Jesus is reminding them that, in the midst of the shock and confusion and grief of his death, they can still do something for one another. It is as if he knows that when we are facing the brokenness in the world and in our lives, we need to do something which is, of course, why we bring food or send flowers when someone has died. Faced with suffering, we want to do something anything to make it better.

Gander is a town on the island of Newfoundland in Canada, which has a surprisingly large airport for a town of fewer than 10,000 people. Gander used to be a refueling stop for transatlantic flights, but with the advent of jets with longer range in the 1960s, most flights no longer needed to refuel and most of the airport was no longer used. Until September 11, 2001. That day, the U.S government closed U.S airspace, the first and only time this has ever happened. The U.S. transportation secretary called his Canadian counterpart and asked if Canada would receive the flights in the air from Europe and Asia. Canada said "yes," and within hours, thirty-eight planes had landed in Gander. As word spread through the town, Gander's citizens mobilized. With only 500 hotel rooms, every public space was converted into a temporary shelter. Toilet paper was collected. Cots and air mattresses were dropped off. Meals were planned. The bus drivers called off a strike in order to transport passengers. The ice hockey rink became a giant refrigerator to store perishable food.

On the morning of September 12, the passengers were finally allowed to get off the planes, taking only their carry-on bags all the checked luggage stayed on the planes. Over 7000 passengers got off 38 planes that day, 7000 people from all over the world, far away from home, disoriented, confused, afraid. Passengers were taken to hotels, community buildings, churches, schools, and private homes, where they finally watched the news and learned what was going on. Families were kept together. Elderly passengers were lodged in private homes. Nurses and doctors were on duty. Everyone was given access to phones and email. School was canceled so that students could pitch in and help. Locals began inviting people home for dinner, inviting them to stay the night, cleaning their clothes, and giving them anything that they could ask for. One passenger remembers the two small stores in town simply opened their doors and told the passengers to "take what you need" food, diapers, formula, toiletries, menstrual supplies, medicine. Prescriptions were filled at no cost. Local bakeries offered fresh bread. Food was prepared by residents and church members

and brought to shelters. Every need was met and "every meal was a feast." Later, when the media interviewed various passengers, tears streamed down their faces as they told these stories of the hospitality they received from the hands of strangers.¹

When Jesus gathered those seven disciples on the beach, he wasn't just feeding them. He was giving them what they needed to keep going, to keep living and loving in a world that felt irreparably broken. They needed sustenance, and so he fed them, but they also needed something to do, and so he invited them to bring what they had caught and to do what they could to help each other. All of the disciples were wrestling with grief, but Peter was also grappling with guilt. In Jesus's final hours, Peter had betrayed Jesus, not just once, but three times, by denying three times that he knew Jesus. Peter needs more than a successful day of fishing and a meal with Jesus on the beach to deal with his grief and his guilt, and Jesus knows it. For the one who denied him three times, Jesus has three questions: "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" And although Peter answers each time affirmatively, it is not enough for Peter to declare his love for Jesus; Jesus also gives Peter something to do: "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." In other words, this nourishment, this forgiveness, and love is not just for you; it is for you to pass on to others.

Richard Rohr writes that we know that we have truly accepted God's love for us when we can love others the way we have been loved. Rohr calls this, "completing the circuit." This may sound like a monumental task to love others the way God has loved us, and I don't mean to diminish it, but sometimes we hear that and decide it's just too big, it's just too hard, and so we don't even try. Like Peter, we wish we could just say that we love God, show up at church, say our prayers, and have that be enough. But God calls us to do more.

Two weeks ago, we sponsored a showing of the movie *The Hate You Give* for one hundred and twenty-five juniors and seniors from John Hay School. After watching the movie, which is a powerful depiction of racism in America and the violence and injustice that stems from it, we returned to church for pizza and conversation. A few of the students were inspired by what they had seen,

¹ I am indebted to the Rev. Amy Miracle, who introduced me to the musical *Come From Away*, which tells the story of Gander. Amy used and shared this story with me in the sermon "Come From Away" which she preached at Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio on September 30, 2018.

and they got up in front of their peers to call them to action. But others responded with deep cynicism. "It doesn't matter what we do," they said. "It doesn't matter what conversations we have. Nothing is ever going to change." Finally, a CWRU professor named Heather Burton got up to speak. "I've been listening to you guys talk, and I want to tell you something," I have two master's degrees and a Ph.D., and I got pulled over by the police when I was driving through Twinsburg. The only thing I had done wrong was that I'm black and I had a hoodie on. So I know, from all kinds of personal experience, how hard it is to be black in American and how easy it is to think there is nothing we can do to change things for the better. But what your classmates are saying to you is correct: the only thing any of you can do is to figure out what YOU can do. And then do it! What can you do, today, to make a difference in your life or in someone else's life? Focus on that. Do that. If we all did that, we could change our country."

Jesus stood on the beach that day and did something ridiculously simple: he told the disciples to fish on the other side of the boat, and then he invited them to come and eat. He told Peter to, "feed my sheep." In other words, focus on what you can do, and do it. Make the next meal, serve the next stranger, step in when you see someone suffering. Call out injustice, educate yourself, exercise your civil rights.

Jesus knows that love is in the details, in small, considerate acts rather than in the grand gestures. And love is passed on, not en masse, but from one person to another, one action at a time.

On All Saints' Day, Steve Garnaas-Holmes shared this poem: This All Saints' Day, sing praise for the unnamed, the unknown saints, the quiet faithful who kept the flame alive, mothers who gave life, grandmothers who said prayers, fathers who taught their sons the courage of gentleness. Thank God for all who have worked for justice, who have offered healing and hope, who have practiced generosity and courage, who have kept the candle burning. Praise God for all those who have suffered, who have borne the light when it was hard, the victimized and exploited, who yet remained God's Beloved. And thank God for those who did nothing special at all, who were simply the children of God, made holy by God's love in them, made saints by being created in God's image, who shone by being themselves, who honored the light of God within them, living their lives instead of others' demands. Praise God for that flame in you,

burning right now, steady and bright, giving light to those who follow. Give thanks, and pass on the light.²

Faced with the brokenness of the world around us, what can we do? What does it mean to gather around this table, in the midst of a polarizing election season, the week after yet another mass shooting in a place of worship, the day after two shootings in our own neighborhood? Blaming others for the problems we see and wishing someone else would fix them won't change anything. The only thing we can do is whatever each of us, individually, can do. That's how this works. Feed my lambs, says Jesus. In other words, care for someone who is hurting. Tend my sheep, says Jesus. In other words, say something when you see someone being mistreated or unjustly accused. Feed my sheep, says Jesus. In other words, extend hospitality to strangers, even to those whose differences make you afraid.

The saints we remember today are all those who responded to God's love by passing it on in a million small but meaningful ways. And we are called to be saints in this same tradition. We are called to feed and tend and love God's people, and there is no gesture so small that it is insignificant. Look around – this is the communion of saints at God's table. If you want things to be different. If you believe the church can be better, if you believe the world can be better, it starts here, at this table, where God calls us to come as we are, bring what we can, to tend, feed, and love one another. So let's get to work.

Amen.

² Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, November 1, 2018.