

“Keep Casting”**John 21:1-19****Third Sunday of Easter/Communion**

God loves the created world, and always will.

John 21:1-19

¹After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.

²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.

³Simon 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.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?”

They answered him, “No.”

⁶He 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.

⁷That 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. ⁸But 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.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.

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

¹¹So 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.

¹²Jesus 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.

¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When 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.”

¹⁶A 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.”

¹⁷He 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. ¹⁸Very 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.”

The Sermon

What does it feel like to be physically alive at this moment?

Our hearts beat.

We breathe.

For many of us, in one place or another, probably several, we can feel our age.

Those are merit badges, by the way. They are our medals for having made it through time and some wounding, weathering experiences. They’re not fun, and they’re not pretty, but they’re beautiful, because they mean we have lived, and we are alive now.

What does it feel like to be physically alive at this moment?

What does it feel like to be a living soul in the universe? We are present *with* our bodies, but we are more than that: our thoughts; our emotional lives and personalities; our sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26); our enigmatic, unfathomable, not entirely definable existence.

We’re alive. You exist. What does that feel like? And what does it mean?

And did you know that God loves what God has created—including this physical world, and including you—and always will?

The hours crawled along, the boat circling slowly while the nets came up empty; the shore visible in all directions, but a lifetime away across the surface of the deep water; through the silence of the long night, the water lapping quietly against the side of their tiny boat on the Sea of Galilee, 12 miles long and six miles wide.

Peter had opted to go out in a fishing boat, and the half-dozen or so other disciples who were there thought that sounded pretty good, so they had gone with him.

What else do you do when you are reeling from trauma in grief and bafflement? Sometimes, you just do whatever you do.

That was what it felt like to be alive, and this was the world of Peter and the other disciples on a long, fruitless night when they had to face the “new normal” of living in a world without Jesus, a world that it may have seemed that God had abandoned, or lost, or couldn’t or wouldn’t control.

Did they still believe, on that long night of futility, that God loves this created world? And loved them?

At daybreak, they were still out on the water when a figure came and stood on the beach, and called out to them to cast the net to the right side of the boat, and they’d find some fish.

For reasons John does not record, they cast it. And now there were so many fish they couldn’t even haul it in. That’s when one of them said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!”

When they made it to the beach with their astonishing haul, there was the charcoal fire—not unlike the one Peter had been warming his hands around just the other night as he had denied even knowing Jesus.

No wonder Peter was so impetuous about diving into the water to get to Jesus on the shore.

And when they came to the shore, there was the bread, as Jesus had miraculously provided bread for thousands of spiritually sick and physically hungry people, not too long ago.

And like that episode, the fish again came from the people around Jesus. He had called them “children” when he had called from the shore, just like it was a young boy who had provided the fish that Jesus had multiplied to feed the people.

Peter went back aboard the boat and hauled out the net, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

There are a lot of theories about why, specifically, “153.” One says that that’s the total number of people in John’s gospel that Jesus, in 48 different episodes, had “directly blessed.”ⁱ I haven’t personally counted them, because I have, you know, stuff to do.

Another theory about it looks at the Biblical symbolic value of numbers. Seven is the number that indicates the perfect unity of heaven and earth: three being the number that represents the heavenly order, four being the number of earth: four winds, four elements, four directions.ⁱⁱ Ten often represents totality. If you add three plus four, for heaven and earth, and then add ten to symbolize the totality of heaven and earth, you get 17.

If you add up each number from 1 to 17 (1 + 2 + 3 + 4 etc. up to 17), you get 153.

The net in which God gathers us up to feed the world is strong enough to gather every single one of us in: the totality of who we are, and the totality of creation, the perfect unity of heaven and earth.

When Jesus spoke over the waters, as God did in Genesis when there was nothing in them, the number of fish went from zero to so many they had to struggle to bring in their haul.

God still speaks love into creation, feeding spiritually sick and physically hungry people.

When Luke tells a version of this story, it happens during Jesus' earthly ministry, and it asks the question, "Who is this man?"

John's asks: Does God still care about the world we live in? Or is God just waiting, with us, for the end time to come and get us all out of here, whisked away from it like a disposable paper cup that's ultimately just to be thrown away?

Does God have any regard for the world God has created?

To hungry, lost, grieving, baffled disciples at daybreak after a long and seemingly fruitless night, the response to that question is an unexpectedly overflowing haul, courtesy of the savior serving them breakfast on the shore, that invites us to become part of God's love for the world.

Do you love me the way I love you, God asks?

Well, yeah; I mean, I *try* to.

"Feed my lambs."

Do you love me? says the Lord.

Lord, you know I love you.

"Tend my sheep."

Do you love me? asks Jesus.
OK, now I'm offended.
"Then feed my sheep."

What are you supposed to do when you are reeling from trauma or grief or confusion or hopelessness?

Do what a Christian does. And keep casting.

When you get sick and tired of seeing the noblest among us having to make the split second decision to sacrifice themselves—the courage of Riley Howell—up against the disgraceful cowardice that results in a world full of bluster, insanity, and firepower, keep casting.

When you are frustrated and starved of hope at the pathetic level of discourse and the bleating, bloviating, childish leadership in countries with their hands on levers of power that could feed the whole world in an instant if they wanted to, keep casting.

When the statistics on hunger and violence and drugs and human trafficking are so overwhelming that it becomes almost soul-destroying to think about the human beings whose lives are ground up in the cyclone of misery and suffering, keep casting.

What does it feel like to be alive at this moment?

We know our broken hearts are still beating.
We breathe, and give thanks for our breath.
We feel the badges of our years and our experience, and pray for those whose badges are more wounding than ours.
We're alive.
We exist.
We are living souls in the universe.

And we keep doing what we do. We keep casting our nets into the wide world even when the water is still,

because the Son of God has shown us that there is life under that unmoving surface if we will just cast our nets into it the way he taught us how.

Did you know that God still loves this world—the created, physical world, and everything, and every one, in it—and always will?

Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!

To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever. Amen.

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ⁱ <http://www.biblestudy.org/bibleref/meaning-of-numbers-in-bible/153.html>

ⁱⁱ I am using here Stan Saunders' overview of symbolic numbers as used in the Revelation to John, which I regard as a "Johannine" apocalyptic though I am by no means convinced that Gospel of John is written by the same author(s). Class notes for Apocalyptic Ecology, PP presentation 6, "Revelation" (Columbia Theological Seminary, January 2019)