



northminster presbyterian church

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22-Apr-2007 Easter 3

SCRIPTURE: Acts 9:1-6 John 21:1-19

SERMON: Deal Or No Deal (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

This concluding chapter of the Gospel of John is an epilogue that was added most likely by a later redactor, not the original evangelist. The last verses of the previous chapter are clearly the original ending, stating and summing up the whole purpose of the gospel: That you may come to believe that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. These are important words, reminding us that the four Gospels are not biographies of Jesus, nor full chronological records of the Jesus' life. Rather they are Gospels; "Good News". Good News to convert people to faith, Good News to change your life and mine. *So listen!*

As the Good News picks up in chapter 21, there has been a break in the action. It is not clear if these seven disciples have previously encountered the glorified Jesus. The action has shifted from Jerusalem, where in one sense the story ended, or at least took a definitive turn, back to where it all began, in Galilee, specifically on the shores of the Lake where Jesus first said: "*Come, follow me!*"

Deal or no deal? Were the disciples back in Galilee fishing because they had listened to Mary Magdalene who came to them from the empty tomb telling them that Jesus was asking them to go to Galilee where they would see the risen Jesus? Or are they back home, because they think the Jesus event is all over?

In verse 1 we read, "Jesus showed himself again," a simple yet profound reminder that always God takes the initiative towards us. This same verb meaning "revealed" or "showed" used here was used at Jesus' baptism and to describe the signs by which Jesus revealed his glory and as Jesus talked about revealing God's name to others.

So what do you think? By returning to their fishing boats, were these disciples turning their backs on Jesus and their spiritual responsibility as witnesses to the crucifixion and resurrection? Or does this risk us reading too much into the text. After all people have to eat, and fishermen would surely turn to the sea for food. Is it not also the case that when people do not know what to do, they turn to what is familiar. No surprise that Peter escapes his cabin fever by going fishing! He would enjoy and welcome the busyness and the distraction of his boat and nets, and the fickleness of fish.

As you think about your answer, I want you to bear in mind that the first part of this Chapter as a way of filling a very big gap in John's Gospel. Unlike the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, John does not provide us with a full record of the Last Supper. But in these verses, we read of this special meal prepared and offered by Jesus. We hear that there is bread and fish already on the fire, before the catch of the day is ever dragged ashore. So what will it be? Are the disciples on the run *from* Jesus or *to* Jesus? Oh, and by the way... *where are you in this race today?* Are you attempting to get lost or are you ready to be found?

Maybe the disciples are in Galilee in obedience to Jesus. Or maybe they are there "on the run" from the Resurrection, just as they had previously fled the scene of the crucifixion. Either way, danger lurks among the familiar. Because isn't it true that we can become so immersed in the familiar routine that we find it difficult to do that which is less comfortable but more necessary?

Isn't it true that people, people like us, often fail because that with which we are comfortable seduces us away from that which would alone can bring us to God? Arriving home, getting their feet back in those old worn bedroom slippers, enjoying the relative calm and quite of the lakeside as opposed to the hubris and humidity of the city, launching their fishing boats, where they knew every knot in the wood, every repair in their nets, there was a danger things could go either way.

But thanks be to God, Jesus intervenes to insure that they will not be lost permanently to their old ways. Jesus intervenes to help Peter face the truth about himself. Jesus intervenes so Peter could be forgiven and healed and thus able to return to the life of discipleship. Jesus intervenes to free Peter for the next steps of his particular journey. Jesus intervenes with Peter asking: *Deal or no deal?*

And *still* Jesus intervenes for you and me. *Still* the Risen Lord stands on the familiar ground of our lives. *Still* the Living Savior has a meal at the ready with which to feed us. *Still* Jesus has instructions that will, when we obey them, help us make sense of life, ensuring that we do not waste our lives.

As often happens in John's Gospel, the text draws a contrast between "*the beloved disciple*", usually taken to be John himself, and Peter. Remember how on Easter morning Peter and "*the beloved disciple*", ran to the tomb. Peter came in second in the foot race, but unlike his friend, who paused in the doorway, he waltzed right into the tomb without a second invitation. In this encounter "*the beloved disciple*" gets it right theologically when he declares: "It is the Lord!" *Peter gets it right emotionally*; he throws on his clothes and jumps into the water. Peter acts more instinctively than wisely; going fishing, knowing he will get wet he has dressed accordingly, and so he tucks his shirt inside his pants and plunges into the water to swim to the shore where Jesus stands. Just maybe Peter is at his best and finest when he acts on impulse, enthusiastically, lovingly, and so, faithfully. *Just maybe we are at our best when we do the same?* Certainly better if we tuck our shirts in and get with Jesus!

The threefold pattern of the words between Jesus and Peter takes Peter back to the three occasions of denial and betrayal and helps him past that painful trinity to his needed threefold repentance with fear and trembling, and a new commission from Jesus, in which love for Christ is to be made manifest in love for the neighbor. *Deal or no deal?* Now, as then, the heart of following Christ is our attention to others. All of us who believe, all of us welcomed by the Savior, all of us restored in the fellowship of the church are commanded in the very same manner: *tend the sheep, feed the lambs.*

Kenneth Cragg is a Christian-Islamic scholar. He notes that forgiveness is not even a "proper English word." He wrote, "You don't add the suffix "-ness" to a verb to make it a noun. Instead, you add it to an adjective to turn it into a noun - like goodness, badness, niceness, rudeness." Thus Cragg argues, "The true word [then] is either forgiven-ness or forgivingness. Perhaps there's a message there...because only when you have experienced forgiveness can you truly express forgiveness." *Deal or no deal?* "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." *Now who said that?*

When we analyze Peter's experience, we see that Jesus is at one and the same both the person wronged by Peter and the God of Grace who alone can forgive Peter and restore him to friendship and fellowship. Forgiveness requires a relationship with the person we have wronged and to the God of love and mercy. When we go to God in such a way, we can be assured that no matter how heinous our sin, how deep the hurt, how depraved the actions committed, the God we know in Jesus Christ, the God of love and mercy will always forgive, *even before we ask.*

This brings me to the events of last Monday, which have been so much in our minds this week. In my Easter Pastoral Letter in the April Northminster News, I asked the question "How far will Easter stretch?"

I want to affirm that Easter stretches even to this shocking, horrifying crime and results of the crime perpetrated on the Virginia Tech campus.

I want to affirm that Easter stretches into the senseless taking of lives; into the bruised and broken hearts of the families of those who have lost loved ones, or who sit still around a hospital bed.

I want to say that Easter stretches to those who witnessed the unfolding carnage; and also into the questions that must be asked about noticing, and responding to those who are so alone that they act out their fantasies in the real world.

I want to declare that Easter stretches to all the questions that need to be asked about the role of pistols, revolvers, handguns in a modern progressive democratic society.

Blacksburg reminds me of Dunblane, Scotland. In March 1996, 16 Elementary schoolchildren and their teacher were massacred by a disturbed person, whom people knew was disturbed, but who had been able to obtain handguns. In the aftermath, legislation was passed by the representatives elected by the people, banning all handguns. Sure if shooting is your sport, keep your gun at the sport club. But in public, if you are not a law enforcement official and you are carrying a handgun, you are committing a criminal act.

Nowhere does it ever say in the Bible that "Thou shalt not murder... *unless you have been able to obtain a gun!*" Nowhere in God's Kingdom Constitution is there any mandate for lethal weaponry, of any kind. There are no metal detectors in heaven.

On Easter Sunday, do you remember how the Old Testament lesson ended: The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy, on all, my holy mountain, says the Lord, because nothing harmful will be found on God's holy mountain.

There are too many issues that are held over us and over the nation by powerful groups who seek to use these issues for their own ends, in dividing and polarizing society, to raise money or exercise power, with the effect of harming the overall community. The ongoing attraction that society has with guns needs amending right out of our hearts and minds, out of our homes, out of our public life.

Yes, everyone has their favorite statistics! I wanted to quote just these from the Brady Campaign, hopefully an organization that everyone can agree is worth listening to.

In 2004, firearms were used to murder 56 people in Australia, 184 people in Canada, 73 people in England and Wales, five people in New Zealand, and 37 people in Sweden. In comparison, firearms were used to murder 11,344 people in the United States. Over a thirty year period, 75% of such murders involved handguns; 8,508 of the 11,344 murders by handguns. Not one of these by a well-regulated militia!

Some say what about defensive use? In 2005, there were only 143 justifiable homicides by private citizens using handguns in the United States.

This ought not to be a Republican or Democratic or a Green or a Libertarian issue or a special-interest issue. The control of weapons of mass destruction ought to be a national issue! It is a community issue, a people issue, *it is a God issue*. And sure, we also know that more people die on the roads every year. But cars do have legitimate purposes, whereas the only thing a handgun is designed to do is to terrorize or harm. They shall not hurt or destroy, on all, my holy mountain, says the Lord, because nothing harmful will be found on God's holy mountain.

In the face of what we know of the shooter, we long to reach out to any and all who seem isolated, bullied, scarred to provide and offer counsel, love care, support. We long to see hope and healing shared among those who must face the future with the loss of a loved one or the memories that will haunt them.

Easter stretches all the way, but does not absolve us of thinking nor acting nor serving nor sharing nor helping in every way we can.

The Risen Jesus asks us to face the truth, the whole truth about ourselves. The Risen Jesus offers healing and forgiveness, free us for the next steps in our journey of faith.

As you go into your day, your week, I ask you to be look out for your Risen Lord, whom you will meet, as Jesus addresses you by name, and with a warm smile, and arms wide open in love and welcome, and with the smell of a great barbeque in the air, asks: *Deal or no deal?*

Jesus intervenes. Jesus intervenes, saying Come with me, all of you; Come with me, all of you; Come with me all of you to be and do and follow and love and serve. *Come... there is much for us to do! Amen.*

Acts 9:1-6

1Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

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.”

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