

"Peter Goes Swimming"

John 21:1-14

May 5, 2019

Dear Friends in Christ

Doesn't it seem that we've been here before? Today's text sounds familiar. Back in January, we heard the account of a miraculous catch of fish in Luke, chapter 5. Jesus was teaching along the shoreline in Galilee, and the crowds were pressing Him right into the water; so, He asked Peter, the fisherman, to take Him out in the boat. Peter was weary from a night of not catching fish, but he consented anyway. Jesus taught for a while, then instructed Peter to row back out into the deep water and throw the nets in again. Despite the illogic of the instruction, Peter did so — and ended up with a net-full of fish.

Do you remember that story? And do you remember Peter's reaction when he saw the nets were filled? He turned to Jesus, terrified, and declared, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Peter wanted to be far away from Jesus: He had a glimpse of how sinful he was and how holy Jesus was, and the glimpse of it was frightening. Peter knew he was a sinner who deserved judgment, and he was fearful that Christ had come to judge.

Do you remember what happened next? When Jesus spoke, He didn't condemn Peter. Instead, He took away Peter's fear. He took away Peter's sin. Then He told Peter that, from then on, he would be fishing for men. That's how, along with James and John, Peter became a disciple of Jesus.

Three years have now passed, along with Jesus' recent death and resurrection, and the disciples have returned to Galilee after that harrowing week in Jerusalem. Peter decides to go fishing; the other disciples go with him. Just like before, the night goes by without a fish in the nets. With daylight, a figure stands on the shore, calls them "children" and asks if they have any food. When they say "no," He tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. Again, an illogical piece of advice: How is the right side going to differ from the left for catching fish?

But again, the net is full — big fish this time, but even so the net doesn't burst. It's another miracle; and it's not because they fished on the other side of the boat. It's because the One on the shore spoke His Word and declared to them that they would find fish there.

Who is this stranger? John says it first: "It is the Lord!" The risen Jesus is appearing to His disciples again, and no one wants to waste any time getting that boat to shore. For Peter, though, that's not quick enough: He straps His robe back on, jumps in the water and swims for it.

Remember that: The first time Jesus filled the nets, Peter said, "Depart from me!" This time around, Peter can't wait to get to the Lord. Something has happened in between: The Lord has given him faith. By faith, Peter knows that Christ is not there to condemn him, but to save him. The Lord is so intent on saving Peter that He's suffered for his sins on the cross, submitted to the grave, and rose again. No fear for Peter this time. Instead, wherever Jesus is to be found, Peter's going to get there as soon as possible.

Peter's faith is confirmed by the Lord's actions. Look at what the Lord doing? He's making breakfast for His hungry disciples. Even though they know who He is, they dare not ask. Why? Because of who He is. The hand that stokes the fire and turns the fish has a nail-print through it, for this is He who was crucified for them. This is the Christ who suffered their death and now has defeated the tomb. Furthermore, as our epistle reminds us, He is no less than the Son of God, to whom angels and archangels sing and give all glory in heaven. But here and now, He is not sitting on a throne to be worshiped. He's making them breakfast! He's not even speaking to make cooked food appear out of nowhere, but He's grilling fish on a fire.

Jesus is risen from the dead. His time of Humiliation is over, but His humility is not. The Son of God appears to His disciples and provides them with daily bread, giving them breakfast. But that's not all. Our text goes on to tell us how Jesus takes Peter aside, and restores him as an apostle. Peter denied Jesus three times; so three times, Jesus tells him once again to feed His sheep. In other words, Jesus doesn't just appear to give Peter fish. He appears to give Peter forgiveness, again and again. After all, that is why He died. And that is why He is risen.

What has this to do with you and me? Let us begin with some amazing truths regarding our resurrected Lord.

We remember, of course, that He is risen. The Son of God who died in our place, for our sins, is risen again from the dead. This is cause for joy. But to add to that rejoicing is this: Risen from the dead and having conquered all of His enemies, the Lord Jesus Christ still serves. He still provides us with daily bread, and He still gives us the forgiveness of sins. His Humiliation has come to an end. His humility has not, and the Lord of all continues to be the Servant of all.

Here is even more reason for thanksgiving: Not only does the Lord provide for us, but He desires that we be with Him. Risen again, He didn't treat the disciples like pigs in a pen, to be fed but kept away from the house. Rather, He summoned them to Himself in order to care for them, just as He does for us today. Peter, the swimmer, would later write of this truth in his first epistle: "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy." (1 Pet. 2:9-10) "You are a royal priesthood," he proclaims; and what do priests do? They have the privilege of drawing near to God. You have the privilege of drawing

near to Him. The Lord wants you in His presence — not just in the future in heaven, but right now. He doesn't want to keep you as distant recipients of His gifts, but calls you to Him now.

And where do you go to draw near to Jesus? You go to where He promises to be found: you go to where His Word is preached and His Sacraments are given out. That's where Jesus is to be found, forgiving your sins.

What great news! The risen Son of God still draws near to you, to give you forgiveness and life and salvation. He tells you exactly where He does this — in His means of grace.

Having declared this incredible news, we now need to preach some Law against sins which seek to get rid of this truth.

For one thing, we must address the famous theology of the great Canadian outdoorsman who says: "Since God is everywhere, I don't have to be in church to worship Him. Why, I can be in my fishing boat instead." Substitute "fishing boat" for "mountain top" or "river raft" or "gold course" or whatever else calls out on the weekends. If God is everywhere, why can't we just worship Him everywhere? We might counter with a question from the Gospel lesson: "If God is everywhere, then why did Peter swim to shore? Why didn't he just stay in the boat, maybe keep on fishing?"

Luther answers this way: It is true that God is everywhere, but He is not everywhere for you. In other words, while God is everywhere, He directs us to certain places for certain gifts. For instance, imagine someone saying, "Dinner is served inside the restaurant. But since God is everywhere and gives daily bread, I can just sit out here in my car in the parking lot." That's silly, of course; God gives daily bread, and in this case, He's providing it inside the restaurant. Even though God is everywhere and gives daily bread, it doesn't mean He's going to deliver it to you in your car.

Where does God deliver His forgiveness? In His means of grace. Wherever His Gospel is preached and His Sacraments administered accordingly, Jesus is there to forgive. If His Gospel is not preached, nor His Sacraments administered accordingly, Jesus is there — but not to forgive sins. He works through means — in this case, His means of grace. If you're trolling for trout on Sunday morning, God is there, yes; but not to forgive sins. Now, someone will probably ask, "So, what if I take my Bible along and meditate upon it while I'm fishing?" I haven't seen that a lot when I've been fishing; but if it does happen, I'll give you partial credit. But you see, Hebrews 10:25 exhorts us to gather together in order to encourage one another, especially as the Last Day approaches. To be off by yourself is to rob others of your presence and the encouragement that your presence provides here.

Enough of that, for it is largely preaching to the choir. If you are hearing this, it means that you're here and not out fishing, hiking, etc., so we leave that and go to something that does

apply to us. You've made it here this morning, but why? Is it out of joyful expectation that the risen Lord is here? Or is it merely habit — you came because that's what you do on Sunday morning? Is it because someone else made you come? Is it because you feel like you have to? Are you present in body, but your mind is far away right now? Realistically, we often lack the eager desire to be with the Lord and be forgiven. Peter jumped out of the boat and swam to His Lord; the same Lord is here, yet we fail to be so eager to be in His presence and be forgiven. If a big lake surrounding the church, I venture to guess we wouldn't be all that inclined to wade across it to get here. Now, we can make up all sorts of excuses about burnout or boredom or other things to do, but here is the truth: The same Lord is here to restore you as He restored Peter, and that is reason for joy. Our reasons for not gathering are the work of the Old Adam within us, which most certainly does not want to be anywhere near the Lord and His grace.

So, let's be truthful about our lack of earnestness, and confess our lack of attentiveness and our lack of respect for the risen Son of God who gathers us here — and who is present with us.

And let us rejoice, for He still comes. He still draws near to us and welcomes us to Him. He still gives daily bread to all, whether they believe in Him or not. He still offers forgiveness and faith to all, so that all might be forgiven and believe and be saved. He still tells us exactly where He is found with grace, in His Word and in His Sacraments. And by these means of grace, He still has mercy upon us and restores us. Though we come half-heartedly, He does not; He comes with all grace and joy.

You see, Christ is risen from the dead. And He who died to restore us to Himself didn't rise again to abandon us. Despite our sinful reluctance to come into His presence for forgiveness, He still comes anyway. Thus, we give thanks to the Lord for His coming, for His patience, and for His most persistent mercy. And thankful for His persistence, we rejoice to confess our sins and draw near to Him. For here, by His means of grace, the present, risen Lord declares that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen