

Accepting the Invitation

April 14, 2013

John 21:1-19

What are the numbers that that are most important or most memorable in your life? I suppose many of us would answer that question practically — we'd think of our PIN or Social Security numbers.

Others of us would answer sentimentally — maybe a wedding date, or a once-in-a-lifetime bowling or golf score.

There are, of course, negative numbers in our lives, too — debts to pay, losing scores, and unpleasant anniversaries like 9/11 — but those we usually would rather forget.

Now if I were to ask the average Christian to tell me the most important or memorable numbers from the Bible, I'd probably hear a lot of 12s and 40s and 3s — 12 Sons and Tribes of Israel, 12 Disciples; 40 Days of Rain in the flood, 40 years of wandering in the wilderness for the Israelites, Jesus being tested in the desert 40 days; and Jesus' rising on the third day, Jonah in the belly of the fish for three days; and so on.

Many of these number are likely symbolic rather than literal, but they are used to convey spiritual truths.

And of course we have the 10 Commandments, and the feeding of the 5000 — and an entire book of the Bible called "Numbers."

But I imagine that few Christians would readily remember a number that very obviously stuck in the mind of the writer of the gospel of John and that he felt was important enough to record in today's lesson.

The writer did not tell us that the net was "full of fish," or that they caught "many fish", or "over 150" fish — no, he gave us the exact number, 153.

People throughout the ages have tried to find some symbolic value in that number, but that's missing the point.

The number was very important and very memorable for John and the other disciples because those 153 large fish were the very real evidence of a miracle — a miracle that Jesus used to inspire and assure them as he sent them out, on their own, as his servants and apostles.

Lying there in the net, they might not have seemed like anything but ordinary fish, but once you considered how and why they got there and filled that net, you would have realized: those were 153 life-changing fish.

Why life-changing? In the first place, because of who put them there. This was not dumb luck, and it wasn't because Jesus just happened to know where the fish were that morning.

The first life-changing thing about this miracle was the fact that Jesus was there.

Now, we tend to just kind of take that for granted as part of the story — it's about Jesus, and so of course Jesus is at the center of it.

But the importance of all the accounts of what happened after Christ's resurrection and before his ascension is that they show us what Jesus was doing for his disciples — for the people he was leaving in charge of his work and his mission.

And so it's significant that Jesus came to these seven disciples that very normal morning as they did something that was very normal for them — fishing.

They were fishermen; they were fishing. He met them where they were, doing the ordinary things of their lives, and even gave them a rather ordinary breakfast of bread and fish. And the lesson of his presence there is especially important for Christ's disciples, then and now.

You see, we have a tendency to forget — or at least we fail to fully appreciate — what Jesus really meant when he promised he would always be with us. We don't look to him — or for him — in the ordinary and common events of our lives.

Instead, we often only look for Jesus when we're facing the storms of our lives or undertaking some new or big project, reserving him for when we "really need" him.

But even though the crises of our lives might be the things we remember most, it's in the common and ordinary that we most need to see Jesus. It's where the rubber of Christian faith meets the road of daily life.

We can compare it, perhaps, to the relationship between a husband and wife. If you want to see evidence of a strong and healthy marriage, you don't look so much at the ups and downs as at the in-betweens.

Sure, how she treats him in a moment of crisis and the things he gives her on special occasions to show her his love are important, but is he "there" for her with his love as much in dealing with the everyday details of running a household as he's "there" for her when grief or illness strikes?

And does she respect him as much in the little decisions he makes as she does with the big family decisions she's glad he takes responsibility for?

The true test and proof of love and trust between husband and wife is in their day-to-day behavior and conversation.

In the same way, we have real proof of God's love for us in Jesus' everyday presence and involvement in our lives.

Now, maybe he doesn't come to all of us while we're out fishing, or golfing, although I've been fishing a number of times when I sure could have used some divine intervention!

But the point I want to make is that Jesus IS there for us every day, whatever the day is bringing to us.

He is, and wants to be, involved in our lives — not just as a divine insurance policy or last resort, but as our constant companion and friend, as we sit down at meals, as we talk with our family and friends, as we do chores, and even as we brush our teeth.

Jesus' disciples weren't doing anything extraordinary that morning, but Jesus met them and blessed them where they were. Those 153 fish remind us that he wants to do the same for us — to bless us extraordinarily in ordinary times and places.

But now we could also turn that idea around and say that those fish also lead us to ordinarily expect the extraordinary from our Lord.

Because if this miracle made anything clear to the disciples, it was that their loving and faithful God had both the power and the intention to take care of their every need, no matter what.

We could call this appearance of Christ to his disciples "Part Two" of his equipping them for the ministry and mission he had called them to.

"Part One" was when Jesus gave them what they needed spiritually — he gave them the Holy Spirit to strengthen their faith and guide them, and he gave them the forgiveness of sins — for their own comfort and as their message to proclaim wherever he sent them.

Now, as we read the gospel, did you notice the first two disciples mentioned here? Simon Peter — the denier — and Thomas — the doubter.

We talked about Thomas last week and I've talked about Peter before. Both of these guys, although unfairly judged, I think, did have noticeable human flaws, just like we all do.

And their presence here in this story reminds us of how much the disciples, just like us, truly needed the love and forgiveness that their risen Lord offered them.

These were not perfect disciples with perfect faith whom Jesus was now rewarding with a perfect catch of fish. These, rather, were sinners like you and me and everybody on this planet, who had no way of saving themselves or making up for all the ways in which they had offended God.

Everything Jesus did for them and does for us flows entirely and purely from God's grace — God's undeserved love for undeserving sinners.

Jesus can come to these disciples and bless them now because they have been forgiven - redeemed by his sacrificial act of atonement on the cross.

And the same is true for you and me if we will accept it. Forgiveness, redemption - everything we need for eternal life in the presence of God.

Ah, but there's the rub, as Shakespeare would put it. Accepting it. You see, there is another part of this gospel passage that we need to look at.

Today's scripture points to a person who Jesus had called to be a fisherman of people. We go back to Peter.

He got off track lots of times--he was always blurting out things without thinking, He was always taking some hasty action he regretted later.

But probably the worst thing we remember about him was when he denied Christ. He said he never would. But he did. He blew it big time. He thought he was disqualified from ever doing the Lord's work again.

At the beginning of this chapter Peter says, "I'm going fishing." He was really saying, "What is there left for me but to go back to my old job. I've got to do something. I have totally failed the Lord. I feel guilty about it, but I can't forgive myself."

He goes off with the weight of guilt hanging heavy on his shoulders, back to his old job. He struggles with where do I go from here? What do I do now? I blame myself over and over for what I did. I can't do anything about it.

He probably replayed the tape over and over from the time he denied Christ, but it didn't do any good. He could not forgive himself and maybe he wasn't sure if the Lord could even forgive him. It seemed just too difficult.

There's a story about a man trying to cross the street. As he steps off the curb a car comes screaming around the corner and heads straight for him. The man walks faster, trying to hurry across the street, but the car changes lanes and is still coming at him.

So the guy turns around to go back, but the car changes lanes again and is still coming at him. By now, the car is so close and the man so scared that he just freezes and stops in the middle of the road. The car gets real close, then swerves at the last possible moment and screeches to a halt right next him.

The driver rolls down the window. The driver is a squirrel. The squirrel says to the man, "See, it's not as easy as it looks, is it?"

Does this sound familiar to you when trying to forgive yourself for something? At times there are certain things you look back on in your life that you punish yourself over and over for just like Peter did.

It seems impossible to overcome. What can this scripture say to us today that will help us to get past the things that are keeping us chained to the past?

Jesus wasn't far from Peter although Peter thought he was. In fact that day on the beach Jesus invited Peter and the other disciples to a carry-in breakfast. He said, "come and have breakfast and bring some of the fish you have just caught."

Jesus took the initiative to invite Peter to breakfast. Most of the time we do not pick up on the invitation.

Even though we include the words every time we celebrate The Lord's Supper, we don't hear Jesus say to us, "Come to me all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" because we are so busy struggling and beating ourselves up over the past.

We are still stuck in our guilt. Jesus is saying, "Come to breakfast." Bring some of the fish you've caught. You are included." We all want to be included but we have a hard time breaking through our own barriers. Jesus says, "Come on. Don't just sit there. Let's enjoy the morning."

We say, "but Lord, I'm not deserving. I can't forget what I have done in the past. I can't get over it." Jesus is saying, "You're invited. Come on."

Should Peter risk it? What if Jesus didn't REALLY mean it. What if I BLOW IT again? What if I MESS UP and say the wrong things? Peter might have been a little apprehensive about accepting the invitation. He thinks he has been disqualified.

When we are faced with the invitation to come to Jesus we often are afraid to accept it. Peter could have refused the invitation to breakfast. He could have said, "I'm going to stay right here. I'm not going to risk it."

But he didn't. I think we need to be more like Peter--a risk taker. See what happens. After all Jesus said, "Come on over for breakfast." It was His idea.

The disciples took the bread and the fish that Jesus gave to them. It was what they all needed that day--not just Peter alone. Jesus offers to us exactly what we need in our current situation just as he did to them that morning.

But he had a greater purpose in it for Peter. He had a special job for Peter to do and Peter wasn't doing it. Peter had to move on. To get unstuck from all of the barriers that were hindering him.

We need to deal with our past and experience not only the forgiveness that Jesus brought to us on the cross but to understand that his grace is enough to cover forgiving ourselves as well. It is a part of the package.

After breakfast Jesus singled Peter out and asked him a question. "Simon, do you truly love me more than these?" He could have been referring to Peter's fishing boats, his job as a fisherman, or he could have been referring to the others in the group.

Jesus is trying to find out what the depth of His love for was for Him. Was it just a shallow, superficial love or was it rock solid like his name--Cephas the Rock as Jesus had called him earlier?

He even asked Peter the same question three times, so that Peter was getting exasperated with the whole thing. But Jesus is looking for a total renewal of his loyalty and a reaffirmation of his responsibilities.

Jesus knew that if he could get Peter to move away from his past and to get him to not only follow him but to keep following him that Peter would become a productive person again.

He would find his own healing as he reached out to others. Jesus is telling him "I've got work for you to do. If you really love me you are going to feed my lambs.

You're going to help these new Christians. You are going to get the focus off of yourself. You are going to be involved in helping other people.

God in Christ is making that same call to us today - to this church, to us as his people in this place. And we have a choice. We can moan about church growth and outreach, we can wallow in the past and say that we've tried and nothing works.

Or, we can make up our minds to commit to finding something that will work. We can hear what Peter heard.

And please hear the "we." It takes every one of us. The quickest way to kill a church is to adopt the attitude, "boy, I hope THEY do something."

Friends, they is us – all of us.

Jesus was saying, "Peter, St. Paul Presbyterian Church, you have been re-commissioned. Don't spend your time rehashing the past over and over again. Get with the program. You've got lots of work to do.

2 Corinthians 5:17 says "If anyone is in Christ He is a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come." And we can start fresh this morning. How about it?