

Jesus Cooks Breakfast for the Disciples

John 21:4-23

(Nominated by Gene Seider)

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On CNN this past week, it was called a “verbal virus.” It seems to be spreading more quickly than the H1N1 virus. Those most vulnerable, they said, are television commentators, politicians, and journalists. When asked a question, if you want to convey complete certainty with your answer, remove any shadow of doubt, apparently there is only one acceptable answer today: *absolutely*.

Senator, will this bill pass congress? *Absolutely!*

Will Lance Armstrong win the Tour de France again this year?
Absolutely!

Is stormy weather headed our way? *Absolutely!*

This viscous verbal virus has even reached the highest office in our land. President Obama was asked recently by a Pakistani journalist if he had read Urdu poetry. Mr. Obama’s answer? You guessed it: *absolutely!*

Interesting, isn’t it, that in a time of so much uncertainty—economic upheaval, war, rising unemployment and mortgage defaults—that we would take hold of a word that masks how we really feel.

I’m glad this word wasn’t available to Simon Peter. It was a time of grave uncertainty for Peter and the movement called the Kingdom of God. “Peter, do you love me more than these?” Jesus asked. Wouldn’t it have been awful if Peter had said, “*Absolutely, Lord!*” You can feel the superficiality of that response, can’t you? No, no word could cover up what Peter was feeling that day beside the Sea of Galilee. You and I can still feel the uncertainty in his response, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

We have Gene Seider to thank for nominating this compelling text. Gene is particularly interested in whether this was a literal occurrence

involving Jesus and some of the apostles beside the Sea of Galilee, or is this text allegory, a story where the various parts reveal a deeper, hidden meaning? Good question, Gene. One of Baptists' finest New Testament theologians, William Hull, suggests that chapter twenty-one was "added" to the Gospel of John (*Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 9, p. 371). The gospel seems to close naturally at the end of chapter twenty with these words:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so 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.

End of story, some say. Then chapter twenty-one was added. It does seem to be allegorical in nature, where elements in the story carry a symbolic meaning. The entire chapter functions as a unit and makes multiple points about the Kingdom of God. So, Gene, I think it is possible that something like this actually happened beside the Sea of Galilee, and the early church found significant symbolic meaning in it. And at some point, they added it to the end of John's gospel.

Take, first of all, the story about the huge catch of fish. This was no ordinary fishing trip. Peter, a leader among the disciples, decided to go fishing, and six other disciples then decided to go with him. Do you remember Peter's trade before Jesus called him to be a disciple? He was a fisherman. It appears that Peter was returning to his old profession and abandoning his call to be a disciple. It was nighttime, the text says. I have mentioned before that nighttime in the Gospel of John is often a symbol for spiritual darkness, the darkness that accompanies uncertainty. Now, look at what happened. Peter and other disciples were in darkness and returned to the familiarity of their old trade. This was John's way of describing the uncertainty, the insecurity and confusion that enveloped the disciples. Remember, Jesus claimed to be their savior, and they believed him. They left their professions and families to follow him. They invested their lives in him. Just at the critical moment, though, it all began to unravel, and he was crucified. And then, believe it or not, there was talk of resurrection. It was just too much to process.

They were in darkness, John says, and had caught no fish, when Jesus, unknown to them, called from the shore, "Children, you have no fish, have

you?” He knew. So he told them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. They did, and the net became so full of fish that they could not haul it in. At that moment, it dawned on one of them, the one called “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He recognized that voice on the shore, as night gave way to day, as their darkness evaporated and the light dawned upon them. It was Jesus calling to them. So Peter grabbed some clothes, jumped into the water, and hurried ashore to greet Jesus.

The other disciples stayed in the boat and hauled in the huge catch. Guess how many fish they caught. One hundred and fifty three. Why such an exact number? Why not just say that it was a huge catch of fish? Some Greeks who studied these kinds of things back in Jesus’ day claimed that there were 153 kinds of fish in the Sea of Galilee. So this was their way of saying that their nets caught one of every kind of fish. As the light brought illumination, it became apparent that the movement called the Kingdom of God had not ended. Oh, no, it had only just begun, and with the help of Jesus it would catch every kind of person in the world: Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans. Everyone would be caught up in the net of God’s love and grace.

And guess what. The net didn’t break. It strained. It bulged. But it didn’t break. No, Jesus’ movement, the Kingdom of God, would not be torn by the inclusion of the Gentiles and others. They all would be brought to a meal prepared by Jesus himself.

This first story about the huge catch of fish reveals the universal reach of the Kingdom of God. It wasn’t just for a small ethnic group of long ago. God’s Kingdom, God’s love and grace, would catch every sort. That diversity would become the strength of the church, not its weakness.

The story about the huge catch is followed by a private meeting between Jesus and Peter. Why would Jesus take Peter aside for a private meeting? Why not James or John or Nathanael? Jesus called him Simon and privately asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

These what? Perhaps with a sweep of his arm, Jesus motioned to all the nets and boats scattered along the shore. Do you love me more than your old fishing trade, Peter? Or maybe he motioned toward the other disciples. Do you love me more than these other guys, Peter? He claimed so in the

upper room, remember? “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you,” Peter declared that night. But he didn’t, did he? No, he had a chance to lay down his life for Jesus, but instead he denied that he knew him. Not just once, but three times he denied knowing Jesus.

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

A second time Jesus asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter answered again, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” This time Jesus said, “Tend my sheep.”

Jesus said to him a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” And this time John says that Peter was grieved. Now, why? It was the same question. Why was Peter grieved when it was asked the third time? We don’t know for certain, but maybe it reminded Peter of those three times he denied knowing Jesus. And look at what this did for Peter. It allowed him to reaffirm his loyalty to Jesus as emphatically as he denied him.

This private encounter with Jesus restored Peter. He didn’t have to go back to his old profession. He had made the full journey from light to darkness to the light again. And so Jesus gave him this blessing, “Feed my sheep.”

This final chapter of John functions as a summary of the early church’s mission, which included both fishing and tending sheep. They were to fish for all manner of men and women. The reach of the Kingdom of God would be universal. The old social taboos of Jew and Gentile, male and female, rich and poor had become as useless as a fishing net out of the water. Jesus introduced a new era where those dividing walls of hostility were abolished. In the Kingdom of God, they would be one in his name.

The Kingdom of God wasn’t about fishing only though. There were also the sheep to be tended. Those already inside the fold couldn’t be ignored either. Once the fish become sheep, they had to be fed and cared for. They had to grow into mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

So what we see in John 21, Gene, is an event that functions like an allegory. It was breakfast on the shore with Jesus, but in a deeper sense it described the dual mission of the church. They were to go out into all the world—to the lost and the hopeless—with the good word of God’s love and

grace. Then they were to grow vibrant, dedicated disciples within the church. And that remains the mission of the church to this day.

One other thing. Do you know what I like best about this chapter? Look at whom Jesus chose to do this work. Those who had deserted him. Those who had gone back to their old trade. Even one who had denied knowing him. Far from a stellar lineup! Jesus has the power to restore us to usefulness in his Kingdom. He has the power to move us from darkness into light. So if you're wondering if Jesus can use someone like you to do his Kingdom's work, the answer is easy. *Absolutely!*

Closing Prayer

Lord, your ways are amazing. We are honored and thankful to have a hand in your Kingdom's work. Help us to do it effectively. Amen.