

May 4, 2025

“You Have No Fish!”

Rev. Nick Hatch

John 21:1-19

Let us pray:

Commissioning Christ, call to us from edges. Give us the courage to cast our nets widely. Dine with us. Help us respond so that others are warmed by your fires of grace. May the words from my mouth and meditations from our heart be acceptable in your sight, oh our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Years ago, I was in Washington state in the city of Yakima on a youth service trip. As usual, the first morning was chaotic. We got turned around and could not for the life of us figure out where our work sight was. We were parked along the edge of neighborhood when a man started waving from a small home far away on the edge of some fields.

“Over here, over here” We could hear him saying:

“I’m guessing that is our host” I said. Soon we piled out of the van and introduced ourselves. The homeowner, Bill, was gracious and I felt unusually at ease talking to him that morning. It’s like we were old friends. Our work would be painting, porch repair, and brush removal- we got right too it.

Come lunch, Bill, an indigenous member of the Yakama tribe, brought us some smoked salmon. Bill’s front porch became our table. We sat in a circle listening to his stories about how he harvested the fish with long dip net and how they were dried in a smoke house in the backyard. He also expounded upon what the salmon meant to him and indigenous people.

“Our futures and the salmon’s future are forever intertwined,” he said. Then, pointing to all of us, he made it clear: “We all have to protect the salmon.”

As he talked, I could not help but feeling a sense of “déjà vu.” Trying not to weird out the youth, after everyone was back working, I approached Bill and said:

“Listen, I don’t know how to say this, but I just feel like we have met before.”

He smiled “Oh, we have met before, have we?”

“Either we have met before or I have heard your voice before, maybe years ago, I know a voice and you have a distinctive voice, and I have heard you speak.”

With a mighty grin under his bushy eyebrows and long hair blowing in the wind he said, “That’s because I am a movie star!”

“A movie star? Really?”

My moment of disbelief was short lived. I remembered. And at the same moment I pointed at him we both said, “Northern Exposure.”

He had played a variety of roles in the 90’s series and I was a major fan. I was totally surprised! He told me about all the other people he met while working on set, how much fun he had, and, how honored he was to work with other indigenous people from across the country who played different roles- even at least one member from our local Menominee tribe.

I cannot say that Northern Exposure accurately portrayed our indigenous allies. But in that moment, at the edge of a desolate field, we shared a story together. We dined together on his porch. These connections brought us into communion with one another. And this surprising stranger left me with a challenge: to care for the salmon part of God’s creation.

Our scripture takes place in a little place called Tabgha, just west of Capernaum. Today you will find there an empty Palestinian village, depopulated from long standing wars. This is home to The Church of the Primacy of St. Pete built atop the rocks at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Inside the church, right where the chancel is located, bedrock protrudes from the floor- the same rocks where the third resurrection appearance of Jesus took place. A small sign written in Latin reads “Mensa Christi” meaning- the table of Christ.

Can you imagine it? It is daybreak and the disciples were in their boat. The smell of wet nets and wood hanging in the air, perhaps a light breeze was moving them. It’s quiet and you can hear water lapping against the sides of the boat. The double-orange sunrise is reflecting and sparring all around their fishless sea. Jesus’s disciples: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, and two others were doing what they knew best: relying on old skills after their world had fallen apart. Hands were chaffed and perhaps slightly bruised from casting nets. Hearts were heavy. The future unclear.

And we wonder:

Why had they gone fishing? It’s a puzzle, and I suspect it was a puzzle for them too. Like half the things Peter proposed in the gospel, it was probably a case of the right motivation and the wrong judgment. He wanted to get on with life. To do the next thing. This was the world they knew. It would feel strange, going back to it, but they had families who needed looking after, who must have been bemused to have them back again after all their adventures, and might well have been suggesting that they should settle down and do something sensible for a change. Like earning some money. Like catching some fish. – N.T.Wright

And so, they fished - dutifully and sensibly for their welfare and their families. But their seasoned, collective efforts turning up nothing.

Have you known this kind of silent dawn where you awake to fruitless projects, empty toil, felt your efforts in vain?

In these times do you kept watch for The One who came for those on the edges, the Christ figures on the shore?

Then the voice of a stranger standing atop a rock, cuts through the cool morning air and across the shimmering water saying:

“Children, you have no fish, have you?”

I mean who is this guy they must have thought?

“No” They answered him

“Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.”

This stranger on the edge tells a boat full of expert fisherman where to case our nets. I suppose their hands were already raw from casting all morning but, there is something about this stranger that puts at such a sense of ease they are willing to forgo their pride and try the fishless waters one more time. And inexplicably- the nets were filled.

A new hope dawned – Jesus was Lord! This was their daybreak after Easter. He has risen! A post-resurrection faith emerged and moved over the familiar waters. Something that what was once incomplete was now whole - full of the promise of divine sustenance and of life eternal.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” “Come and have breakfast.”

Then, when they had finished breakfast, Jesus begins to ask Simon Peter if he loves him, and each time Peter says yes, and Jesus gives him a command, a commissioning if you will.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? “Feed my lambs.”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

“Tend my sheep.”

Love means growing up and working for justice. Loving Christ means to journey, and to take risks. Because:

Jesus has a different vision of maturity: It is the ability and willingness to be led where you would rather not go.... Jesus confronts him (Simon Peter) with the hard truth that the servant leader is the leader who is being led to unknown, undesirable, and painful places. The way to the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invest so much, but the downward mobility ending on the cross. – Henri Nouwen

This divine edict, to serve and work and be in unknown and undesirable and painful places, is why Christ goes on to clarify:

When you were younger, you used to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, someone else will take you where you do not wish to go.

“Follow me.”

Friends, from the edges, the stranger Christ calls to us, offering abundance, and welcoming us to his table. Just when we try to return to “things as usual” or live by our own expertise in familiar places- Jesus third resurrection appearance re-centers us and might just be our Eastertide conversion.

The difficulty of conversion is the difficulty of choosing. A choice must be made to enter into life and share in (and) others’ search for life. It has been said that a conversion must be radical to the point “of confronting death in order to achieve a resurrection.” Conversion is a gift of God because it shows us the way and invites us to enter the world of freedom, the world of life. But at the same time conversation

is a human task, because it demands of us an individual and collective commitment to the building of that world. – Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, pg. 80-81.

So, I wonder:

From what edges does Christ call to you and are you humble enough to listen?

Will you feed his lambs?

Will you care for his Makers creation?

Will you follow him?

Have courage. He waves to us. The day shimmers with hope. Our Mensa Christi awaits with plentiful bread and cup. Have your brush with stardom. Enter and share this world of life abundant. Amen.