

February 7, 2016
Sunday Morning Service
Series: John
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2016 David J. Whitcomb

To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as we prepare to hear from John 21:1-14.

1. Why didn't the disciples recognize Jesus?
2. What caused John to decide that the "stranger" was Jesus?
3. Why did Jesus give the failing fishermen a great catch?
4. Why did John bother to remind the reader that there were 153 fish in the net?
5. If you were one of those seven disciples, would you have gone fishing?

DO YOU HAVE ANY FISH? John 21:1-14

Somewhere in my library I have a book entitled, *God's Will is Not Lost*. The book is somewhat of a reaction against the sometimes obvious frenzy of professing Christians searching for God's will as if God is playing a game of hide-and-seek with it. The essential conclusion of the book is that in many areas of life God has plainly given instruction about what He desires.

On the other end of the spectrum are those books that represent the school of thought that God really does not have a specific will about most things in life. Those people conclude that it is God's will for people to confess sin and trust Christ, and it might be God's will for you to seek fellowship with Him. But when it comes to things like

which local assembly you should be part of, or who you should marry, or where you should attend college, if you attend college, or what vocation you should pursue, God really doesn't care.

On one hand, people arrive at such conclusions because human common sense seems to dictate that God could not possibly care about less important things for all the billions of people in the world. That seems pretty impossible. On the other hand, Bible wisdom indicates that God's abilities and scope of work eclipses human imagination. Isaiah's conclusion on this matter still rings true. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).*

Do we forget that the Scripture teaches that God numbers the hairs of our head? Does God not know or care when a sparrow anywhere in the world falls out of its nest? Is it not God who clothes the lilies of the field? That being true, it does strike me as strange that this same God would not be concerned enough to have a will regarding marriage, vocation, or work in a particular part of the Body of Christ for people He has created in His own image.

Granted, it is really difficult to discern God's leading in some of these matters. But if God has made clear statements regarding His will, a true follower of God will take those statements into consideration when making decisions.

Peter made the decision to go fishing, and six other disciples agreed to join him in that decision. Was that okay? There's nothing wrong with fishing. However, we know that Jesus had already told these men some details about His will. For example, He told them that He was making them fishers of men. He told them that He commissioned them to go and tell the good news. He promised that they would receive the Holy Spirit to help them be His witnesses. In retrospect, we realize He told them to meet Him at a particular mountain in Galilee. So what were these guys doing out on the Lake Galilee fishing? In a word, they were failing. What would you have done? What would I have done?

No Fish – Many Fish (vv.1-6).

The first two verses of this passage establish the setting in which Jesus taught a very important lesson (vv.1-2). It was another situation in which Jesus revealed Himself to His disciples. This time there were seven. We should not be surprised that Jesus did this thing because making God known was His work. The first verse states, *After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way (v.1).*

The word *after* reveals that this event took place some days after the week-long celebration of Unleavened bread. It was at some point after Jesus appeared to the apostles without Thomas and then again in Thomas's presence (20:19-29). The event took place at the Sea of Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee, to which the disciples have trekked in accordance with Jesus' instruction. When Jesus met the women who were returning from the empty tomb that resurrection morning, *Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me" (Matthew 28:10).* That is where the seven disciples were – kind of. We should be challenged and encouraged by the fact that these men obeyed what Jesus told them to do. Would we?

In that setting of somewhat obedience, we will see that *Jesus revealed Himself*. The word (*fanerao*) translated *reveal* means to make visible, to display, to cause to be seen. Jesus our Master knows when we need to see Him better, know Him better, love Him more, and submit to His will. In fact, *making known* was God the Son's ministry. John the Apostle stated this several times in this Gospel. John Baptist promised that He would be *revealed* to Israel (John 1:31). Jesus did miracles to *make His glory visible* (John 2:11). Jesus' brothers challenged Him to *reveal* His power (John 7:4). Jesus *made manifest* God's works (John 9:3). Jesus *made visible* the Father's name (John 17:6). Therefore, it is not surprising that on various occasions after He rose from the dead Jesus did what our text says, "Revealed Himself to the disciples." He still does this ministry for us through His Word.

Seven disciples were the beneficiaries of Jesus' revealing. *Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together (v.2).* Simon Peter, the leader by personality, ability, and Jesus' appointment was there. Thomas was part of the group though we were never told he was also a fisherman. Nathanael was Philip's

friend and came from the city where Jesus displayed His power in the first two miracles. The sons of Zebedee were James and John. We would expect them to be in the boat because they grew up in the family fishing business. And there were two other disciples who remain unnamed.

One obvious point is that the seven disciples failed at fishing. The failed venture began when *Simon 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 (v.3).* Do we blame them for fishing? Can we conclude they were not doing Jesus' will? On one hand, it was a time of uncertainty. Jesus had appeared to them a couple of times but quickly disappeared. They were no longer accompanying the Teacher every day, and their opportunity to live on the resources people gave was now gone.

But, Jesus had told them to meet Him in Galilee. Okay. That is pretty much where they were. It is also true that He had told them that He was sending them out to do His ministry. *"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27).* *Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21).* Granted they sure weren't doing that.

But we also know from hind sight that they had not been indwelt by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, were not prepared to jump into the work yet. Therefore, rather than just hang out and get hungry, Peter decided to go fishing. He did not mean that he was going to get a pole and go sit by the lake like Andy Griffith. He decided to go back into the fishing business – temporarily, of course, until Jesus showed up.

On one hand, we can't really conclude that Peter and his six friends were in rebellion against the Lord's will. On the other hand, this was a questionable action. Jesus had told them to go to "the mountain" in Galilee. Before He was crucified, Jesus told them, *"But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (Matthew 26:32).* It appears that Jesus had specified a particular mountain as the meeting place (Matthew 28:16). The guys were not at the mountain waiting, but occupying themselves at the lake.

Knowing that Jesus called them to ministry, it was a dangerous temptation to go back into business. What if they were successful? Would they find it difficult to follow Jesus' leading into shame and persecution if they found ease in a money-making venture? This might not be evidence of rebellion, but it is evidence of fooling with a temptation that could lead them into rebellion.

I remember vividly the day when I had to make this kind of choice. I knew beyond any doubt that God had called me to be an under-shepherd, to spend my life feeding sheep. After graduating from grad school, we planted a church in Woodruff, SC. In order to sustain ourselves during that five-year period, I started a business. The business did well. One day it became clear that it was time to enter the ministry full time, or it was time to give full attention to the business. Which would I do? The answer to that question is obvious from where I stand. If I would not have been fully convinced of God's calling, it would have been a very difficult question to answer.

The good news is that the seven spiritual dwarfs (little faiths Jesus called them) failed. Some people believe ancient fishermen fished at night in order to escape the heat of the sun. That might be true in the summer, but this was about mid-April. The Sea of Galilee is at about the same latitude as Savannah, Georgia. However, it does seem that nighttime fishing was most likely to be successful. Then again, John loved themes and one of his themes was the contrast of spiritual darkness experienced out of God's fellowship and spiritual light experienced while walking in fellowship with God.

Is it possible that these fellows were not doing what Jesus intended for them to do? Indeed, they were as good as we are at convincing themselves they were in the Master's will when they were not. And yet, it is often in those gray areas of life that our Master allows us to go in order to help us see that outside His will we fail.

The Master Fisherman advised the failing fishermen (vv.4-6). This part of the story is a wonderful lesson about how Jesus has a way of exposing our failures. *Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus (v.4).*

Jesus stood on the shore but no one in the boat could discern who he was. Maybe it was one of those unique situations where the disciples were supernaturally kept from recognizing Jesus (as on the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:16). Probably it was just becoming light, and in the gray dawn it was difficult to identify the man on the shore

100 yards away. Or this might have been just part of the human experience. If we are some place we shouldn't be, doing something we shouldn't do, it is probably unlikely that we will be thinking about seeing Jesus.

The seven fishers of men were in the boat, and the stranger on the shore asked a simple question. *Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." (v.5).* "Do you have any fish?" is the kind of question a fisherman would expect from a shore dweller. Maybe he wanted to buy some for breakfast. And yet because the question came from the Master, who knows all it was intended to reveal.

When I was a kid, one summer day I was working on my go-kart in the front yard. Ray, the neighbor kid from up the road, showed up on his bicycle. The problem was that the engine on my go-kart wouldn't start. So as I pulled on the rope repeatedly Ray watched. Finally, he asked, "What's the matter, won't it start?" To which I replied, "Oh no. It will start. I'm just getting my exercise." That kind of question simply forces us to acknowledge that we do indeed have a problem.

The disciples' simple answer "No," to Jesus' question acknowledged Jesus' ministry of revealing, making known, making visible. In this case, He made the reality of failure quite visible. Have you ever wandered out of God's will or intentionally rebelled against God's desire for you only to have that failure revealed by someone asking a simple question? Sometimes it is the pain of a bad marriage that must face the question, "Why did you marry him/her?" Or maybe it is a trying job highlighted by the question, "What would you really like to do?" The Master may move someone to ask you a question that helps you see you are not doing what pleases Him.

Jesus loves to steer us back into His will. *He said to them, "Cast the net on 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 of the quantity of fish (v.6).* Surely the disciples were agitated by this stranger's advice. They had to think, "Are you kidding?" They were professional fishermen. Who was this know-it-all on the shore trying to tell them how to do their business?

Nevertheless, they obeyed the stranger's advice and miracle of miracles the net was full of fish. These guys had to be shocked. This

kind of thing never happened. How do you explain no fish on the left side of the boat and a whole mass of fish on the right side of the boat? How it happened the natural person would not be able to explain, but that life was now better was beyond argument. They obviously knew now that they really were doing the Master's will. Any time we prosper, it is has to be an indication that we are in God's will. In fact, they might be able to explain that this was simply a matter of learning on which side of the boat to fish. No, this was only a part of the lesson Jesus was teaching His "little faith" followers.

Come and Have Breakfast (vv.7-14).

Finally, Jesus was identified (vv.7-9). The beloved disciple figured out who the Stranger was. *That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea (v.7).* Again, as in other such mentions in this Gospel, John is the secret beloved disciple. He didn't have to be a genius to figure out who the stranger was. Immediately, he considered why this miracle of fish, why did the guy on the shore know, why "Oh, that's the kind of thing Jesus would do." It shouldn't be hard for us to connect the dots between circumstances and the promises and teachings of Jesus' word, the Bible.

John figured out the mystery and Peter acted (as usual). To facilitate with fishing, Peter had removed his outer garment or he had tied it around his waist. As soon as he realized Jesus was on the beach, he "put on" the outer garment, which might mean that he girded it about him so he could swim. Remember the weather was probably like mid-April in Savanna. These fishermen were hardy souls.

So was it human effort that resulted in the profitable day of fishing, or was it divine intervention (vv.8-9)? We cannot help but wonder if the disciples thought, "Wow, look what we caught!" Peter swam for shore and *the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off (v.8).* No one will argue that it did not require a good bit of work and effort to get the fish to shore. In fact, the fishermen worked hard night after night and especially so when they

actually caught fish. Now these tired fishermen labored to drag the amazing haul up to the shore.

Did they carelessly say to Jesus, "Look at all these fish!" He might have replied, "Oh, I already have some fish, thank you." *When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread (v.9).* This whole scene is introduced to indicate surprise. If Jesus made a fire while it was still dark, and the disciples were only 100 yards from shore, wouldn't they have seen it? And when did He catch and clean those fish? While the seven disciples were awed by the results of *their* work, Jesus had already prepared breakfast. It takes a while for a fire to become charcoal. And yet there it was complete in an instant with cooked fish and cheese biscuits from Red Lobster. It really does appear that Jesus simply spoke the breakfast into existence. Now He could offer a great breakfast to hungry fishermen after a hard night's labor. Breakfast served by the same gracious Master who had washed their feet a few days before. Why did He do this?

Jesus caused the fishermen to acknowledge His blessing (vv.10-14). He acknowledged *their fish* (vv.10-11). *Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught" (v.10).* Fish that you have just caught? They caught nothing. He put fish in their net. Jesus is so gracious. This is such a great picture of life. Our Lord graciously gives us life, strength, health, ability, opportunity, and wisdom to carry out tasks. And then when we are finished, we have the audacity to step back and say, "Look what I have done." And our loving Master who made it all possible says, "Yes, you've done well."

In this case, the Lord had provided a bountiful supply. *So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn (v.11).* What does the number 153 mean? It is so specific that Bible students and scholars over the centuries have concluded it has to mean something special. As a result, all kinds of strange interpretations have been offered. Probably it means there were 153 and that many fish should have broken the net. It also means that when the disciples sold this number of fish it would amount to a good provision for the seven men. But that was not Jesus' point. He can make money come out of a fish's mouth.

Was it the fish they caught or was it divine provision (vv.12-14)? Jesus provided their daily bread. *Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."* Now none of the disciples dared ask him, *"Who are you?"* They knew it was the Lord (v.12). Observe how Jesus served them. *Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish (v.13).* By serving the disciples who didn't quite obey Him exactly, Jesus was preparing them for service. *This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead (v.14).* Each time Jesus disclosed Himself, revealed more of His character, He was preparing the disciples for that moment that was just days away when He would return to the Father.

In the circumstances of life, our gracious Master will often 1) Reveal that we are not exactly where He wants us. 2) Provide our needs and even our wants. 3) Reveal that He can and will care for us. 4) Prepare us for the next step of following in His will. Are you seeing? Are you learning? Are you following?