“Boatloads of Love”

John 21:1-19

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The Gospel of John is one of my favorites. I love the language of it, the symbolism, the parallelism between light and dark. The gospel’s tone is different from the other, what we call *synoptic*, gospels. Its purpose isn’t to convince readers that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament scriptures like Matthew’s was or as an historical and instruction manual to new Christian converts like Luke was. Instead, the Gospel writer takes liberty with some of the more familiar stories that we find in the other gospels, changing them in small ways, moving events around in the timeline of Jesus and his ministry in order to make an evangelical masterpiece.  John never refers to the miracles of Jesus as miracles, but as signs instead….signs that point to who Jesus is — the Messiah, the son of God, who was with God from the beginning and will be with God forever.

As I’ve said, I love the language and the construction of the Gospel and yet…this last chapter in John, at first glance, is so…disappointing. It made the 8th grade teacher in me want to take out my red pen and make edits.  As I told my 8th graders many times, never state in your essay: “And now I am going to tell you about…” whatever their essay was about.  And yet, at the beginning of this chapter, we get, “After these things, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples; and he showed himself in this way.”

The dialogue is awkward: “Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.”  They said to him, “We will go with you.”

And if we kept reading to the very end of this chapter, we’d see what to me, is one of the most frustrating things that students do: after having written an amazing essay, they are just tired of writing and so they wrap up their essay with a rushed conclusion. The final verse is as follows: But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

I read that and I want to say, “Really, John?  Really? That’s how you end this amazing Gospel? You start with the most beautiful poetry - ‘In the beginning was the word…and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ And this is how you end your masterpiece? What gives?”

What gives…is that many scholars believe that this last chapter in John was actually *not* written by John, but tacked on later, after the gospel had been published. Which then makes us ask, why? What does this story add that the gospel was missing?

At first glance, it appears to be another appearance of Jesus after the resurrection, a miracle or sign story, a shared meal, and a weird exchange between Peter and Jesus. Oh, and some nudity.

But maybe there’s more going on than that. I mean, it’s the Bible. Of course, there is.

Instead of thinking of this as a final, weird chapter tacked on at the end, we can think of it as an epilogue.

Perhaps the writer thought we’d be tempted to read the gospel like the beginning of every Star Wars movie: A long time ago, and in a galaxy far, far away. Perhaps the writer’s intent in writing this epilogue is to say to ancient *and* modern readers: we shouldn’t reduce the story of Christ as a story that takes place only in the past, but as a story that continues through to today.

This epilogue takes themes from stories earlier in the gospel and pulls them through, like a needle pulling thread, all the way to this last chapter. There are elements within these verses that, if we pay attention, we will recognize.

For example, there is the catching of fish. At no point in any of the gospels are the disciples able to catch fish on their own without Christ’s help.  In every single story, at some point, Jesus shows up and *then* the disciples are able to catch their fish. Perhaps the writer of this chapter is pointing out that even though Jesus has sent the disciples on a mission, they won’t be able to accomplish the task without him. And so, in this chapter, it is none other than Christ who helps them catch the fish.

There’s also the fact that the disciples fail to recognize Jesus. We might remember another time in which someone failed to recognize Jesus. When he appears before Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, she doesn’t recognize him and thinks instead that he’s the gardener. Only when she has a conversation with Jesus does she recognize him as Christ.  Her statement to the disciples: “I have seen the Lord!” Is echoed in the Beloved Disciple’s “It is the Lord!”  Perhaps the writer of this chapter wanted us to remember that even the disciples struggled to recognize Jesus in their midst and so we might also be just as slow at times to recognize Christ among us.

The meal that Christ shares with the disciples on the shoreline — a simple meal of bread and fish — evokes images both of the feeding of the 5000 and the Last Supper with Jesus providing the meal and distributing the elements. This breakfast meal will be the actual last meal that the disciples share with Jesus, not the Last Supper. This reminds us that Christ continues to share in table fellowship with his disciples and will always share in table fellowship with us, in this post-resurrection world, even 2000 years later.

Probably the most important thread that this epilogue writer pulls from pre-resurrection times involves our friend, Peter.  When last we left Peter, he was drowning deep in shame. Peter, the one who swore he would never abandon Jesus, who wanted Jesus to wash not just his feet, but his whole body also, who argued over which disciple would get to sit at Christ’s right and left hand…that Peter…denied knowing Christ three times on the worst night of Christ’s life.

Peter’s denials took place around a charcoal fire in the middle of the night, surrounded by those who arrested Jesus, and in today’s gospel text, Peter finds himself around a different charcoal fire, in broad daylight, surrounded by his closest friends and by Christ himself.

Mirroring Peter’s three denials, Jesus asks him three separate times: Do you love me? Each time, Peter responds with an affirmative, eventually exasperated, “Yes, Lord!”  There’s some interesting things going on when we read this section in Greek. When Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, Jesus uses the word *agape* for “love” which is an unconditional love, like the love that God has for us.  When Peter responds with, “yes, you know I love you!” Peter is using the word *philea*for “love” which means more like a brotherly love. Peter still doesn’t fully get it, obviously.  But in the last exchange, Jesus changes from *agape* to *philea* which might be Jesus saying to Peter: “Look. I get it. This discipleship thing is hard. I’ll meet you where you are now and maybe soon, you’ll be able to get to the *agape*-stage.”

It is interesting to me that we tend to remember Peter’s denials of Christ more than we remember this exchange. And yet with this last chapter tacked on, it’s as if the epilogue writer is saying, “There’s way more to Peter’s story than his denial.” By adding on this reversal of Peter’s denials, we see that the most important element of this story is the grace that Christ offers. And it’s this grace that Christ extends even to us that leads us away from loving Jesus in the philea or brotherly love way to the agape-way: unconditionally, with our whole beings, body and soul. Love is what the disciples’ mission will be based on.

So, what does this have to do with us today?  What if we wrote an epilogue to the epilogue, detailing all the ways we’ve seen the risen Lord, or failed at first to see him, or as we’re about to do in a few minutes, the times we met Christ at the table and shared a meal with him?  What stories would you add to an epilogue to this epilogue that would tell future Christians about the ways you have encountered Christ and the ways that you followed Christ’s command to go into the world, feeding and tending Christ’s sheep?

Remember my griping earlier in this sermon about the final sentence of the Gospel? The one about the “many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written?”  Theologian Frances Taylor Gench offers this possible explanation: “Perhaps it is an acknowledgment that the story continues — that the one who is the Word made flesh continues to be present in the lives and ministries of those who believe in his name. He cannot be confined to any page.  Indeed, new stories of his surprising presence among us, and the abundant life he offers, are unfolding every day.”

Friends, those threads that the writer of this epilogue pulls through to tell this final chapter, are threads that we still find and still need today: threads that remind us that we need Christ to help us in any of our endeavors, that remind us that Christ meets us at the communion table each and every time we gather, that remind us to be ready for Christ to surprise us at times, that remind us that even when we fail Christ, Christ still invites us to join him in mission.

So, what will you add to the epilogue?

Whatever it is, I promise *not* to get my red pen out.

All praise be to God.

Amen.