

5.1.22

Defeating the Distractions of Life

John 21.1-22

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How easily are you distracted from the more important things in your life? For example, if you're married and your spouse starts to talk to you, how easily are you distracted by your phone buzzing with a text or an email coming in on your device? When you have something important to do, do you ever find yourself binge watching a program or doing something small and mindless rather than starting the important task you know you really should be doing? How many of you are looking at your phones and didn't hear what I just said? I'd like you to be thinking about how you get distracted as I continue our scripture from John 21.

Before I read the rest of it, remember that according to John, today's encounter between the disciples and Jesus happens **after** the empty tomb of Easter morning; **after** Jesus appeared among the fearful disciples who had locked themselves in a house and said to them "*Peace be with you.*" **After** Jesus breathed on them and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit.*" It happens **after** Jesus appears to them a second time when Thomas is present and Jesus again said, "*Peace be with you,*" and implored Thomas and all of them to believe and not doubt. So how well did the disciples follow up on these experiences? Let's pick up the story at verse 15. John 21:1-22

"After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2 Gathered there together were **Simon Peter, Thomas** called the Twin, **Nathanael** of Cana in Galilee, **the sons of Zebedee**, and **two others of his disciples**. 3 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. 4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, "*Children, you have no fish, have you?*" They answered him, "*No.*" 6 He said to them, "*Cast the net to 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 there were so many fish. 7 That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "*It is the Lord!*" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the boat,

dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, *“Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.”* 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, *“Come and have breakfast.”* Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, *“Who are you?”* because they knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now **the third time** that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, *“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”* He said to him, *“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”* Jesus said to him, ***“Feed my lambs.”*** 16 A second time he said to him, *“Simon son of John, do you love me?”* He said to him, *“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”* Jesus said to him, ***“Tend my sheep.”*** 17 He said to him the third time, *“Simon son of John, do you love me?”* Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, *“Do you love me?”* And he said to him, *“Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”* Jesus said to him, ***“Feed my sheep.”*** 18 *Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”* 19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) **After this he said to him, “Follow me.”** 20 **Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved** following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, *“Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?”* 21 **When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?”** 22 Jesus said to him, *“If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!”*

It's important to notice who goes on this fishing trip in John 21: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, and two others. Seven disciples sitting by the sea, Simon says, *“I am going fishing.”* The others say, *“We will go with you.”* They went

out and got into the boat. Does this seem strange to anybody? According to the fourth gospel, on the two previous Sundays, these seven disciples had seen and experienced the risen Lord. He gave them his peace as well as the Holy Spirit. He implored them to move from doubt to belief. He empowered them with the mission of sharing the forgiveness and love of God with the world. These seven guys had participated in a religious experience of the greatest intensity and highest importance. Let's recall what we know of these disciples.

Simon Peter was the one they all looked to for leadership. Peter said on the night of Jesus' arrest (13:37), *"I will lay down my life for you."* But in a moment of weakness a brief time later **three times he denied** even knowing Jesus because he was afraid of what other people might think of him or do to him if they knew he was follower of Christ.

Thomas had also expressed his willingness to die with Jesus (John 11.16) when he went to raise Lazarus from the dead. But even after witnessing that miracle, he couldn't believe that Jesus had risen from the dead himself. All we know about **Nathanael** is given in John 1 and 21. In **John 1:45** Philip came to Nathanael and said, *"We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth."* Nathanael said to him, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* Can you imagine how poor Nathanael felt? Of all the words you speak in a lifetime, only two sentences are preserved for posterity and half of them don't reflect your best self but an unfortunate slip of the tongue. Yet when Jesus said to him, *"I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you,"* Nathanael responded, *"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!"* Along with Peter, Thomas, and Nathanael are **the sons of Zebedee**, James, and John. While prominently featured in the other three gospels – this is the only joint mention of these two disciples in the fourth gospel. These two brothers had longed for glory and claimed they could endure anything Jesus could. All five of these men made strong vocal statements about their commitment to do anything, go anywhere for Jesus, even to death itself. All five of these disciples saw and heard the risen Christ. So what do they do? **They go fishing!** What's wrong with this picture? What can we learn from it?

First, it teaches us the post-Easter drop-off in church attendance is an old problem. The disciples were exhausted from all the events of Lent and Holy Week. Now they decide, *“Let’s go fishing in Galilee.”* Secondly, they’re ignoring the command of their Lord and forgetting the commitments they themselves made to obey and follow him. **For heaven’s sake what are they doing fishing when they have the greatest story to tell in all of human history?** It’s almost as if everything that’s happened hasn’t impacted them at the level of their behavior and their habits. They just had perhaps the most intense, powerful spiritual experience anybody’s ever had, but now it’s over. So they go back to what Peter, James, and John know well – they go fishing.

Now we can understand that after all they went through in Jerusalem, these experienced fishermen, probably were greatly relieved to go home to the beauty of the water and the comfort of a familiar routine. When most of us are stressed out or feeling under pressure, it feels good and can be wise and beneficial to have some time off or away to get renewed. Having been to Jerusalem and Galilee, I can totally understand their desire to be in Galilee rather than in the city. Often when we go through times of great stress, doing something familiar or that we enjoy helps us relax. Yet they fished all night and caught nothing. Tired and more than a little agitated, they’re ready to head into shore when a man on the beach calls out to them, *“Hey boys, you didn’t catch any fish did you?”* I don’t fish much, but I’m sure that after being up all night and catching absolutely nothing, this was not the comment most likely to elicit a friendly response. The fishermen answered him, *“NO.”* I wouldn’t be surprised if that answer was shortened and cleaned up for spiritual purposes. The man on the beach called back to them, *“If you throw your net on the right side of the boat you’ll find some.”* Isn’t it annoying when some amateur without your experience or education tries to tell you how to do what you’ve been doing for years to make a living?

Yet when they followed Jesus’ instructions, they weren’t able to draw in the net because there were so many fish. John recognizes it’s the Lord. He tells Peter who jumps in the water like Forrest Gump going to see his mama. The rest of the crew came in the boat dragging the net full of fish. Jesus already had fish on the grill and bread ready to eat. As he had done with the 5,000 and the 4,000 and with the disciples on the

night before he died, and with disciples after the resurrection, Jesus took, blessed, and gave what was available to those who were present. Maybe as they sat on the cool early morning sand and munched on breakfast they remembered that Jesus had called them to fish for people, not fish. As the morning sun climbed steadily higher in the sky, perhaps they reflected on the fact that their failed fishing trip without Jesus was a reminder that he had told them (**John 15:5**), ***“Apart from me you can do nothing.”*** Peter is once again at the center of the story in John 21 as he is for many of the stories with Jesus. **Peter also exemplifies the distractions of life that can trip you up. The first is focusing on ourselves.** In **Luke 5:8** after the great catch of fish **Peter has his eyes on himself**, and he says to Jesus, *“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”* Peter looked at himself, at his sin, and he was afraid. But Jesus told him not to be afraid and invited Peter to follow him and help him draw others. Jesus doesn’t call any of us because we’re perfect.

A second distraction is being overwhelmed by our circumstances. In **Matthew 14:30** while Peter is walking to Jesus on the water, which obviously took a lot of faith, Peter **shifts his eyes from Jesus to his circumstances** – the waves and wind and that’s when he starts to sink into trouble. We’re no different. It’s quite easy and understandable if we focus just on our circumstances – the wind and waves of illness, grief, uncertainty, fear, loneliness, depression, doubt, addiction, problems of national and global scope - that we can get distracted from Jesus and our faith; rather than circumstances causing us to focus on Jesus and our faith when we need them the most.

Another distraction that impacts a lot of Christians especially **is focusing on other people rather than focusing on following Jesus and our own discipleship.** In **John 21:20-22**, Peter has his eyes on another believer, in this case, John. Jesus tells Peter he’s going to be a martyr for the faith and Peter wants to know, *“What about John?”* Jesus basically tells him, ***“That’s not your concern. Follow me. Don’t worry about someone else, focus on following me yourself.”*** Each of us is to follow Christ, without being distracted by or preoccupied with others; not their behavior, their expectations, or their future. You can’t control other people or circumstances. You can control how you choose to respond to other people and circumstances. You don’t have

to allow others to distract you from our goal of running your race of faith with your eyes fixed on Jesus.

Like Peter, you need to **overcome the distractions of life – being preoccupied with yourself, with your circumstances, or with others.** God's will for other people is not your concern; your task is to be working out your own salvation in fear and trembling, as Paul says in Philippians. Too much religious and spiritual energy is spent on distractions involving other people and outward circumstances rather than moving forward in following Christ yourself and doing what you're supposed to do in your own life. Jesus basically says to Peter, ***"God's will for John and anybody else isn't your business, follow me!"***

John 21 also reminds us that membership in the church is open to all kinds of folks who come in faith, as imperfect as it may be, who will follow Jesus as best they can, support one another in love, and extend and receive forgiveness all under the guidance and strengthening power of the Holy Spirit. Membership in the church of Jesus is open to all kinds of people – people like Peter who denied him, Thomas who doubted him, Nathanael whose tongue ran ahead of his mind, James and John who thirsted for glory and a cast of many other characters. They and their spiritual descendants along with the spiritual descendants of many others who we meet in the pages of the Bible are still present in the church today. All five of these Christ followers made bold professions of love and faith yet they were fishing instead of following.

Finally, remember we're told there are seven disciples in the fishing party that day. There are two other unnamed disciples. I think they represent you and me. You and I need to decide if we will have experiences with the risen Christ and then go back to life as usual. Will we go fishing and live a life of distraction or will we live with focus and concentration on the last words spoken by the risen Christ in all the gospels, ***"Follow me!"***

Blessing: *"All shall be well, all shall be well... For there is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go."*

Julian of Norwich

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why do you think the disciples were fishing in Galilee?
2. What might Jesus be trying to teach them with the miraculous catch of fish?
Compare this incident to the one described in Luke 5:1-11 – what similarities or differences do you notice?
3. Do you notice anything this post resurrection appearance of Jesus has in common with the others we've looked at this month in Mark 16.1-8 and Luke 24.13-35?
4. Why does Jesus ask Peter three times if he loves Him? Why do you think Peter may be frustrated by Jesus repeating the question?
5. Why does it matter where you look in life? How does your focus impact your faith and your relationships with others? What are some things that can distract your focus and take it off your relationship with the risen Christ?
6. What does following the Lord look like in your life? Do you think the Lord would say you were "fishing" or "following?" Why?