

“Fishing, Failure, and a Future”
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Easter 3C
John 21:1-19

Late in life. I got into fishing. I had always had a bit of contempt for fishermen.

“I’ve got better things to do with my valuable time than to sit on some bank waiting on some creature with a brain the size of a pea to make my day,” I said. “I don’t have the patience for it,” I said as I refused invitations from friends to go with them out to the lake to fish.

But on my 60th birthday I got my first fly rod. Perhaps taking up fishing at 60 is the way one ought to do it, when one slows down a bit, and has more time for a sport that requires lots of time sitting and waiting for a bite.

To my surprise I really loved fly fishing. There was a lot to learn, and I enjoy learning new things. I even got a rig and started tying some of my own flies. I found it to be true, as someone has said, “Trout live in the most beautiful places in the world.” I began planning my travel schedule on the basis of the opportunities for stepping into some unfamiliar mountain stream, or wading into some marsh, in order to go after fish.

But the thing that most impresses one about fly fishing, an aspect of the sport that stays with you no matter how long you practice it, is failure. You go out at first morning light, hauling all of your gear, full of hope and expectation. You use good form in casting and presenting the fly. You work from a well-stocked box of fly patterns. And yet, as the sun goes down that evening, you have very little to show for it.

I’m embarrassed to admit it, but once I even traveled all the way out to Montana, hired a rental car to drive to some remote location, and hired a guide, an expert to take me into the outback where I was sure to be successful. I spent two days full days fishing and caught -- one, pitiful looking trout. If you are going to be a fisherman, you had better get good at failure!

Funny, I heard very much the same statement from my Bishop when I began the pastoral ministry. Our Bishop, addressing us young pastors said, “I can assure you, if you have any vision for the church, if you have high expectations for yourself and your ministry, then you had better get good at handling failure.”

It’s a rather odd message to hear, as we walk through the Great 50 Days of Joy that the church calls Eastertide. We are presented, in the days just after Easter, a gospel lesson that is so full of failure. Easter is the joyful victory of God, not the sad defeat. And yet defeat permeates this Sunday’s gospel. Gospel means good news and yet our story is full of bad news of failure.

With this Sunday’s gospel lesson we come to the very end of the Gospel of John. Failure permeates every aspect of this story. First of all, there is the apparent or assumed failure of Jesus and his mission. The walk with Jesus has ended terribly. The disciples have trudged back to what they were doing before Jesus called them to be his disciples. They are fishing. Maybe they didn’t know what to do with themselves. After standing by and watching Jesus humiliatingly crucified

on Friday, it's over. Back on the road, as the Jesus movement gained momentum, they had hopes that he was indeed, the anointed one, the Messiah who would redeem Israel.

But Jesus had failed. You can't fight City Hall. The people turned against us. The Romans had all of the arms. There's nothing left for us to, but to go back to fishing.

Maybe you think it odd that John has given us accounts of the risen Christ appearing to the disciples when they were behind locked doors (John 20). He has spoken to them, appeared to them. And their collective response? They have gone back to fishing! You must be a really dull person to walk away from a resurrection, to have been personally met by the risen Christ, and still go back to fishing! But honestly now, as we sit here a few Sundays after our grand celebration of the resurrection, are we much different from the disciples?

And yet there fishing did not go much better for them than their discipleship. A group of disciples have been fishing all night, and they haven't caught a thing. Their empty nets must have seemed to them like a symbol for just how they felt. Empty. Failures. Defeated.

Peter, the lead disciple, is among the group. Peter personally embodied their collective failure. Back in the upper room, Peter had promised to remain steadfast and to stand with Jesus, even when the going got rough. Well, you know how long that lasted. Peter ended up denying Jesus three times and breaking down in tears at the failure of his resolve.

Note that when Peter denied Jesus, in the courtyard in the middle of the night, when the maid had questioned him, Peter was not so much denying Jesus as denying that he was a disciple. And to be sure, with his repeated denials, he certainly doesn't act much like a disciple.

But now, here at the end, Jesus comes to Peter, seeks him out and re-calls him. Even as Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus calls him three times, calls him to love him and then commissions him, giving him the assignment of feeding his beloved sheep. In spite of Peter's past failure, Jesus puts Peter in charge of his flock, asking him to attend, feed, and keep the sheep of Jesus pasture.

Peter denied Jesus three times back in that dark twilight of that dark Friday. Now, three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And three times Peter answers in the affirmative. Yes! Yes! Yes I love you!

I don't think Jesus is so much quizzing Peter as repeating his question in order to reassure him. When he asks, "Do you love me?" Jesus seems confident that the answer is "Yes!" Though Peter has disappointed himself and his Lord and failed at being the perfect disciple, nevertheless his love for Jesus is sure. Just because you dearly love Jesus, that doesn't mean that you will never disappoint yourself or Jesus.

Yet the important thing is that Jesus returns to Peter, engages him, and commissions him.

Our gospel lesson concludes with a curious prediction of Peter's death. One day Peter, the one who had once denied his Lord, and then the one who was forgiven and re-called to be a disciple by his Lord, would eventually die for his Lord. Peter, the failure, the one who was charged by Jesus with tending the sheep who were failures, would succeed as a martyr, that is, as a witness

to Christ. Peter would prove, in the end, completely steadfast and faithful to Jesus' invitation, "Follow me!"

Easter with Jesus, the days after the resurrection, is not simply moving with Jesus into eternity, and not primarily taking Jesus taking us into eternity. Easter concludes those words ringing in our years, "Follow me."

I think there's a lesson here for us in this account of Jesus breakfasting with the disciples on the beach. Sorry, if you thought Easter and the risen Christ meant that Jesus has thereby erased all discouragement, frustration and failure from the world and from our lives. Still, even after Easter, even after the resurrected Christ comes and stands right in front of us, it's still possible to misunderstand, to fall away, to allow the everydayness of life, the dull, reassuring routine, to overcome our joy at the miracle of Easter.

And yet the good news is that Jesus does not let us be. He comes to us where we are, seeks us out amidst the dull, numbing routine of everyday life. There he speaks to us, reassures us and once again calls to us, "Follow me."

Jesus will not let us walk away from him or his resurrection, shrug our shoulders and go back to our everyday routine. He comes to us. The risen Christ appears. He not only appears to us, but he also calls to us. He assigns us his work to do. "Feed my sheep" could be interpreted in a number of ways. I think that's how Christ's vocation is. What he expects you to do varies with each of us but each of us is here under his invitation, his command, "Follow me!"

I hope that in your times of failure, when you aren't the follower of Jesus you intend to be. When believing in Jesus is difficult for you, or when you are disappointed by the results of your labors, or facing some failure in your own ministry, that you will remember this story, this post-Easter story and take heart.

Our failure does not negate his vocation. Even in our failures to follow, he keeps showing up to us in our ordinary lives, he keeps encouraging us, and keeps saying to us, even us, "Follow me!"

—William H. Willimon © 2019