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“Breakfast on the Beach with Jesus”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Third Sunday of Easter (Year C)

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Psalm 30; John 21:1-19

What a mixed and motley crew of Jesus’ disciples we find gathered at the beach this week! Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John and a couple of other disciples are all there, gathered around their boats and their nets, in need of a serious get-away. The events of the past week, you see (you know, Jesus’ death and resurrection), had been rather, well, *overwhelming*, and the disciples needed to be somewhere they could feel safe, somewhere they felt comfortable, somewhere they might have a little control over what was happening, somewhere they could make sense of things. So they climb in their boat together as evening comes and return to what had once been their livelihood. But in a similar story to the one Luke tells about when Jesus first called them, they caught *nothing* the entire night. Perhaps their skills were a bit rusty, perhaps their minds

were a bit distracted, perhaps their hearts weren't in it. Who knows really? But they didn't catch a thing.

Then, as morning dawns, a stranger on the beach calls to them (*we* know it is Jesus, but they don't). He stands on the shore and yells out, "No luck, huh? Why don't you try the right side? Bet you find some there." And so they do, because what have they got to lose at this point? And in an instant, the nets that had been empty all night long are full to overflowing. John, the "beloved disciple" knows then. He knows who is standing on the beach. He cries out to Peter and the others, "It is the Lord." The positive ID has been made and suddenly they are all aware that it really is Jesus on the shore.

Now I love this next part of the story because it is totally crazy. Peter, for some reason is buck naked in the fishing boat, or at least that's the way the English translation reads. Most likely, the reality was not nearly as interesting. Peter was probably wearing a loincloth or a loose-fitting work smock and put on his outer garment before he jumped in the water - so anxious to get to Jesus that he couldn't wait another second. I will forever connect this scene with the movie *Forrest Gump*, in which Gump (played by Tom Hanks) is on his shrimp boat in the Gulf Coast when he sees his long-lost friend Lieutenant Dan on the shore. Forrest

Gump shields his eyes on the boat until he recognizes the wheelchair-bound form looking stoically at him. When he does, he cries out, "Lt. Dan, Lt. Dan!" jumps into the water, and swims excitedly to shore while his shrimp boat continues on its merry way slamming into pier after pier. I imagine Peter's enthusiasm to have been something like Forrest Gump's – unbridled, unselfconscious, uninhibited, elated and free. He was thrilled to see someone he thought he would never see again.

As Peter swims to Jesus like a crazy man, the rest of the disciples bring the boat and their nets full of fish to shore. They gather on the beach and grill the fish over a charcoal fire and toast the bread as the dawn light becomes fuller with the rising sun. Bread and fish for breakfast, a picnic of sorts, not unlike that story by the Sea of Galilee when 5000 and more were fed with bread and fish. The presence of the Lord when bread is broken and nourishment shared is not at all unusual in the gospels. It had to have been the most perfect breakfast ever.

At some point after breakfast, Jesus must have found himself alone with Peter for one reason or another, and he turns to him and asks, "Peter, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

A second time Jesus said to him, Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord," replied Peter, "You know that I love you."

"Tend my sheep," Jesus said.

And then a third time, "Simon [Peter], son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord (Peter felt a little hurt at this point), you know everything. You know that I love you." And Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

He goes on to make sure Peter knows that this three-fold commissioning will not be easy. It may even involve dying. He wants Peter to have no doubt about what he is getting into. And then he says, "Follow me . . ."

There Peter is, standing in the morning light, smelling a bit like fish, caked with sand after sitting in his wet clothes. Peter, this disciple who followed Jesus with abandon, who had left his own livelihood, who thought he knew Jesus best of all; Peter, this one who had denied Jesus three times while sitting around another charcoal fire; Peter, this follower of Jesus who had run to the tomb to see

it empty; This Peter stood before Jesus and three times acknowledged his love for him. This Peter heard clearly what Jesus was saying to him: Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep; Follow me. This Peter moved forward, forgiven and loved, to be the Rock upon which Jesus would build his church.

What an incredible story. If you are like me, you love this passage because of its poetry, its repetition, its rhythm and symmetry. In this passage Jesus gives Peter, who denied him three times, a second chance, a way to make it right. The power of this passage comes because it is about love and we know Peter does love Jesus, as bumbling and foolhardy as he is. But this passage is about Peter, right? It doesn't have anything to do with us.

Except that we know that it does.

We know that we, like Peter, love Jesus. We do. But we also know that we, like Peter, have let the world go on around us as if we didn't love Jesus, as if we didn't know Jesus, as if we didn't follow Jesus. We have kept silent when others have spoken out against "the least of these." We have kept quiet when laws have been passed that will adversely affect the poor, the sick, the weak, the lonely. It's not that we haven't tried. We have. But we are tired. Or busy. Or misinformed. Or confused. Or afraid. We do try. We do love Jesus.

Maybe we love Jesus enough to be like John and recognize Jesus in our midst, cooking breakfast on the beach. Or maybe we love Jesus like Peter, enough to throw caution to the wind and in our exuberance to jump into the waters and try to get to him as fast as we can.

Or maybe we are just learning to love Jesus. Just learning how much Jesus loves us. Just learning what love like this means – what grace like this means.

Most likely, you, like me, are working hard to figure out what it means to love Jesus in your life every day, what it means to tend and feed Jesus' sheep and lambs, to care for the people of God around us. . . .

No doubt many of you heard the name Riley Howell this week. He is the young man who threw himself at the gunman at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte on Tuesday of this week. He lost his life, but in the process likely saved the lives of many others. One other student in the classroom, Brandon Poletti, was able to escape with several other students when there was a break in the shooting, likely the moment Riley knocked the gunman off his feet.

I could not help but think of another passage from our gospel writer John, only a few chapters earlier, when Jesus tells his disciples, "This is my

commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

I am sure that Riley did not want to die. He was full of life and energy and joy. But there was, in his heart and mind and soul, a love for others that, when faced with a shooter that he could stop and save others, he made the decision, in a split second, to do it.

Most of us will never be faced with the need to make such a split-second decision, but we *are* faced with the decision every day (even every minute) whether we will love God and one another or whether we will not.

Jesus' questions were not just for Peter, you see. They are for all who seek to know and follow Christ. I am deeply grateful because I have seen you answer those questions with your lives. I have seen you show your love for Jesus as you care for his sheep in the world. I have seen you do this in your daily work as health care providers, teachers, social workers, financial advisors, students, construction workers, cooks, lawyers, listeners, and people who pray. I have seen you care for Jesus' sheep as you feed the hungry, work to abolish poverty, fight against injustice and oppression, give voice to those long-silenced, go the second

mile for someone in need, and quietly care for the sick, the dying, the lonely, and the afraid.

Jesus' questions to Peter are questions to us all:

My child, do you love me? Love my people.

My sister, do you love me? Care for my children.

My brother, do you love me? Be a light to those in darkness.

If you love me, Jesus tells us, you will follow me. You will follow me.

And so we cry, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you! I will follow you."

Jesus called Peter, yes, and he calls us *all* to love – to love as broad and as deep and as high and as wide as he loved. Tend, feed, care for, protect, love my sheep, he asks, and after three times we know that we, like Peter, have been forgiven for those times when we denied him, when we didn't follow where he was leading. And we like Peter, are called to live the rest of our days in love of Jesus through the way we love others – the way Riley did in a split second because his life was already built on love – the way you and I can and do and will in our own lives as we live and work together.

It won't be easy, Jesus tells us. Life is not easy. But Jesus knows that we will never fully understand him until we care for his own the way he cares for us.

Jesus asks us: "Do you love me?"

"Feed my lambs."

"Do you love me?"

"Tend my sheep."

"Do you love me?"

"Feed my sheep."

"Follow me," he says. "Follow me."

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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