Bishops Annual Ministries Appeal

Sample Homily by Father Jim Hamilton

Down in our hearts, we are worried that we will be revealed to be actual frauds. We might cover that concern with bravado. We might actually present our insecurity as brash and conflictual. But, when the feathers smooth and the passion dies down, the real worry is that we are unlovable. That then becomes a lasting worry that we will only be remembered for our mistakes. In the dark of night, we reveal the vulnerability of our fears of loneliness and replaceability.

In so many ways, this emptiness motivates the yearning heart of the gospel, the good news is not only that Jesus wins, that love wins, that hope wins…it is a call to understand our own belovedness. We are worth the win. It is the only way that we will be able to truly love others. It is the only way that we will truly understand the saturating love of God. It is the only way that we can make any heads or tails of the Gospel story. We have to understand that Jesus dying for us was not some kind of mistake. We have to understand that Jesus conquering death for us was not some kind of miscalculation. We have to see that we are still the children of God. Both individually and corporately capable of the works of the Christ. From that state of belovedness alone can we build a Church that is strong enough to tackle problems far beyond our own capability.

Jesus’ friends in today’s story are on the verge of retreat, the safe and cowardly response to an unknown next step. I am sure you understand this. The preponderance of evidence of how Jesus had succeeded at all he claimed was unrefusable. Yet, who would lead? And where do they go now? And what about those miracles? They didn’t have any miracles.

Regardless of the Rabbouni moment with Mary, regardless of the Holy Spirit saturated upper room, regardless of Thomas’ tactile revelation with an unpretentious Jesus these were just plain fisher folk and laborers who were now leading a metaphysical jailbreak to collect energy and amass a movement against the Roman government and the prevailing wisdom of their intellectual betters. It seemed more than daunting. Without Jesus’ clarity and magic, they were straight up sunk. We who build the church always have felt this way.

So, what does Peter do? “I’m going fishing.”

This is a pretty understandable response to pressure and overwhelming responsibility, especially when you have that inner voice in the back of your mind saying, “What makes you worthy? You betrayed your friend and denied him three times. You are certainly no leader.” This is Peter, and the disciples, being human, a critical first hurdle to move from self-doubt to picking up the mantle and building the Church.

Kate Riley, our very own Diocesan Youth Missioner, loves this phase in development, the pre-teen and teen ‘I’m out of here’ response to stress. We all have it. Maybe we have grown out of it, probably not. But Kate deals with kids who are developing the kind of response centers and leadership matrices that will shape the future of Christ’s Church. Imagine the responsibility. She is often the convener of these fishing moments, the retreats to move forward. She gathers kids who know they have inherent value, but are afraid to act on that yet. They have the wobbly legs of the early disciples. It is so critical to have those moments away, the self-reflective deep breath moments, the safe among your peers let’s distract ourselves moments, before starting in on an unnerving task, like growing up. Kate does it with talent shows, skits, dance parties, movie nights and giving kids the microphone to share their good news. Here, in the gospel, these kids went fishing.

When Peter announced his intention to head back to what he knew best, Thomas, Nathaneal, James and John (and two others that no one thought to write down their names) thought that it sounded like the best plan available. Fishing. “I’m going, we’re going fishing.”

These fishing moments are important, even crucial. Like a retreat at Claggett for us in the Diocese, they can clear our mind, reset our mission and focus our resolve. Jesus took one too, remember. He was nearly required to take a retreat by his Bishop, the Holy Spirit nipping at his heals as he headed for his desert discernment get-away, way back at the beginning of the story. You must head out into those liminal spaces for clarity and healing. But after that time is over, you need to roll up your sleeves and get back to work.

Jesus may have been concerned that this was looking more like a return-to-fishing lifestyle, a return to the rhythms of their lives fishing for food and not fishing for people. So, just before daybreak, Jesus meets them on their retreat.

“Children,” he says…reminding them to whom they belong and where they are on their philosophic journey. “Children, you have no fish, have you.”

Rough! Jesus knows the fruitlessness of their night and calls them out on the metaphorical fruitlessness of their first meeting as the proto-church of Christ. They have no fish. None. They have no action items. They have no first steps. They had such a good idea, heading out to retreat. But, along the way…they realized that they were not retreating…they were actually retreating.

Jesus intervenes.

With specific instructions, Jesus refocuses their efforts. "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." Maybe right is a direction. Or, maybe the right side of the boat is more conceptual. Clearly, they have been fishing on the “wrong side of the boat” up to this point. The right side brings a bounty enough for breakfast, or more importantly…to get them back off the boat.

And with that haul, Peter knew the identity of the stranger.

Two things are important to note with Peter’s response.

One, remember that Peter hasn’t really had a recorded direct interaction with Jesus since his thrice denial of his friend around the fires at the courtyard of the high priest, weeks prior. Peter had rushed to the tomb, only to find wrappings remaining. Jesus had spent specific time with both Mary Magdalene and Thomas at this point in John’s Gospel. But we don’t know that Peter had reconciled with Jesus yet. His action is fervent. He has to reconnect, apologize, rekindled the closeness of their bond. He jumps into the water. He cannot wait for the slow boat, laden with fish.

Two, when you jump into water to swim to land…who puts on clothes? It is not difficult to imagine Peter as a New Testament version of Adam and Eve, ashamed of his recent naked sins and trying to put some fabric between his disgrace and his friend. The regret of his life, the revelation of his weakness, the confirmation that he was (as we all feel in the dark of night) a fraud, mixed together with his eagerness to clamber to shore and see his Lord makes Peter all the more loveable and relatable.

That jumping off the boat moment is one of trust and hope. It is hard not to see the correlation between this moment and the image of a refugee jumping off a boat to safety, climbing on a plane to a better future, navigating away from the limitations of their past and into the purpose of their own tomorrow. Just like Peter, refugees can’t prepare to be shifted from their plans, it is a future thrust upon them. And, it takes a community of care and intention to welcome them, having struggled to make it to dry shore. The work of ERICA, Episcopal Refugee and Immigrant Center Alliance, here in the Diocese is precisely that hard work. ERICA’s director Betty Symington tries to avoid language of the poor and the needy, it’s the wrong way to see new arrivals. These neighbors arriving here in Maryland are looking for a new home, a productive career, a quality education and a way to continue the dreams stolen from them back home…a place they sorely miss. Instead of being general in their response to a new refugee, ERICA first takes time to listen and deeply understand their specific dreams. What rewarding and humbling work this must be meeting and reordering lives interrupted.

Jesus does something similar with how he visits his friends after he is resurrected.

It is the beauty of these stories of resurrection in John. Each meeting is specific and tender in the approach to each of the disciples featured. Mary had lost a teacher, a gardener, a mentor. Jesus appeared as she needed. Thomas had lost a challenger, a refiner, a patient coach. Jesus appeared as he needed. Peter had lost an intellectual sparring partner, a cheerleader, a vision-caster. Jesus appeared as he needed.

Here in the Diocese of Maryland, we continue this humble work to appear as needed in the programs of Sutton Scholars. Understanding and attending individually and tenderly to youth who have been treated as statistics all their lives is at the heart of the work of Sutton Scholars. The high schoolers who participate are given tools that can only be found and nurtured in small and attentive groups with leaders that really see them. This is what Jesus is doing here, caring deeply about the need that Peter has for reunion, exoneration and transformation.

The next scene we have is one of the first of a new church, at least the first recorded potluck in a post-resurrection church. Friends sitting around eating breakfast together. Jesus proves that he is real, by eating cooked fish with them. But that may be a less important revelation than the other that is emerging in this tableau. Our Canon for Latino Ministry, Margarita Santana puts it best. “We Christians approach people on their journey. Even if the people have no papers, no proof of who or why they fit, we are a place to provide food and safety for them. We don’t ask them to produce any evidence that they belong. They just belong.”

All of this: the retreat, the team building, the gentle correction, the plunge into a new future, the gentle welcome and the scene of community come before Jesus even utters a word about Peter being a leader of the church. By the time he gets to tend my sheep and feed my flock, he has already allowed for them to experience what church does best. He has already shown them that they are only going to be able to accomplish it all together.

This rings especially true for us in the wake of a remarkable and tiring pandemic, with wild worldly upheavals and countless problems at our parochial level. We cannot do this work alone. We must rely on the dream that Christ has for his band of friends, the ones who were clearly afraid that they were frauds and failures. He saw in them a capacity to be more together than they could ever be on their own.

The Diocese of Maryland is far from a perfect collection of churches and leaders. We are just as human and fearful as the disciples. However, our programs and the work we do is meant to work together to tell the story of Christ’s Church. From our state of belovedness alone can we build a Church that is strong enough to tackle problems far beyond our own capability. When Christ calls to us, “Children, you have no fish.” We know that we are never alone in the work that comes next.

Please consider supporting the Bishop’s Annual Appeal this season. It is a way that we can do more, reach further, love greater, touch more lives than we could ever imagine by ourselves. Uniquely and collectively, we will build a community of faith where we all belong and where we are all beloved.

Amen.