

**May 3, 2020 - Feeding Us with Joy**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

Jn 21:1-19

“Not different things but the same things done differently” seem to describe how we have responded to the present challenge of the coronavirus. We may not have been physically together for over a month now, but we have certainly been present and available to one another in different ways. We are reaching out in various ways to maintain contact with one another and especially with those alone and most vulnerable.

Our virtual worship services have symbolized what we all are living: care for one another and spiritual closeness with the intent to reinforce the theological statements that we are one in Christ, that we belong to the Creator of the Universe, and that we are not about ourselves but about a reality that is larger than us. We have confirmed by our faithful actions that we are the church and the church is not merely the building in which we gather. Indeed, the building may be closed but the church is open. We share our trust in God, our prayers, our concern for the poor and hungry, our joys and our sorrows, our resources and our skills. We lay it all down for the glory of God and on behalf of the kingdom. When with Peter we are asked, “Do you love me?” we may reply with a resounding and confident “Yes!” And when we do all this in memory of Jesus, we are following him, our Shepherd. We are feeding his sheep, we are demonstrating stewardship of one another and all the people of the world whom God has entrusted to our care.

But shepherding God’s people is not the exclusive image we are given in today’s gospel. In fact, it all starts with a fishing story and one that was going badly. I’m not a fisherman but am aware that not all fish stories end in triumph. Some of the disciples, confused by the latest events of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection and disoriented about what it all means and what to do next, decide to do what they know best, they go fishing. Certainly, doing what we know best during a time of crisis helps to soothe our distress. We may not be aware of our anxiety, but we might notice how we feel unsettled and easily irritated. In worse cases, we join the blame game and look for allies in an “us v. them” dichotomy. When tragedy strikes, our brains become numb and disoriented before they try to reinterpret reality and create a sense of balance and normalcy with a renewed meaning for life. It’s exhausting work: both the mind and the body are stressed out. Going on auto-pilot for some time becomes a survival skill that allows us to take care of ourselves. The anxiety we are experiencing collectively is grief-led: life is not what it used to be and who knows what it will look like once the crisis is over. We are grieving the importance of physical contact, the touch, the handshake, the hugs, all demonstrations of our care and love for one another and especially for those who suffer. Those who grieve the loss of loved ones cannot be consoled but with distant words. Those who welcome a new life into the world cannot but offer a virtual hug.

The disciples return to the shore empty-handed and probably frustrated. Jesus, though they do not recognize him, is there standing and watching. They might be puzzled at this stranger who dares to tell them what to do. Yet they find themselves following his every direction to the finest detail. They do not seem to mind his intrusion and maybe they even welcome his specific instruction: “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” (v. 6) That promise must have sounded quite peculiar: How would he know? Was it their desperation for a catch, a desire for success, or readiness to believe the unbelievable that motivated them to try? They didn’t ask “Why?” they might have simply thought “Why not?” and followed their instinct to accommodate the stranger. This gut feeling, this adventurous and immediate reaction is in total contrast to more cautious attitudes that want to ponder, calculate, evaluate, envision, project, negotiate, and navigate. Sometimes, a “Why not?” attitude may prove to be more profitable than a risk adverse and well thought out response. And yet we know, ministry involves both an immediate and unfettered outburst of generosity *and* a detailed and purposeful plan.

At the abundance of their catch, the disciples’ eyes open and they recognize Jesus. In his presence, it is not so much the result of a task that matters as the joy one experiences in the process itself. Their trust mutates into joy, and this joy is very evident in Peter’s exuberance.

When they get to shore, Jesus has a fire going with some fish on it. Jesus has not supplied his fish when he first questions them about their nightly catch. If I understand his pedagogy correctly, he has done that on purpose.[[1]](#endnote-1) Jesus is ready to offer his miraculous input when we are honest, vulnerable, and willing to dig into our personal resources even when we sense that our well is totally dry and there is absolutely nothing else we can contribute. When we are ready to trust Jesus and demonstrate a readiness to listen and obey, our joy brings us to a place of rest, and we get replenished.

When we’re about to throw in the towel, when we are distracted by what we do not have (the fish), we can focus on what we do have (Jesus and his Word). We can remember that the Lord still provides. Jesus has already prepared a table for us. In his presence there is a fire burning. Will we give up our place at the table, our opportunity to commune with our Lord? But that is exactly where we find strength. God is constantly saying, “I’ve got you.” When we feel disoriented in life, let us call upon the Lord of life, our Good Shepherd. He will ask us to feed his sheep, a task we may not feel equipped to do. Do not worry, all we have to do is to follow him closely in his footsteps.

1. See the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:37-44 and especially v. 37 “*You* give them something to eat.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)