

John 21:1-15 “Concerning Discipleship”

Here’s a piece of biblical trivia for you -- In the Bible, there’s no distinction between the word “spirit,” and “breath.” The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew and the word for spirit or breath is “ruah.” The New Testament was written in Greek, and the word for spirit or breath there is “pneuma.” When you think about it, both of those words make sense in their original language. “Ruah” sounds like someone either taking in or expelling a deep breath. When we talk about “pneumatic pressure,” we’re talking about a measurement of compressed air. So “pneuma” makes sense in Greek too. I say this to let you know that I’ve been thinking a lot about what’s been happening in the air lately. I’m not talking about the pollen that’s floating around town leaving us with itchy eyes, scratchy throats and a coat of yellow dust on our vehicles. I’m not talking about toxins or greenhouse gasses or anything like that. Still ... it’s bad air in a biblical sort of way. It’s a bad spirit. At Easter Sunrise service a few weeks ago, we played “petals and thorns.” This is where you pass a rose around the group and share both a highlight (or petal) and a discouragement (or thorn). And in our case, we were asking each other to share petals and thorns we faced during Lenten Season. There was a variety of “petals” shared, but just about everyone around the campfire had a similar “thorn.” And that was, “There’s a general feeling of unrest in the world, and people seem more mean-spirited.” If we were translating from English to Greek or Hebrew, I guess we could have said, “It seems like a lot of people these days have ‘bad breath.’”

This seems especially true on social media. People feel emboldened to reveal their rage and ugliness in what they post. They’re quick to use demeaning names to label anyone who fits their category of “other.” People can’t seem to muster any compassion for those who are in need or hurting or who are living on the margins. It’s like we’ve grown accustomed to living in a divided, fractured and wounded world and it shows in the way we treat each other. And what’s sad is that the church is guilty of this too. We’d like to think this “bad spirit” is limited to

politics or social media. But it doesn't take much to discover this mean spirit in the church too. Sure the church, like any institution, has its ups and downs. But lately it seems that churches aren't doing a very good job at being patient or loving with each other cooperatively. We label each other and withdraw into our little evangelical or mainline, conventional or progressive, high church or laid-back church, small or large church encampments and we strategize and scheme about how we can best discredit one another. And people outside the church see this too. "Pastor, what do you mean, 'People outside the church see this?'" People outside the church don't even pay attention!" To the contrary. People outside the church watch us whether we like it or not. What do they see? They see our hypocrisy. They notice when the church hammers people into the ground about the sins of sexual immorality yet we're constantly giving our leaders "mulligans" when they "slip up." Unless of course, they're people we don't agree with, in which case, they're headed straight to hell. People outside the church take note of this, and they judge us for it.

Here's the thing, though: The church is made up of human beings. And as humans we are flawed, fickle, fearful, and sometimes fanatical hypocrites. We *all* sin and fall short of God's glory. That's just the human condition. The problem is, we spend a lot of effort and energy trying to convince the world that somehow we're better than everyone else. And I'm *not* saying that we should give up *trying* to be better people. Our goal is to be more like Jesus after all. Where we fail is when we spend so much time trying to *look* good that we don't do the hard work of trying to *be* good.

Consider Jesus' twelve closest disciples. The word *disciple* means, "follower, believer, student or devotee of a philosopher or religious leader." Jesus had a lot of followers, but he hand-picked twelve of them to be his apostles. By the end of his earthly ministry, one of those twelve had fallen out of the picture because he was so distraught over betraying Jesus, he took his life. But the eleven who remained were commissioned by the Risen Christ himself to go deliver the good news

and *make new disciples*. It took them a while to catch on though. Two weeks ago John's gospel showed us how hard it was for them to muster enough courage to leave the house they were hiding in. According to the passage Barbara read today, it looks like they finally got out of the house. They were out doing what many of them did best. They were fishing. Once again, Jesus, the Risen Christ visited them, but this time it wasn't in a house, it was on the shore of a lake. Jesus saw that his friends were struggling. They weren't having much luck fishing. The net kept coming up empty. Jesus said, "You don't have any fish, do you?"

I don't know about you, but I think it's annoying when you're out fishing and someone says, "Hey, how's the fishing today?" when it's obvious you aren't catching any fish. Then you're faced with a choice. You can lie and say, "Oh no ... I'm catching tons of fish. I'm just throwing them back." You can ignore the person which sort of makes you look like a jerk. Or you can be honest and say, "I'm not having much luck here." But you know that your honesty might get you some unsolicited advice, which may or may not ruin your fishing experience depending on how well you take advice.

Jesus offered these disciples, who hadn't recognized him at this point, some advice. He said, "Cast your net on the other side of the boat." Yeah, right. That'll help. But they did. And sure enough, they came up with a huge load of fish! And the Disciple who Jesus loved ... remember the one who beat Peter in the foot race to the empty tomb ... finally noticed that this was Jesus talking to them. And Peter, being the big goof that he could be sometimes, jumped off the boat and swam to shore. He was so happy to see Jesus again! Jesus had a coal fire going and he cooked breakfast for his disciples. Yet another example of Jesus modeling servant leadership to them.

Finally, after breakfast, Jesus had some time with Peter alone. Now remember, Peter was the disciple who, after telling Jesus that he would always have his back and follow him faithfully, denied knowing him

three times after Jesus was arrested and put on trial. Peter was the disciple who was always putting his foot in his mouth and acting impulsively. Jesus didn't say anything to Peter about his denials when he appeared to the disciples the first time. Nor did he say anything when he appeared before them the second time when he had his conversation with Thomas. But now he's with Peter, one on one. Did Jesus chew Peter out for denying him? No. Did he give him a hard time about still being so impulsive and pulling crazy stunts like jumping out of a boat to swim to shore instead of being patient and waiting? No. He asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Notice Jesus didn't use the nickname he gave him ... "Peter" which means "the Rock." Jesus used his birth name. And Peter said, "You know it!" Jesus replied, "Feed my lambs." Jesus asked the same question again. Peter gave the same answer. Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." Peter was feeling a little hurt for being asked twice. Jesus asked him a third time ... this time he didn't call him by name." And Peter said, "You know everything! You know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." Peter denied Jesus three times, and Jesus gave him three opportunities to say, "I love you." What a great teaching moment. The past and its failures didn't count anymore. What counted was love. Love for Jesus and love for the flock. The master provided a great learning opportunity to his disciple, and told them to go care for others ... to pass his teachings on.

Being a disciple means learning from the master. The master assures us that our past mistakes are forgiven and that what counts most is our love for Jesus and tending the flock. Like Peter and the other disciples, we get it wrong sometimes. Sometimes the church seems to be more of a hindrance than a help. We make mistakes. We often find ourselves on the wrong side of history. We make decisions and hold prejudices that when we stop to reexamine and reconsider, we realize that our actions do not reflect those of the master. The problem we face now ... the problem we face during these "mean-spirited times" is that admitting we're wrong or admitting we don't have a full understanding of something is perceived as a sign of weakness. "Don't back down! No

compromise! Stand your ground! If they see you falter, you'll lose credibility!"

If we're going to be taken seriously ... if we're going to win back any credibility in this world as we go about the mission of proclaiming the Good News, we need to learn how to swallow our pride and admit our mistakes. We're still going to get things wrong, but hopefully we'll be willing to grow, learn, and mature. We'll learn to get up again after we fall, always moving forward on the road we're walking. And hopefully each new generation of disciples we make will follow this example for years to come. Apprentices will still learn the way of Jesus from mentors ... from masters ... so that they can become mentors for the next generation.

A worldwide movement of discipleship can begin right here this morning. And I'll guarantee you we'll face other times where there's a "mean spirit" in the air too. But we don't give up hope in the face of it. Jesus caught that group of disciples in his net of love, and so now as a new generation of Disciples, we can go spread that net for others. Our Regional Minister, LaTaunya Bynum reminded us yesterday at our annual gathering that being a Disciple of Christ, as we are in name and mission, means we're committed to being a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. Just like those eleven disciples on the shore of the lake. You may think, "But we're such a small group." Maybe. But we have a lot more than eleven people! And that's better than the apostles had on that day Jesus met them on the shore.