

Gone Fishing
Rev. Cindy Maddox
May 1, 2022

John 21:1-17

My maternal grandmother was a complicated woman.
She could be sweet and kind and loving.

And she could be cantankerous, critical, and demanding.
I have several childhood memories of my grandmother bringing my mom to tears,
mostly during our vacations together at the family cabin in Canada.
Vacationing there was wonderful for my father as a fisherman,
and wonderful for us kids, with the fishing and swimming
there on Lake of the Woods.

It was not so wonderful for my mom
because it meant living in what was then a small three-room cabin
with her mother,
who judged everything from how she was raising her children
to how she washed the dishes.

Well, one summer my grandmother was in a particularly bad space.
Her anxiety was running high, and it made her short-tempered.
My sister's fiancé had joined us for the trip,
and that extra person just put Grandma over the edge.
I'll spare you the details, but she had been obsessing about something,
and we surprised her when we arrived with an excellent solution to the problem.

Even though it should have been a good thing,
the surprise completely unnerved her.

It was not the way she planned it!

And she let us know of her displeasure in a variety of ways.

Later that evening most of us were down on the dock—
evidently preferring the evening mosquitos
to the sulking grumpiness of Thelma—
when we heard the screen door slam
and Grandma came stomping down the hill.

She stomped through the boathouse and out to the dock,
put her hands on her hips, and proclaimed,
“I'm just gonna' get in the boat!”

Well, I'd never seen my grandpa move so fast.

He was out of his chair and helping her into the boat
as if he'd been waiting his whole life to perform that very duty.

And then she just sat there. She didn't go anywhere.
 I don't even know if she knew how to drive the boat.
 But she was upset so she just got in the boat.
 My parents and my sister and I have joked about that line for years.
 Whenever one of us is pretending to be mad, we'll announce
 "I'm just gonna' get in the boat!"

As I've gotten older, I think I've become more understanding of my grandmother;
 still, I'm not 100% sure I know why she wanted to get in the boat.
 Maybe she wanted to imagine driving off into the sunset.
 Maybe she thought that the gentle rocking of the boat
 might calm her spirit.
 Or maybe she wanted to be part of the gathering
 but couldn't bring herself to fully join,
 not knowing if she was welcome after the way she acted.

I think of this story every time I read this account of Peter, after the resurrection,
 just announcing out of the blue, "I'm going fishing."
 I can't help but wonder if it was some version of "I'm just gonna' get in the boat!"
 After all, things did not turn out the way he planned, either.
 Remember, throughout the Gospels, Peter is portrayed as bold and impetuous
 and very sure of himself.
 He tried to walk on water.
 He suggested building a shrine at the transfiguration,
 when he would have done better to keep his mouth shut.
 He tried to stop Jesus from washing his feet,
 then tried to get him to wash his hands and head, too.
 He promised Jesus that he would follow Jesus anywhere.
 even going so far as to proclaim, "Not only would I follow you,
 but I would lay down my life for you!"

That's when Jesus predicted:
 "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."
 And of course Peter did.
 While sitting by a fire outside the court where Jesus was being tried,
 Peter denied that he even knew Jesus.

I imagine that his betrayal must have been eating Peter alive.
 "It might have been one thing if Jesus had stayed in the tomb.
 Peter would have had to live with himself for denying his friend and teacher
 at the moment when Jesus needed him the most. . . .

But then Jesus rose from the dead,
and he had to actually look Jesus in the eye again.”¹

According to the Gospel of John, at this point in our story
Jesus had already appeared to the disciples twice.
But we have no story of a conversation between Jesus and Peter,
or any indication of a personal exchange.

Thomas is the one who gets the personal contact, not Peter.
Peter must have still been carrying the guilt and shame of his denial.
So he got in the boat.

Maybe he wanted to imagine sailing off into the sunset.
Maybe he thought that the rocking of the boat might calm his spirit.
Maybe he wanted to get back to something he knew—fishing—
something that just might go the way he planned it.

Fishing all night and catching nothing was not the way he planned it.
They were coming back in with empty nets
when some guy they didn’t recognize called to them from the shore,
telling them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat.

After getting skunked, the fishermen I know would not like to be told,
“Oh, you should’ve done it this way!”

Why would they listen to some guy who doesn’t even have a boat?
But they did as he instructed, and it wasn’t until their bountiful catch
that one of the disciples recognized Jesus.

Somehow the abundance made them see.
The one who turned water into the best wine,
the one who multiplied the bread and fish,
the one who took their sorry little lives and made them rich . . .
only he could have caused this kind of abundance.

And that’s when we find out that Peter was fishing naked.
The text says, “When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord,
he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.”

Laborers in the first century would not have had many sets of clothes.
So they did not work in their outer clothes or cloaks,
which were also kind of billowy for hard labor.

Most likely Peter had been fishing in his undergarments,
which was common for laborers.

¹ Morley, Rick. “All the Way: A Reflection on John 21.” www.rickmorley.com

So the real question isn't why Peter was fishing naked,
 but why he put clothes on just to jump in the water!
 I mean, I'm guessing after traveling together for the last few years,
 it wouldn't have been the first time Jesus saw one of his disciples
 under-clothed.

So it doesn't make sense.

Why would you put on clothes to jump in the water?

I wonder if it's because Peter couldn't face Jesus naked.

Oh, he was eager to be with Jesus—

 otherwise he would have just stayed on the boat until it got to shore.

He wanted to see Jesus . . . he just didn't want Jesus to see him.

 He was already feeling vulnerable.

 He was already feeling exposed.

 He was already feeling like Jesus could see right through him.

He needed every bit of protection gathered around him.

So he put on his clothes—his cover, his shield from Jesus' eyes—

 and then he jumped in the water,

 most likely weighed down by the very things he chose for protection.

And don't we know how that is?

There is so much pressure on us to be perfect, or at least put on a good front.

 We're embarrassed if our children act out in public.

 We're afraid of what other parents will think if they hear how often
 we actually lose our tempers and yell at the kids.

 We don't talk about our children's struggles with anxiety.

 We don't talk about our struggle with depression.

 We are ashamed that we got fired or didn't get that promotion.

 We don't admit when we lose our joy.

 We don't even want to admit something is our fault
 because we're afraid of our own imperfections.

Or maybe I'm just preaching to myself . . .

 because I have to admit that I felt embarrassed about getting COVID.

I was ashamed that I caught a virus that literally millions of people have had.

 I would not think any of you should be embarrassed about getting sick,
 but somehow I am supposed to be above such things?

 How ridiculous is that?!

If it had been any week other than Holy Week, I might have been tempted to hide
 why I couldn't be in worship that Sunday.

 But there is no excuse big enough for missing my first Easter here.

I was forced to be transparent,
 and although one of my core values is authenticity,
 it still killed me to admit it!
 We don't like everyone to see our weaknesses.
 We like to keep up appearances,
 like to keep up the façade that we have our act together,
 that we're just fine
 and life is hunky dory or peachy keen or totally awesome,
 depending on your generation.
 So we put on our cloak of respectability.
 We put on our garment of protection.
 And then we're lonely when nobody sees how much we hurt.

Peter put on his cloak before jumping in to swim to Jesus.
 If his purpose was to hide, it didn't work.
 Oh, he may have felt better, with his dripping cloak gathered tightly around him,
 but Jesus still saw his soul.
 Three times Jesus asked Peter to declare his love,
 and the Greek verb choice here is interesting.
 Jesus asks "Do you love me," with a form of the word love known as *agape*,
 and Peter replies "you know that I love you"
 with a form of the word love known as *philo*.
 Over the years, preachers have made a large distinction between these two words,
 saying that *agape* love is divine love, unconditional love,
 and *philo* love is more like brotherly love.
 So twice Jesus asks, "Do you unconditionally love me,"
 and twice Peter replies "I brotherly love you."
 More recent language scholars say that this is too big of a distinction
 for these two words, especially in Jesus' time.
 There isn't evidence that these words were so clearly defined.
 But the writer of this Gospel was a careful writer.
 He wrote it this way for a reason,
 because look at the third time Jesus asks the question.
 After asking Peter twice if he *agape* loved him,
 and Peter twice responded that he *philo* loved Jesus,
 Jesus switched the third time to "do you *philo* love me."
 And I can't help but think Jesus is saying,
 "Okay, maybe you can't love as fully as I want you to love,
 but I will accept what you can do.
 I will accept your love with all its limitations,

with all its imperfections,
and I will STILL draw you into relationship.
I will still draw you into community.”

That is what Jesus was doing with his questions.
Jesus was not testing Peter or shaming him,
but drawing him back into relationship,
and back into community where he belonged,
where he was accepted in spite of his flaws and mistakes.

I think my grandmother “got in the boat” so that she could be near us,
so that she could be in relationship,
so that she could be loved even in her critical, anxious state.
Peter got OUT of the boat for similar reasons—
so that he could be near Jesus.
And in the process he found himself loved, even after all he’d done.

I don’t know for sure about all this *agape* love and *philo* love business.
But there’s another love I know and treasure.
Linda is a developmentally disabled woman in Maine
who is also deaf and mute.
Her guardian brings her to church, and signs for her,
and she repeats the same signs back to show she is listening,
unless she gets tired of listening and then she turns her head.
Linda sits up front and always walks out during the postlude,
all the way down the long center aisle, waving to her fans as she goes.
And every time she told me that she loved me,
she always made the sign for “family” before the sign for “I love you.”
Her guardian translated that as “I family love you.”

Maybe we can *agape* love God and one another.
Maybe we can *philo* love God and one another.
Maybe we can *family* love God and one another—
family in the best sense of the word, the belonging sense,
the “you’re always welcome here with open arms” kind of love.
Maybe then we won’t be so afraid of being seen.