

Embracing Hospitality and Service, A Meditation offered by Rev. Dale Osborne
April 10, 2016 - Lectionary Text: John 21: 1-19

Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus. Thank you Jesus! Those three words are my secondary title for today's meditation. I suppose I should also say thanks to the author of this beautiful portion of the gospel according to John.

You see, as a child I used to daydream about being transported to the age in which Jesus walked and taught on the earth. The stories from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John gave me scores of scenes and vignettes to nestle myself into as a bystander who just wanted to know more. Of all the scenes and stories I have encountered in the gospels, it is this well-crafted story of hospitality and service that I am most drawn to. Over the past 7 weeks the 7 members of the Binkley discipleship class have been meeting to engage the gospels and Jesus more directly. I wonder into which story Kim or Be, Anna or Caroline, Jackson, Painter or Nia might choose to transport themselves. If any of you have not tried this method of connecting to the gospel stories, I encourage you to do so. When you can imagine yourself as a participant in the story, in the age when it occurred, there are so many more connection points for you. All of our senses can be engaged as we participate with Jesus and the people who surrounded him in and around Galilee.

The first portion of today's gospel reading is what I call the hospitality portion of the message. Jesus is the character engaged in beautiful and miraculous hospitality. The setting of the story is on the shoreline and in the open waters of the Sea of Tiberias. This location is very close to the locale for an earlier miracle story where many thousands were fed after a long day of teaching and preaching by Jesus. In the end, due to some miraculous hospitality and sharing, none of the over 5000 congregants went away hungry that day.

The story begins with seven disciples being listed as primary characters in the events to come. These were seven of the disciples who had been devastated by the death of Jesus and amazed by his appearance to them behind closed doors shortly after his resurrection. The tone of their gathering that day may have been a bit somber and confused. Jesus seems to appear and disappear with eerie regularity. That can shock your system. As they sit near the shore, Peter speaks up as he often does. I don't think Peter liked silence. As they sat, he goes to his old profession for support stating to the others, "I am going fishing." The open ended portion of that statement reads, "Who is going with me?" Fishing usually meant a boat and nets and work for several people. The 6 other disciples responded quickly with "We will go with you." Peter is reenergized as a leader in the group. So the 7 disciples fish all night and their nets are empty. Peter must have felt sheepish. His friends followed him into the water for nothing. But as day is breaking, a figure appears on the shoreline. The boat is close enough that the disciples can hear the person on the shore but they cannot make out who he is. The stranger on the shore calls out saying, "Children, you have no fish have you?" They answer with a chorus of "No". Jesus, the stranger on the sand instructs them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. Immediately their net is full to the breaking point with a huge catch of fish. The net is so full that they cannot even draw it into the boat.

The miraculous occurrence of the fish inspires "the disciple whom Jesus loved" to exclaim to Peter, "It is the Lord". Jesus has been revealed to him in the abundance of the miraculous catch of fish. When Jesus is made known to Peter and the others, they respond in two different ways. Peter, the character of all characters has been fishing in the nude. He is inspired by the revelation of Jesus so much that he throws on his clothes and swims a hundred or so yards to shore. Brothers and sisters, this may be the reason that followers of Jesus dress in clothes before heading off to church. Peter set the standard. Thanks for the encouragement Peter. The other disciples maneuver the boat with its large catch of fish to the sandy shoreline.

When they have left the boat, in the wee hours of the early sunlit morning, they can smell the aroma of fish and bread cooking on a charcoal fire that Jesus has prepared. He invites them to the breakfast of hospitality. He also invites them to participate in the hospitality by providing some of the fish they have recently caught. Peter grabs some of the large fish and we can imagine him working with Jesus to add them to the fire pit. The bread, the fish, the fellowship of friends is a heartwarming story. None of the disciples dared to ask Jesus "Who are You?" because they all knew it was their Lord who was serving them with such immense hospitality. The messiah, the teacher, the beloved friend who they had followed faithfully for three years was now serving them warm bread and tasty fish on the shore of the sea of Galilee. So many memories of time spent together infused the hospitality of Jesus in their midst with gratitude and blessing.

The hospitality portion of the gospel message moves quickly into a post breakfast invitation to service in the name of Jesus. Service and compassion as a response to deep love and conviction are what surface in the second half of our story. Peter is approached and questioned by Jesus in a threefold challenge for the outspoken disciple. I can see the two of them stepping a few feet away from the fire as they walk together on the shoreline. Do you really love me Peter? Do you really love me more than these other disciples Simon Peter? Do you truly love me Simon Peter, son of John? Of course, Of course, of course I love you Jesus. How can you keep asking me this question? Why three times Lord? Is it because I denied you three times on the night of your arrest? Is it because you do not trust me? I thought you knew everything about me? Surely you know my heart. Surely you know that my heart's desire is to serve you. What must I do to exemplify my love for you? "Feed my lambs Peter. Tend my sheep Simon Peter. Feed my sheep Simon Peter, son of John." This is the response Jesus requires.

As a bystander standing not too far from the group in my imagination, I too listen for greater understanding. All of us are encouraged to pay attention to this story and hold fast to the message being offered. The gospel is not too hard to understand, it is simply very hard to follow sometimes. The simple and profound message is clear in my heart, "To love is to serve. To love is to feed. To love is to care."

I want to eat that bread and fish on the shoreline. I can taste it sometimes. I can feel the breeze coming off of the sea and I can hear Jesus asking each one of us in the same way he asked Peter, "Do you love me?" If you truly love me, show compassion whenever you can. Make a sacrifice if necessary.

There are countless ways to show hospitality and practice service in Jesus' name in our community of faith called Binkley and in the greater community around us. Many have answered a call to service on the Church Council. For their gifts we are grateful. Many are prayerfully considering service as a deacon at Binkley while others are already serving in this compassionate ministry. For sharing your gifts now or in the near future we are grateful. Hundreds are serving in a cause of feeding lambs today by participating in the CROP walk. Many others feed lambs on a daily basis through the 40 year ministry of Meals on Wheels which is joyfully housed in our church. Hundreds from our greater community participated in a service activity of love and hospitality yesterday. It was called Race Forward. People of all skin colors were walking and running for Racial Justice. Thousands in our state are engaged in a ministry of hospitality and love for the GLBTQAI community as they oppose House Bill 2. I am no political animal, but I want the cause of love and hospitality to be supported in my state. Many are engaged in tending to lambs as they strive to provide quality early childhood education and healthy daycare within our building. As followers of Jesus, you and I are called to embrace the ministries of hospitality and service. Because we love Jesus and we know the sacrificial love he showed to humanity, we are encouraged to make sacrifices in the service of love to all the humans, creatures, plants and bodies of water that encompass the earth. I thank you for all your efforts in hospitality and service. In the name of Jesus, let us jump in like Peter and tend the lambs wherever and whenever we can.