

Text: John 21:1-14

Title: "Believe because He provided a catch for His fishermen"

Time: 6/14/2028

Place: NBBC

Introduction: A few Wednesdays ago at our men's prayer time, I heard about ocean fishing adventures from Dale, Mark, and Mike. It seems that good fishermen enjoy telling the stories of their fishing expeditions almost as much as going on them. The one exception may be the story about how Dale's thumb got caught on Mark's hook one time. I am sure that telling that story is much more fun, at least for Dale, than experiencing it was.

A fisherman's story always includes a description of the size of his catch. The fisherman, John, was no different in this regard. Our chapter is one of his fishing stories. He tells us about a particular fishing trip on which the disciples caught 153 fish (v. 11). To know an exact number like that, John had to have taken the time to count them all. That the net was not broken for all of these fish is another detail that makes his fish story even more remarkable. He sees the Lord's provision in this miraculous blessing of fish.

But the fish stories of the Gospels are about far more than recollections of good times, and they are more than the Lord's generous provision of fish for dinner plates. Because Jesus is always a part of the fish stories of the Gospels, they are also recollections of eternal spiritual truth. Jesus used these fishing expeditions to teach this truth.

One previous fish story that must have come to the mind of the disciples on this occasion happened a couple of years earlier in Luke 5:1-11. There, of course, Jesus wanted to teach His disciples that when He is in the boat, He is not just "Master," but also "Lord." Only when a person understands this is he willing to leave fishing boats and nets behind to become a fisher of men.

Here in John's Gospel, the spiritual truth of this fishing story is that we must believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name, because He revealed Himself as risen a third time by providing another catch for His fishermen. Notice three things about this catch.

I. Jesus gives the catch to reveal Himself as the risen Lord with work for His disciples to do (vv. 1, 12-14).

Illustration: The Gospels of Matthew and Mark record that both the angels and the risen Lord told the women on that first Resurrection Sunday that the disciples must go to Galilee, where the Lord would meet with them. These Gospels simply tell us that the disciples did so and received the Lord's commandment to make disciples, which we call *The Great Commission* (Matt. 28:7-20; Mark 16:7).

After describing the events of the second Sunday appearance (Luke 24:36-43), Luke's Gospel and his Book of Acts emphasize the fact that the Lord directed His disciples back to Jerusalem after appearing to them in Galilee, where they received His teachings on the kingdom of God for forty days and then witnessed His ascension back to heaven. After this, they remained in Jerusalem to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Luke 24:44-53, Acts 1:1-14).

This chapter of John's Gospel falls between these emphases chronologically. It describes a detail about the trip to Galilee, prior to their Great Commission and return to Jerusalem. John indicates that the trip north to Galilee happened after the second Sunday appearance of the risen Jesus. Although, they had received instruction from the angels and the Lord to meet Him in Galilee the previous Sunday, their delay obeying was caused by the refusal of Thomas to go with them for a time. Jesus repaired Thomas's lack of faith on that second Sunday.

Application: So in our chapter, we find that the disciples have made their way to Galilee, their home by the Sea of Galilee,

here called the *Sea of Tiberius*, but they are still not yet ready to hear the Great Commission commandment to make disciples, which the Lord would soon trust to them. Jesus had appeared twice to the group, and now He does so a third time in Galilee with this specific preparation for Great Commission work in mind. They needed this revelation of Himself to become good disciple-makers.

To prepare them for their work, Jesus reminds them again that He is their Lord. I say *again* because Jesus had taught them this truth before, as we saw in Luke 5:1-11. Also, Jesus had told them on that second Sunday in Jerusalem, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21). And yet, their response for now was merely, "We go fishing." A more fitting response, of course, would have been "Lord, here we are in Galilee as you directed; where to next?"

Jesus provides them a catch to remind them that they are to do His work, not merely their own. He wants them to catch men, not merely fish. He had spent three years teaching them about this work of fishing for men, by precept and example. He graciously and miraculously uses this fishing trip to remind them that He is the Lord who wants this work done His way.

We need that reminder too. How often we say something like, "I am going fishing," when we should be asking the Lord, "How can I fish for men today?" We need Jesus to use this passage in John to reveal Himself to us as our risen Lord. He is the same Jesus to us as He was to His disciples. He is the same Lord who must be obeyed. He has placed before us the same work to make disciples. He wants us to catch men, not merely fish. Have we learned to say with these disciples, "It is the Lord," and then order our day as His servants? Jesus gives the catch to reveal Himself again as the risen Lord with work for them and for us to do.

II. Jesus gives the catch when the fishermen had caught nothing (vv. 2-5).

Illustration: Both the Gospels of Luke and John indicate that Galilean fishermen liked to fish at night time. There were some practical reasons for this. First, the daytime sun gets very hot on a boat, where there is no shade of trees, so it was cooler to do this work at night time. Also, it was known that the fish were more active at night and so easier to catch. In fact, the use of torches or lights against the night sky could attract fish to their fishnets. This technique is still known by fishermen today.

Application: Of course, it was no accident that the fish were nowhere to be found on this particular night. There must have been a memory of the Luke 5 episode rising in the hearts of the disciples when Jesus asked them here, "Children, do you not have any fish?" The grammar Jesus used shows that He knew the answer was negative already. Every time the Lord asks us a question, He already knows the answer, but He asks us anyway so that we might know what the right question is and so that we might contemplate what the right answer may be as well.

On this morning, the right question was "you do not have a catch, do you?" and the right answer was "no." The disciples needed to contemplate that answer if they were going to grasp all that Jesus wanted to teach them on this occasion.

"No catch" is the right answer, but not the final answer. Jesus provides for them the correct final answer. He calls from the shore and tells them to cast on the right side of the boat. I think by this time, having seen the appearances of the Lord the previous two Sundays, knowing that He had promised to meet them in Galilee, and remembering what had happened previously in Luke 5, the disciples had no trouble obeying this one whom they could not yet see clearly in the morning mist on the shore.

The Bible is clear that our Lord has invited us to a work that we are not able to do. While in the work, we will often hear Him ask us, "You haven't had much success, have you?" That is the right question, and our answer is often correctly *no*. He wants us to remember our dependence on Him while fishing for men.

The Apostle Paul put our situation as gospel ministers this way: "For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? (2 Cor. 2:15-16). That is the right question, and Paul understood that the right answer is that no mere human is sufficient. But Paul also knew that this is not the final answer.

That we are not sufficient in ourselves to do the gospel work of a local church, to which the Lord has called us, is the right answer that gets us to the final answer, which Paul put this way: "And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Cor. 3:4-6). We are not sufficient in ourselves, but when we follow Jesus as our Lord, our sufficiency comes from God and we become faithful ministers of New Testament truth. We are privileged to join with our Lord as He does His miraculous work.

We need this faithfulness as ministers of New Testament truth. We must learn what Paul learned to be faithful this way. We need to see again that Jesus provides the catch after the disciples had caught nothing all night long.

I am convinced that the Lord has a purpose when we find that our best gospel efforts are failing — to help us be less wise in our own eyes. Proverbs condemns the fool, and then it tells us that a fool has more hope than a man wise in his own eyes (Prov. 26:1-12). When it comes to making disciples, we need to be willing to appear foolish in the eyes of men, and in our own eyes. The more willing we are to be a fool for Christ, the more shall we find true what Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission found about gospel ministry: "God's work, done God's way, for God's glory, shall never lack God's supply." The

disciples learned this lesson of dependence from their risen Lord, and their ministry became well-supplied.

Jesus gave the catch to reveal Himself as the risen Lord who has work for them to do. He gave the catch after they had caught nothing by themselves. And now a last point:

III. Jesus gives the catch by telling the fishermen to keep on fishing (vv. 6-11).

Illustration: My daughter mentioned the practice of awarding a pin to a successful soul-winner in front of the church as a practice with which she did not agree. I saw her point. We must remember that the salvation of a soul is a miracle only God can do. He must get the "pin" and all the praise.

But then I thought too of the miracle that happened the day Peter and John were asked for alms by a lame man at the temple. They had no money for him, but they told him to arise, and he did. God did that miracle, not Peter and John, but what a privilege it was for these men to have a part in this work. And then I wonder too whether the man would have ever walked had Peter and John not done their part.

Application: This seems to be how the Lord prefers to have His miracles accomplished. He is pleased by our enthusiastic participation and obedience: "they cast, therefore" (v. 6).

The distance of the boat from shore is described as 200 cubits, or about 100 yards. That is about four lengths of an Olympic sized pool. John confirms Peter's suspicion that this is the Lord, and Peter puts his outer garment back on (evidently feeling that meeting the Lord in his fishing garb was inappropriate), and he jumps into the water swimming to be with the Lord. I believe that enthusiasm pleased the Lord. Of course, of all the disciples, Peter sunk the lowest after boasting the most the night of Jesus's crucifixion. But his swim also reminds us that

those who are forgiven the most also tend to love the most enthusiastically too.

It is this enthusiastic love, born in a sense of our own forgiveness, that will find us involved in the work of fishing for men. This too is a spiritual lesson Jesus teaches his disciples. He wants them to love Him enough to obey Him enthusiastically, so He gives them a part in the catch. He tells them where to cast the nets, but they have to cast it. In the same way, the Lord has put people in need of the gospel in our lives, but we must let them know the good news of the gospel. When they come to Christ, the gospel will come to other parts of the sea.

Paul writes about this enthusiasm. Speaking specifically about financial investment into gospel ministry, he wrote to the Corinthians: "But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:6-7). When Peter jumped into the water, he had the same heart that a cheerful giver has. No longer was he leading a fishing trip. Instead, he took the lead for enthusiastic obedience, dragging the net to shore when asked.

Jesus, of course, already had breakfast prepared for them without any of their hard labors. He did not need their fish, but it was their need to be able to give it when He asked them to bring it. Jesus gives the catch by telling His fishermen to keep on fishing, and to do so enthusiastically. So, keep fishing.

Conclusion: Have you ever noticed the emblem of a fish on the back of a car as you drive along? That fish is a symbol of Christianity, and it has been so for a very long time. The Greek word for fish is ΙΧΘΥΣ, which is comprised of five Greek letters - iota, chi, theta, upsilon, and sigma. Each of these letters is the first letter of the Greek words for *Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior*. The symbol dates to the second century church, during a period of Christian persecution. It was used to identify secret

meeting places of local churches. It is also found frequently among the catacombs of Rome, where Christians were buried.

John would have very much approved of that symbol. It says exactly what he wants us to believe about the man who cooked a fish breakfast on this morning after the long night of unsuccessful fishing.

Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in His name? Have you trusted Him to be your Savior? John says we must believe because He provided this catch for His fishermen.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*