

A Storytelling Commentary on John 21:1-19

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The story of Jesus' appearance by the sea in the Gospel of John is one of the great stories in the whole Gospel tradition. The description of the disciples who were gathered there in Galilee is a list of most of the twelve. There are seven of them who are listed: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James, John, and two others of the disciples. Counting Judas, that were five who were not there. The missing disciples include Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, and Philip—who were the ones to whom the Greeks went to question about Jesus and John.

Thus most of the disciples have gone back to Galilee and are sitting around doing nothing by the sea of Tiberius. They are "sitting by the dock of the bay...wasting time." The implication of this is that the disciples had gone back to life as usual as fishermen. The tone to use in naming the disciples is therefore one of discouragement. Convey in the way that you tell this that after Jesus' death, his disciples returned to their life as fishermen in Galilee and were discouraged. This is the implication of the story.

Simon Peter's decision to go fishing is as if he is trying to generate some energy: to paraphrase, "Well, I'm going fishing. I'm not going to just sit around here and be depressed." The others then say, in effect, "All right, we'll go with you." So they go out and they fish all night and catch nothing. The atmosphere of discouragement is only heightened by their inability to catch any fish.

Jesus' appearance is told as a surprise: "Jesus appeared on the shore." His appearance is not to be taken for granted. It is a very unusual thing that someone who had died would appear on the shore of a lake. So it is not something to be stated as a matter of fact, but rather with a tone and/or gesture of surprise. Of course, the dynamic of the story is that the storyteller is telling this to the audience so that we as listeners know what is going on, but the disciples do not. Part of the fascination of this episode of the story is that *we* know what's going on, but the disciples don't know.

This is a characteristic of this resurrection appearance stories: e.g., the two on the road to Emmaus and Mary Magdalene weeping at the tomb. There are many places in which the storyteller talks directly to the audience and tells them things that Jesus' friends don't know. This creates an intimate relationship between the storyteller and the audience. Make the most of every opportunity you have as a storyteller to give your listeners this inside information. Move forward or lean forward to address the audience. Make contact with the audience so that they get the inside scoop about what's going on. Another possibility is to speak softer as if telling a secret.

The call of Jesus obviously is a call across the sea, so it should not be delivered in a quiet voice. The dynamic of the story is in part created by a change in tempo. The

transformation of the scene from depression to excitement and energy is expressed here by the tempo and the energy of the teller.

Regarding the comment about Peter being naked. On the one hand this is a guy story and so it is not a big deal that he was fishing naked. On the other hand, there are lots of sanctions in ancient Judaism against nakedness. There's been a lot of discussion about whether he was totally naked or whether he had underwear on. In Mark the word "naked" clearly means "no clothes." We know this because in a later use of the word the description is "he had only a linen cloth around his body and when they seized him, he left the linen cloth." The clear implication is that the linen cloth was all he had on. This is told in Mark as a sign of the shame of the disciples running away.

I think it's likely that in this case it means that Peter had stripped and had nothing on. It provides a note of humor, as well as a note of male vigor and energy. It's a sign of Peter being a workingman who was working hard with the nets. However, that energy is made present in the way the story is told, whether or not "naked" meant he had anything on. The dragging of the net to the shore by the disciples is again a sign of their strength as fishermen.

The contrast between the story of the catch of fish and the breakfast that follows is a contrast of volume, speed, and tone. When the disciples get to the shore, it is now a symbolic eucharistic celebration. They gathered around the fire and Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Bring some of the fish you've caught," so Simon went on board and hauled off the net full of 153 big fish. Jesus took the fish, cooked them, and gave it to them. This is a moment of camaraderie among a group of young men.

In the middle of the description of the action, the storyteller explains to the audience, "None of them dared ask him 'Who are you?' because they all knew that it was the Lord." This is an inside view of what's going on in the disciples' minds. It tells us, the audience, what they were thinking. The audience is invited to identify fully with the disciples. It is an opportunity for the audience to see the event from the disciples' point of view—to share their feelings. So it is important to effectively convey the inside view.

The conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter is the most intimate conversation between Jesus and another person in the whole of the Gospel tradition. It is a dialogue in indirect speech. What Jesus is saying is conveyed as much by the tone of his words as by their content.

First, Jesus addresses Peter as "Simon, son of John." He does not use his affectionate nickname "Peter," but rather his formal name. This is the only time in the Gospel tradition in which we learn that Simon's father's name was John. It is a formal address to Peter. It is not a friend's manner of address, but rather the kind of statement that is made at a wedding when the minister addresses the woman and the man, each by their formal name.

The question Jesus asks three times is, "Do you love me?" with the additional phrase, "more than these" the first time. Repetitions in biblical storytelling are never for the sake of simply repeating the words. They are always intended to create intensity. There is a change in tone every time the words are repeated. This series of questions is a crescendo of intensity in which Jesus' question becomes more and more intimate, intense, and quiet.

The first time the question is asked includes a reference to "these": "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" What does "these" refer to? The referent is ambiguous. Is it all these things—fishing, Galilee, a certain way of life? Or does it refer to the other disciples? Given the context of a return to fishing after being in Jesus' traveling seminary, the dominant implication is "more than this place and all the things associated with this way of life," rather than a comparison between whether Peter loves Jesus more than the other disciples.

A big deal is sometimes made about the Greek words used for "love" in Jesus' repeated question. In Greek, the first two times Jesus asks Simon Peter, "Do you love me?" the word used for "love" is *agape*. The last time he asks, the word used for "love" is *filee*. Peter always responds with the Greek word *fileo*. My sense is that there isn't a lot to be made of that difference. And there is no way to distinguish the two Greek words for "love" in English.

The dynamic is that with each repetition the word "love" is more intense in Jesus' question and then in Peter's response. The third is the most intense. Jesus' intensity can be conveyed with a deadly serious and quiet tone. In Peter's reply, you want to convey his grief, because the implication of the story is that at this point he makes the connection between these three questions that Jesus is asking him and his three denials of Jesus.

The three responses of Jesus are sometimes confusing to remember. The order is: feed-tend-feed, lambs-sheep-sheep. In other words, it is feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Try to remember feed-tend-feed and then lambs-sheep-sheep. Start with the young ones, then the elders who are first tended and then fed.

Also notice that the first two episodes of the conversation are the same question and answer with minor variations. The third time there is expansion: Peter is deeply grieved, saying, "You know everything, Lord; you know that I love you." The next episode is Jesus' expanded response.

Just a comment about fishing versus shepherding. Fishing was a great vocation. You're out on the water every day. Peter had an independent business as an entrepreneur. Fishing was respected in the ancient world and it was a great vocation. Herding on the other hand was the pits. At one point in the Mishnah the rabbis say don't have your sons do three things: be a butcher, a doctor or a shepherd. They were the three vocations to avoid because they involved uncleanness. Also, shepherding was considered a low class thing to do. It was a hot, dusty, and boring job. So Jesus is asking Peter to leave something that

he loved, and symbolically to take care of his sheep. In terms of its cultural associations, this was a definite step down.

The prophecy that Jesus then makes is that Peter must face the fact that he will be martyred and not to run away from that future. The statement "When you were young, you girded yourself and you went wherever you wanted; when you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will bind you and take you where you don't want to go" is a prophecy of Peter's death. This is tough talk. It's let's-face-the-facts and what-are-you-going-to-do questioning: "Are you going to deny me again? Are you going to run away? Or are you going to stay the course?" The invitation, as well as the command, is, "Follow me." The tone, however, is invitational, not commanding. Jesus knows a command will not work. This is an invitation to follow his way.

The common motif at the end of all of the Gospels is the mission of the disciples. John's story is most like the ending of Mark where the issue is confronting fear and facing the realities of what it will mean to be a disciple and tell the stories. John's treatment of this common motif is the most intimate, the most direct, and the most personal. It is thereby consistent with the approach of the whole Gospel of John. In John 21, we get to know Jesus intimately, just as we did in the long discourse in chapters 13-17. First at supper and then at breakfast, there is the opportunity in these stories of John to come to know Jesus more directly as a person than anywhere else in the Gospel tradition.

This story is a great opportunity and I hope you enjoy telling it. I trust you will take its telling as an opportunity to invite everyone to embrace the story for their own journey of discipleship.