*WALKING AWAY FROM IT ALL*

John 21:1-19

May 1, 2022

You’ve seen them, haven’t you? They’re everyplace you look, everyplace you go. “Help Wanted” signs, right? “Now Hiring!” And if you don’t happen to see them when you walk into your formerly favorite restaurant or shop, you know it by the slow or non-existent service, huh? There’s no one there anymore to take care of you.

It’s a result of two things, I think. First, during the pandemic, people didn’t want to come to work in order to protect themselves from the virus. They wanted to stay home and stay safe. And maybe with the stimulus checks and up-bumping of the unemployment benefits, they just might afford not to come into work. Although all that might be stretching it. That unemployment bump ran out last September.

But the second thing I do think is going on. This has all been within the time frame of discussions about a $15 minimum wage. Some people just want more money, so they don’t want to come back to their low-wage work, right?

It’s called the Great Resignation. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, workers across America—professionals as well as shift workers – have been rethinking the work they do. In some cases, they’ve decided to walk away from it, sometimes to new jobs, and other times to no jobs at all.

Today’s Gospel lesson tells a story of someone who walks away from it. It’s the apostle Peter. The job he walks away from is commercial fishing. Remarkably, this incident from John 21 is the second time the Gospels describe Peter’s walking away from that job.

The first time is in Luke 5:1-11. After a long day of unsuccessful fishing, Jesus invites Peter (then called Simon) to take him out in his boat for one last try. The net comes back bursting with fish and Jesus says to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you’ll be catching people.” Simon, along with his fishing partners James and John, rows to shore. And immediately comes the first Resignation. They leave everything and follow him.

John’s Gospel has a different take on Simon’s calling, but it, too, involves resignation (John 1:35-42). In this version, Simon’s already a follower of John the Baptist. His brother Andrew tells him, “We’ve found the Messiah.” He recruits Simon to quit John’s band of followers and take up with Jesus instead. Jesus immediately changes Simon’s name to Peter, which means “Rock.” Clearly, this resignation is about a lot more than just changing jobs. It’s more like swapping one life for another.

Today’s passage opens with the words, “After these things . . .” Sounds ordinary, but it’s anything but. The “things” John is referring to are the death and resurrection of Christ(!).

In light of these “things” Peter and his friends have just experienced, his remark sounds like the biggest non-sequitur of all time: “I’m going fishing.”

*Really*, Peter? *Fishing*? That same life you’ve already walked away from once?

Peter’s already been part of one great resignation. Now he’s drifted back to the fishing nets he once, in his zeal, abandoned.

What happens next in John’s story is reminiscent of the first calling of Peter, with the no fish, and the nets over the other side, and then the incredible haul. But Jesus doesn’t sit down in Peter’s boat this time. He’s standing along the shore, as Peter and his mates row back, discouraged.

“Boys, you don’t have any fish, do you?”

It’s a question, but also a statement. Does Jesus observe how high the empty boat is riding in the water? Or does he just know, from the drooping of the men’s shoulders as they row, that this is a failed fishing expedition?

They admit it; then Jesus gives them a fishing tip. He tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat – a crazy piece of advice. (Why one side, rather than the other?) For some reason, these seasoned mariners take the beachcomber’s advice. And once they do, the net comes back so full they fear it will split wide open.

No fish after a whole night’s trying. Then this man, whom they have some inkling of, but can’t yet connect, tells them to just put the nets down on the other side of the boat. And more fish then they can deal with.

Just like that earlier time in Luke, where Jesus told them to do that . . . and they remember. And so it dawns on them who this man is. After that comes that touching scene when Peter dives into the sea, so as to reach his Lord that much faster. They all gather on the beach for breakfast: fish grilled over charcoal, and bread.

Their impromptu gathering is the exact opposite of another meal they’ve recently shared together, the Last Supper. You could call this meal “the First Breakfast” – for it takes place at daybreak rather than night, in joy rather than solemnity, in hope rather than fear. And another thing. They recognize and share again in Jesus . . . at Communion, huh?

After breakfast, Jesus turns to Simon and asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

It’ not at all clear what Jesus means by the word “these.” There are some possible explanations. Maybe Jesus is asking Peter whether he loves him more than these others love him. Or he could be asking if Peter loves him more than Peter loves the others. Or maybe Jesus is asking Peter whether he loves him more than he loves these fishnets. We can’t say for sure what Jesus means by his question, but we do know how Peter responds. He leaves his boats and his nets behind – not for the first, but for the second time – his second Great Resignation -- and embarks on the life of an apostle. That task will occupy Peter all his years, until he finally dies his martyr’s death in Rome.

From that day forward, Peter begins to fulfill the challenge Jesus sets before him: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Feed my lambs . . . . Tend my sheep . . . . Feed my sheep.”

There are lots of sermons in this passage, but today I want us to focus on *WHY* Peter would feed his lambs; tend his sheep.

Jesus catches Peter with the question, “Children, have you any fish?” He could just as well ask that question of us.

He could ask it any day. And there we’d be, taking care of day-to-day business as usual – arms full of groceries, fingers on the keyboard, hands on the steering wheel, drumming out the rhythm of our lives.

“Have you any fish?” he wants to know?

“*Fish*! What do you mean by ‘*fish,*’ Lord?” But we know. We really do. We don’t need to be lectured. Jesus doesn’t ask the sort of questions the world asks to define success. He doesn’t ask:

Have you been pulling down a paycheck?

Have you achieved a level of professional competence, commensurate with your years of experience?

Are you able to finance the type of leisure activities you want?

Will you be able to take early retirement?

No, Jesus looks at the big picture. And then he transfixes us – like a dear caught in the headlights—with a single question. “Have you any fish?”

To many people, the goal of life is to achieve a vague notion of success, but they’re not at all sure they’d know it if it dropped in their laps. Achievement can be like an endless staircase: each time they reach the next landing, they look up and see the next flight winding upwards, into the hazy and uncertain beyond.

But Peter doesn’t have that problem. Jesus cups hands to mouth and shouts, “Have you any fish?” But Peter already knows the answer. No more illusions for him. No more losing himself in the frantic rat race, hoping it may yield some small prize or modest success. Peter knows his net is, and forever will remain, *empty*.

So, too, it’s only when our nets are truly empty that—paradoxically—we are receptive to the message Jesus has for us. “Lord, to whom shall we go?” asks Peter, on an earlier occasion when Jesus challenged his faithfulness. “You have the word of eternal life” (Jn. 6:68).

Near the end of his life Steve Jobs’ biographer asked him about where he discovered meaning. Jobs said that he’d learned from his guru in India that life is like a river: and at first, you think that if you’re successful, you get to take many things out of the river, products people have made or ideas they’ve come up with. But he said, “Eventually in life, you realize that it’s not what you get to take out of the river, it’s what you get to put into the river.”

And of the boat and of the nets, Peter walks away from it all: boat, sail, oars—and most of all, that net bursting with fish. The other gospels tell of the day, three years before, when Peter and the others “leave their nets and follow him.” But this incident is different. This time, the net Peter leaves behind is *full*. But Peter knows that Jesus, Jesus himself, Jesus’ claim on his life, are more important than even a net full-to-breaking.

For the first time in his life, Peter truly knows this. And for the first time in his life, he’s received a love so amazing, a call so compelling, he’ll never return to his fishing boat again.

“Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.” And Peter did.

Amen.