

Circle of Mercy – Sermon
John 21:1-19
April 10, 2016 – Third Sunday of Easter
by Missy Harris

My nephew Eli is a fly fisher - a serious fly fisher. He would rather be in his waders in the creek or river than anywhere else. He sits at the table in his room for hours at a time, tying intricate flies. When he knows the weather has been bad for days, at the first pause in the rain and patch of blue sky he sees, he grabs his fishing gear and either walks to the creek near their house, or he begs someone who can drive to take him to streams further away. I asked him what it is that he loves about fishing, and his answer was both simple and profound: “I like being outside. When I go fishing and I’m mad about something, I usually forget about it.”

His response to my question made me wonder if one of the reasons that the disciples went back to the work that was most familiar to them was, in some ways, to “forget about” or find some release from what had just happened to Jesus, to them, to the community that they had hoped for and had invested their lives in helping to create. Were they returning to the physical work of fishing to try to forget about their disappointment and sadness, to find release for their fear and anger?

I just returned from a board meeting at Jubilee Partners. In our meeting yesterday we received an update about Neighbor's Field, a part of Jubilee's property that they prepared a little over five years ago to be a community garden space for refugees who were resettling in and near the town of Comer.

The people who use this space most are Karen and Karenni families from Burma who are intimately connected with the land and agriculture have made use of this space – tending $\frac{1}{4}$ acre plots of land to grow their own food. And when I say that the Karen and Karenni families are intimately connected with the land, I mean they can and do make use of everything – yes, everything – animal, vegetable, mineral – every single bit of everything. One of the partners commented, “You can go out to Neighbor's Field on a Saturday or Sunday and there will be 50-70 people, cultivating and tending their small plot of land. It's not economic. It's what they know and what they do.”

After fleeing their homes in Burma and living in refugee camps in Thailand for years, times when they were forced to rely on their ingenuity and creativity in relation to the land for survival, they come to a new place and feel most deeply connected with the way of life they know best – tilling the soil, making the most use out of all that they have – even though they have other resources for food, they

are drawn back to working the land, toward the work that their bodies know so well. Even after a week of working 60-70 hours in chicken processing plants, they yearn for and move toward what is most familiar.

This too made me think about the disciples returning to what they knew best, to the very thing that they were doing when Jesus called them to put down their nets and follow him. Before that time, it probably was for economic reasons that they fished. But after his death, I wonder if they needed most was to return to the routine, the known rhythm of a day or a night, spent fishing.

They were at ease in their boats, (except for that one time when they got pretty mad at Jesus for sleeping during a terrifying storm). The work they returned to was stored in the memory of their muscles. Their bodies knew exactly what to do when they were navigating their boats into the water, casting out and drawing in the nets, hauling in their catch for the day, preparing the fish for their families and to sell in the market.

Honestly, they seemed way out of their element after they put down their nets to follow Jesus, and it was evident much of the time. There are so many stories about when they didn't get it, when they fell asleep, when they grew weary of the crowds

pressing in, asking for more and more – of what the disciples weren't even sure that they knew how to or could offer. What a relief it must have been just to return to and lean into the kind of work that their bodies knew exactly how to do. And sometimes, isn't that exactly what we need – to pay attention and respond to what our bodies are telling us that we need to do?

My friend Diane and her husband Josh spend several months out of each year working on commercial fishing boats in Alaska. They work on a 58 foot salmon seiner with five other people. I posed the same question to her that I asked my nephew: what is it you love about fishing?

My message barely reached Diane because, at the moment, she is on an Antarctic Research Vessel, cruising the Western Peninsula inside a beautiful fjord, doing a climate change/glacial melt study about how it is impacting oceanic animal and plant life. But, she had a brief moment of increased bandwidth and was able to share this response to my question:

First of all, fishing (if it takes) is an addictive behavior. I say that in all sincerity. If it gets under your skin, you're hooked (pun intended). I think the three things I love about it are: the camaraderie of the crew, the remote

locations where we fish, and that it can be rewarding both in the sense of a hard days work and if you are lucky, monetarily.

I happen to fish with an eclectic and highly interesting crew of people. But it goes beyond that. Fishing is hard, long hours. It can be dangerous at times. It's exhausting, and when you are finished, you feel like you have just done battle. And those around you that have battled with you - you feel an immense connection with. Not that those same people don't also annoy you at times...those stories and times that you now share are an intense bond and intimacy of sorts.

Space is tight and you have little privacy. You work 20-22 hours a day on the deck with very little sleep and then do it all again. I am not trying to be glamorous here. It's slimy, physically exhausting work, and most days I swing between anger, frustration, exhaustion, physical pain, and the monotony of doing extremely repetitive work - but just then - you will have one of those moments where time stands still - and you see a humpback whale breach or the most fantastical sunset over the water, or the best laugh ever with your crewmates. It's challenging to keep up the morale for the whole season and not lose focus on the back deck with heavy machinery.

But the time spent on the water, away from ‘civilization’ can be magical, other-worldly and sometimes daunting.

The disciples were out doing what they knew how to do, and there in front of them on the shore they looked up at one of those moments where time stood still. They saw someone standing on the beach. At first, they didn’t recognize who it was. Commenting that he noticed their lack of luck, the stranger suggested that they go back out and cast their nets again, this time on the other side of the boat. And when they did this, their nets were filled to the point that they could barely draw them back into the boat. It was sheer abundance, and that’s when they recognized him. One of the disciples proclaimed, “It is the Lord.” And, there went Peter – he put on his clothes and jumped right into the water and rushed toward the beach to greet Jesus.

I think if Peter had a Facebook account and needed to update his relationship status with Jesus, it would say something like: It’s complicated. When reading the accounts of Peter’s interactions with Jesus, the thing that is clear is that we never know how Peter is going to respond to Jesus. He was constantly vacillating between being 100% on board OR being ready to bail on the whole endeavor.

What we can always count on is Peter to doing the impulsive thing.

- In the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus first called the disciples from their fishing boats to follow him, when he recognized Jesus, Peter immediately told him, “Go away. I am sinful.”
- When Jesus was transfigured on top of the mountain before Peter and two of the other disciples, Peter immediately jumped into action and said, “Let’s stay here, Jesus. It is good to be here. I’ll build three houses, one for you, one for Elijah and one for Moses.”
- When Jesus came to the disciples to wash their feet, Peter immediately said, “Don’t wash my feet. You will never wash my feet.” To which, Jesus replied, “Unless I do this, you won’t have any part with me.” And Peter quickly responded, “Ok, but not just my feet. My hands, my head, my whole body.”
- And finally, in the events leading up to Jesus’ death, Peter, standing next to a charcoal fire, was asked directly three times, “Are you one of Jesus’ disciples,” and three times, he denied knowing him.

After my friend Diane answered my initial question about why she loves fishing, I told her the text I was preaching from today. She said:

The thought of returning to work that is so familiar after all they had been through; then, breakfast after a long night out fishing is heartbreakingly beautiful. There is nothing like the feeling of tough physical labor and then someone taking the kindness and time to bring you nourishment.

This image of Jesus waiting next to a charcoal fire on the beach for the disciples to return to shore is exactly that: heartbreakingly beautiful.

When they came to the beach, they saw that Jesus had prepared breakfast for them – some fish and bread on a charcoal fire – the same kind of fire where Peter had denied Jesus three times before he died. And in this moment, Jesus doesn't scold them or ask them where the hell they had been when he needed them most – both of which would have been fair responses.

Instead, it is a moment of pure tenderness, toward all of them – but especially Peter.

Peter, in particular, has been haunting me a bit. He is so real. I can so relate to his constantly moving back and forth between being 100% on board ready to follow Jesus anywhere and in the next moment, wanting to run as fast he could in the other direction – away from the unknown, back toward what was comfortable and familiar. I often wonder what the conversation was like in Peter’s own mind. Was he constantly kicking himself for being so impulsive, for not responding faithfully, for denying that he even knew Jesus?

Out of all the disciples, Jesus turned to Peter, the one who had denied him, not once, not twice but three times and asked him: Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?

It was a heartbreakingly tender moment – Jesus offered to the one who had denied even knowing him a gesture of mercy and an opportunity for repentance. It wasn’t forceful. It wasn’t belittling or shaming. It was an open invitation. It was an chance for Peter to return to love. Jesus showed that **even** the one who denied him could be trusted with the task of carrying on God’s work in the world and walking in the path of love. Even Peter, who publicly had denied their relationship, could try again to choose this path, could respond and live into the call of love. But I

wonder if Peter trusted himself, when he responded to Jesus' asking him three times, "do you love me?" saying, "Yes, you know that I do."

It occurs to me that, even with all of his short-comings and denials – or better yet, because of these, Peter maybe got it better than any of the other disciples. He got it so well, that it terrified him. He knew how often he would get close, ready to give all that he had to the work Jesus called them toward, and then shrink away – maybe letting his self-doubt and fear overwhelm his desire to follow where Jesus was leading him. As hard as he might have tried not to do so, this was his pattern. This was his go to response.

What would it really mean for him to truly allow Jesus, to wash not only his feet, but his head and hands and entire body? What would it require of him to allow all of who he was, body, mind and spirit to lean into this new way of life, to allow his muscles to form new memories, to open himself to the possibility that this work could possibly become as familiar to him as the work of fishing?

After proclaiming his love for Jesus three times, Peter was instructed to feed the lambs, tend and feed the sheep. He was being asked to step out of the familiar waters. He had stumbled on the dry land path in the past, a path that held risk and

uncertainty, a path required courage. He had made mistakes. He would probably continue to stumble and make mistakes on this dry land path that Jesus called him back to.

Even so, Jesus would continue to pursue Peter with a heartbreakingly, beautiful tenderness, reminding Peter that no matter what, he is still invited into the work of love. He would still meet Peter on the beach, with breakfast prepared to remind him that the invitation would never end, that the opportunity to live into love would always be in front of him.

Responding to Jesus' call, to "follow me" required stepping outside what was familiar and comfortable. Jesus called the disciples toward work that stretched them. He called them toward something new and uncertain. He called them toward work that required them to respond with love. Jesus invited them to take a risk, for which the *primary requirement* was love.

Staying the course on the dry land path was unfamiliar them. But it was path where love would lead them to loving others. It was the path where, ultimately, their muscles would be conditioned and acquire new memories, and where they would find life.

When we have lost our way, when we have failed, when we think we have veered so far off the path that we may never find our way back, Jesus is still standing there on the beach, waiting with breakfast prepared, calling us back with relentless tenderness and care.

And can we, at least for a moment be like Peter, forgiving and tender enough with ourselves to be able to respond to the question – Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? with certainty – “You know that I do.”

Amen.