

April 21, 2013

Overflowing Catch

A young colleague of mine posted on his church's Facebook page this week that he was planning on preaching this Sunday so there would be hope and peace and comfort in his message – that he was preparing for something meaningful to share in the midst of a painful week. Bless his young heart. I hope and pray that he does bring comfort to his congregation. But I'm a bit more skeptical. The events of this week and in Newtown a few months ago, and all the tragedy on top of tragedy that fills our ears and wounds our hearts is overwhelming to me. It's hard for me to switch gears. Instead, I've been scavenging the house for the remaining Easter chocolate, and turning away from watching the news.

Truth be told, I'm afraid. But I'm not afraid in the ways you might think. I'm not very often afraid for my family's safety, and for that I consider myself very, very fortunate. As a parent, I want my children to learn caution, and I talk to them about dangerous situations. However, I am more afraid that they will lose the joy in life the more a culture of fearfulness develops all around them. That's not what I want for them. I don't want them to be afraid, and even more so I don't want them to have to numb themselves to outside circumstances to survive. I'm not sure when the emotional crossover happens – but I remember one time listening to an NPR report about the places in the world where violence is much more pervasive and repetitious than it is in the United States. The person being interviewed was saying, at some point, you realize that you still want to go out to dinner with your spouse. You still want to find the pleasure in everyday events. You could stay at home and cower under the kitchen table, but life is too

important, too precious to stay stuck there. Even if you may see a bombing – you go out the door – you go to work – you send your kids to school. It was hard to imagine, but I get what was being said. To quote one of my all time favorite theologians, Jimmy Buffett, “Breathe in, breathe out, move on.”

It all makes me think of the disciples’ emptiness after their beloved teacher, Jesus, was killed by the state at the request of the religious leaders of the day. Who can you trust? How can you move on? They put all of their hope in his teaching. They believed he was going to change the world. The devastation was tremendous. They lost their friend. They lost their belief in the goodness of humanity. An innocent person had been brutally put to death. The stench of evil hung in the air. In John’s account, the disciples saw Jesus after his resurrection, but his appearances to this point seem ghostly. Not much changes. Grief is still the emotion on the surface. And it may be the acceptance of that grief that calls them back to the water to fish. They were yearning for a familiar activity after days of being locked up and afraid.

Peter says, matter of fact-ly, “I’m going fishing.” And the disciples say, “We’ll go with you.” In my limited familiarity with grief – this sounds about right. At some point, that stalemate of sadness, anger, and immobility needs a nudge to break free. It’s not switching directly from grief to joy, or from sadness to happiness, and yet it’s taking that one small step to something like resuming a “normal” life. I’m going fishing. I’m going out to lunch. I’m changing out of my pajamas today. It doesn’t have to be a big thing, just the one thing that signifies that life has not ended. The flowers bloom. The grass grows. The seasons change. Bostonians put one foot in front of the other until they are able to think about running again.

It is in this moment, this limbo moment between despair and going fishing again, where their eyes are opened and they recognize Jesus, for real. He shows them the path from emptiness to catch a glimpse of life's fullness. It's right there in the story. The emptiness of the nets expresses exactly what the disciples have been feeling. It's no use. Even this livelihood that they knew wasn't serving them well. They were all trade fishermen. You would think they would catch something. Maybe it was some comfort to feel the rocking of the boat, the weight of the nets, the smell of the sea – but to not catch any fish really mirrored their mood - emptiness.

They see Jesus on the shore, but they don't know it is Jesus. This figure suggests that they cast their nets to the other side of the boat. They do what he asks and the catch that they get is huge. Then, and only then, Peter gets it. It is the Lord! This super abundant catch of fish should have broken their nets, but it didn't. The point of the story is meant to be obvious. The catch is overflowing. God's love is overflowing. Look and see what God can do. Death is not the final answer. Emptiness doesn't last forever. See. See. See.

Now, for us, more than 2,000 years later, we forget. We come to believe that the stories are tilted in the other direction, and if our only sources of information come from news sources geared up to stoke the irrationality of our fear, that makes sense. But it isn't true. The longer narrative, always, as they say leans toward justice, leans toward love. That doesn't mean that we are immune from feelings of emptiness, and it doesn't mean that the grief of losing a loved one isn't heart-wrenching. Moving too quickly from empty to full probably means that we've filled up on chocolate and a big helping of denial. That isn't the message of Jesus either.

There's a transformation that happens when our eyes are opened and we recognize the risen Christ. For Peter, it was immediate. It is in this encounter with Jesus where he moves from

bumbling disciple to the rock on which Jesus will build the church. It happens in us as well. Sometimes it's personal. We take that one step from fear into new life, as we deepen a commitment to someone or something that we really love. Sometimes it's in community. A church quits worrying about how empty the pews are and how low the treasury has gotten, and focuses instead on ministry with the poor and learns to see Jesus. Sometimes it's even national, as slavery passes away, and institutionalized separation passes away, and prejudices continue to be challenged. God's love is abundant, overflowing, and it's there for everyone, with no exceptions. We are transformed when our eyes are opened and we can say with Peter – "Look, it is the Lord!"

Today, I'm not sure what kind of hope I can offer for the world, or even for the small slice of the world gathered here this morning. Many of our relationships are broken and when we fail to do the hard work of reconciliation, we may be doomed. If we think that the unrest is only happening somewhere out there, we may want to think again, because any time we are spurred to hate, stuck in emptiness, or paralyzed by fear, we become part of the problem, not the solution. Jesus took love all the way to the cross, and he told us to pick up our crosses and follow. Love has no limits. That's what transformation in Christ looks like. Our practices in that kind of love take time to cultivate. It's not easy for us, and it flies in the face of cultural expectations. To the outside world, it may seem Pollyanna-ish. It may look like we ignore pain and suffering – but not at all. We can't, for our goal is not to deny pain or push suffering under a rug, but to transform it. That's the message of the cross. An instrument of torture becomes a symbol of hope. Anything less would be to deny the love of Christ, a love, Jesus says is as abundant as life itself on this planet. Throw out your net to the other side and see what you can catch!