

The Pastor Posture

John 21:1 - 19

Seven disciples and an all-nighter. Nothing to show for it. Almost like their nets were broken.

After Jesus' resurrection, after He had spoken with His followers but before His ascension, these fellows were back in their old stomping grounds and turning to their old trade. "Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.'"

"They said to him, 'We are going with you also.' They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing."

In order to appreciate what's happening in this chapter, we need to take a look at the previous chapter of John's gospel. There, he concludes with, "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

In the first 20 chapters, he spelled out his version of the good news to lead people to faith in Christ. But then, in the last chapter of his book, he launched into something different. It is not directed to those just coming to faith in Jesus; it rather speaks to those who have known Him and yet are in need. In need of what?

Glad you asked. You see, as awed and overjoyed as these ragamuffins were with their risen Savior, they were surely discouraged and down on

themselves for their own behavior – Peter, as you recall, not many days earlier dished out some satanic advice to Jesus concerning the cross and then denied vigorously ever knowing Him at His trial. After the resurrection, Thomas was filled with an almost defiant doubt that Jesus was alive again. James and John certainly remembered disputing with the others when they desired thrones on the left and right of Christ's. Nathanael and the others deserted Jesus, leaving Him in the garden like a bunch of scared cats. Surely, it was on their minds and they must have pondered just how do you face such glorious majesty when your life includes such a travesty of failures?

Peter had once told Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8) Even a relatively righteous man is confronted with his short comings before a perfect holy Lord. Isaiah the prophet, beholding the glory of God said, "Woe is me, for I am undone!" (Isa 6:5)

I suggest that these guys weren't fishing for enjoyment. They were in the retreat of guilt and condemnation. And they caught nothing. You recall Jesus told them, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." (John 15:4,5) Yes, indeed, their 'nets' if you would, were broken.

"But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet

the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, 'Children, have you any food?' They answered Him, 'No.'"

Now, everyone knows that it's rare to find an honest fisherman. (ha) But, these guys didn't even have a story about the one that got away. Their two-letter answer said volumes.

And He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'"

John recognized the handiwork of the Lord and perhaps that's one reason why this story was special to him. Undoubtedly, he remembered a similar event that had marked the beginning of his own discipleship. (See Luke 5:1-11)

"Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea." Fascinating! How many of you know that if you want to swim well, you don't drape yourself in a coat or cloak. Clearly, this was something that stuck out in John's memory as well. What was Peter thinking?

Was he trying to prove something to the Lord? Why was his outer garment necessary? Obviously, he was so thrilled that he didn't want to wait for the boat to get to shore and the fish were the last thing on his mind. But he wanted that covering. He didn't want to approach his Lord 'in the buff' so to speak. He was zealous to come to Jesus but careful to be covered. I suggest that it was another indication of the self-

consciousness born from the awareness of his sin. Adam and Eve did the same thing back in the garden of Eden. (See Gen 3:7)

"But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.'"

Many good sermons have used these verses to affirm God's ability to provide the things we need – that we inevitably wind up tired, hungry and empty handed when we launch out on our own. If we will but turn to Christ, He will provide.

But that is not what I think the primary message is here. Jesus was clearly inviting fellowship. Isn't His grace and love obvious. Rather than a lecture or rebuke, a breakfast is prepared – a welcome back meal. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever! These guys probably thought the Lord was bitterly disappointed with them and on the look out for others who would be more faithful and less bumbling. But of Jesus, it is written, "A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench;" (Isa 42:3) He even credits them with catching the fish! Ha!

"Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken."

Don't you just love this guy? First, he leaves the others to drag this haul of fish so large that they couldn't take it in the little boat. And

now, when he notes the Lord's interest in the fish, he jumps up and single-handedly drags the whole catch to shore.

"Why do you suppose the number of fish is recorded? And why are we told the net was not broken? Earlier, in a similar miracle, Luke says when they took in a haul miraculously, the net broke (5:6). This speaks of evangelism. In the amphitheatre, in crusades, the Gospel is preached and a haul is taken in, but not all who respond will continue on. In the Parable of the Soils, only one in four goes on to bear abundant fruit (Matthew 13). Consequently, when we baptize 60 or 80 people on a Sunday morning, I know not every one is going to go on and bring forth fruit abundantly. But of those who are truly in the Kingdom, of those who are brought to shore, not one will be lost. Each one will be accounted for exactly. Thus, as this scenario unfolds, Jesus shows Peter and John that they are not only fishers of men, but tenders of sheep."

"You see, in the arena of evangelism, we cannot deal with statistics because we can't see men's hearts. But in shepherding ministry — in pastoring, in discipling, in parenting — we must account for every sheep. We must be aware of the brother or sister in need of tending, of touch, of care. Whose job is this? Yours and mine together. Those of us who love the Lord have the joint responsibility of saying, 'Where is #151? I gotta go find him.'" (Jon Courson)

Yes, the net did not break and that caught John's attention. You see, John was a net mender. Jesus

found him doing just that when He called him to follow (See Matt 4:21) and we know from both scripture as well as church history that John was a mender of 'nets' within the body of Christ. Also, there's nothing like a friendly meal to help mend a discouraged heart. So...

"Jesus said to them, 'Come and eat breakfast.' Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, 'Who are You?'--knowing that it was the Lord."

Surely, they recognized the miraculous haul of fish just as John did. But, there was more — His manner, His kindness and then... His servant-heart --

"Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. "

This gives me such hope. These guys had physically witnessed the resurrected Savior twice before (all right — just once for you Thomas) and they still wound up in a dumpy, fishless, all night boon-doggle. How often I've mused, 'If I could just see Jesus, just once, I'd be so faithful, so obedient, so...' but it wasn't just seeing the Savior that changed these guys, that drew them on and motivated them to give their all for Jesus. It was loving Him. *"For the love of Christ compels us..." (2 Cor 5:14)*

"So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs."

OK, all of you net-menders — take note. Jesus referred to either the fish or the fishermen when He said, "...more than these", but that's not the most important issue. Peter was addressed as Simon which connotes the opposite of Peter. Simon implies wishy-washy or go-with-the-flow. Peter means rock. This is relevant but not the key either.

The word for love He used was 'agapao' which means to love dearly. With this, the target was revealed. The question was perfect. The issue is, always has been and always will be — love. Loving God supremely.

Simon searched his heart.

He was on the spot. His honest answer was, "Lord, you know I 'phileo' You." Or "I like you." Phileo means love, but it is not at all the caliber of 'agapao'. It is more akin to friendship.

"He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?'"

"He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.'" "

"He said to him, 'Tend My sheep.'" "
In this second question, there was no comparison. Jesus simply asked, "Do you agapao Me?" It is interesting that, as with the first round, Peter said, "Yes" but qualified it by again saying that he 'phileo'ed Jesus. Clearly, Peter was confessing that he did not have this agapao love for Christ. Consequently, Christ 'notched' it down again...

"He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?' Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do

you love Me?'"

"And he said to Him, 'Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.'" "

"Jesus said to him, 'Feed My sheep.'" "

This time, Jesus used 'phileo'. He said, "Simon, do you phileo Me?" and Peter was grieved or literally 'thrown into sorrow or sadness' not because of three questions but because the third one was the one he had been so bitter about — he phileo'ed but he also failed.

Jesus started with "Do you agapao Me more than these?" or "Do you love Me supremely." Then, He simply asked, "Do you agapao Me?" And then, He concluded with, "Do you phileo Me?" Now, one good explanation for this is that Jesus was restoring Peter regarding his three denials. However, there is something more here to be understood.

To love God supremely has been the foundation and essence of His desire for us from the beginning. (See Mat 22:37; Deut 13:3) Peter, who had spent some three years in the presence of Christ, had witnessed the crucifixion and then the resurrected Messiah could not confess to this kind of love. Yet, Christ was not surprised or disturbed. Rather, what John, the apostle of love observed and presented to us was a mending of Peter's 'net' and a revelation of Christ's heart for all who would minister to His people.

Jesus didn't refer in this passage to the coming power of the Holy Spirit. That came later. He did however lay out a clear path to supreme love which of course is the

fruit of the Spirit. In that, He gave Peter three charges, each associated with a degree of devotion. Beginning with the last one and moving backward chronologically, let's examine them closely.

At entry level so to speak, (v17) in His third interchange with Peter, Jesus said to him, the transliteration "bosko mou probaton" which is translated "Feed My sheep." Indeed, bosko means feed and mou means my or mine, but probaton more appropriately means any four-footed grazer. Jesus was saying, "OK, Simon, you phileo Me. Feed my four-footed grazers." This is the proverbial step in the right direction. Mending nets takes time, and the best thing to do is to get busy helping others – feed their souls – get out of your pit of self – leave the conundrum of your sin nature in the Lord's hands. Start feeding His grazers. At this point, that's probably all they look like to you – they belong to the Lord, but they're just grazers.

Now, for the second interchange -- progressing heavenward toward agapao love, to love Jesus dearly, there is the associated, "poimaino mou probaton" (v16). This is best translated as "Tend my grazers as a herdsman." At this point, it is more than feeding, it's tending. The typical Middle Eastern herdsman in tending his master's property would watch for enemies of the herd, defend the herd, heal the wounded, find and save the lost or trapped and love the herd so as to earn their trust. These herdsman, contrary to the way we do in the west, would

walk before, and the animals would follow.

Deeper, holier love has associated with it deeper commitment and involvement with those God loves. There is a greater giving out. Jesus said, *"By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another."* (John 13:35) Specifically, agape love. When feeding becomes tending, when phileo becomes agapao, that's when the world begins to recognize us as Christ's. Many dear people in ministry get stuck in the phileo and feeding. They teach, teach, teach but they don't reach out in compassion and real self sacrificial tending of God's 'grazers'. (Ouch!)

OK, now for the first interchange -- the summit is heaven's love – a supreme love for God – to agapao Him "more than these". It makes no difference what the word "these" refers to; it's ambiguous because it simply means more than anything else. Associated with this, Jesus charges Peter to "bosko mou arnion". With "bosko", we're back to feeding, but the key is that we're no longer feeding just any four-footed grazers. "Arnion" means "little lambs". Little lambs are nursed. Nursing is feeding in close quarters. It's intimate. It's not just leading the way into green pastures or tossing some grain their way. The sustenance is coming from you, from your heart. And it might hurt a bit. It is when we have this kind of love that we see the herd as a flock and, by the way, not as a bunch of old ewes or rams but little lambs. We see God's children as He sees them. This is also important for it is how Jesus Himself is seen in

heaven. In Revelation, He is described as such 24 times. You might say that when our love for Jesus is agapao and supreme, we see Him in His people.

Peter and the boys had gone fishing apart from Christ's direction. That's pretty clear because they came up empty, they caught nada. They'd gone their own way. And recall, Peter had girded himself before diving into the water – the natural response of the self-willed man or woman before a holy, loving God. It is because we are ashamed that we sense our loveless heart must be covered. However, playing upon this circumstance, Jesus foretold that he would completely change, that he would one day give his life for his Lord.

"Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger (or until now and for some time), you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me.'"

In closing, I submit that our church corporately is hurting for lack of pastors, not just in name or title but in truth. Oh, we have lots of wonderfully dedicated people in the pulpit teaching and preaching and most are there with a deeply sincere heart to love and tend God's people. But our churches as a whole simply don't model the life and ministry of Christ. Today's churches are businesses with slogans and growth

plans that mimic corporate business strategies. We have equated size with success while multitudes in our midst remain untended.

I suggest that there are manifold more pastors in our family than we would have ever believed. From our text we can see that while 'nursing shepherds' is the ministry associated with loving Christ supremely, in many places it's nearly impossible to even get an appointment with the pastor. We've got it wrong in this approach. Gifted oratory and good organization is not necessarily synonymous with spiritual health and growth even if multitudes attend. Someone once said, "A big church is like a battleship and a battleship can do a lot more damage to Satan than a rowboat." That's probably true but that ship will surely sink if it's holey rather than holy.

I humbly urge each of us to consider what Jesus said to Peter and how it may apply to us and to our family in Christ. And may God raise up in our midst many, many more with the gifting and grace to pastor – to feed, to tend and to nurse as He leads.