

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 1, 2022 (Easter 3, Year C)*

153 fish. In a world with a tremendous amount of ambiguity, that's pretty specific. But that's the number of fish we hear the disciples hauled in when the resurrected Jesus encouraged them to cast their nets. 153 fish.

Now, I'm not sure who was tasked with counting them. And 153 isn't some Biblically significant number, one dripping with hidden meaning. They just caught 153 fish. Which seems like an awful lot. It's certainly a sign of abundance, considering it was just Jesus and the disciples broiling them on the beach for breakfast.

What I love about the specificity of 153 fish is that it speaks to the specificity of God's love for each one of us. Yes, Jesus' resurrection was a triumph of life over death on a grand scale. Indeed, it enacts the very salvation of the world. Through it, death no longer has dominion over us and we are set free to live and love in a way that unleashes our heart's greatest desire, which is to be in relationship with God. That's the big picture of the Easter event that we continue to celebrate over these 50 days of Eastertide.

But in those 153 fish, we encounter the specificity of Jesus' love for each one of us. Jesus loves us not in the abstract, but in the particularity of who we are. In all our brokenness, in all our foolishness, in all our sinfulness. Jesus gazes into our hearts and loves us with the specificity of 153 fish. Which is good news indeed.

And if you don't think you're truly worthy of Jesus' love — because of your brokenness, foolishness, and sinfulness — all you have to do is look at Peter and Paul. They play prominent roles in our readings this morning, and they play prominent roles in building up the church in the days and years following Jesus' resurrection. They were also broken, foolish, and sinful.

Take Paul. The person who did the most to build up the early church by planting and nurturing multiple communities of Jesus followers, has a heck of a back story. And it's not good! Before his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a violent and vehement persecutor of those who followed Jesus. We hear that when he took those first steps along the road to Damascus, he was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." And Paul took great pride in his diligence at exposing and arresting and punishing these Jesus followers. So this is hardly the best resumé for becoming a future fervent disciple of Jesus.

And then there's Peter. It's got to be tough to bounce back after famously denying Jesus, not once but three times in the run-up to the crucifixion. But it's not just the denials that sullied his reputation. In the gospels, the rock upon whom Jesus builds his church, often comes across, quite frankly, as a buffoon. It's hard not to laugh out loud when we hear about his actions in this morning's gospel passage. "When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea." That's right. When Peter hears Jesus has appeared, he put on his clothes and jumped into the sea. *That's* the rock upon whom the church is built? Peter certainly doesn't come across as the most solid foundation.

But, as with the 153 fish, it's the specificity of Paul's hateful past and Peter's utter foolishness that points to Jesus' love for each one of us. No matter what we do or how we act, Jesus still loves us. So the question becomes, do we love *him*? Do we love Jesus with all our heart and mind and soul?

After that breakfast of broiled fish, this is precisely the question Jesus poses to Peter. Jesus asks him whether he loves him. Not once, not twice, but three times he asks him, to the point that Peter is rather offended. 'Of course you know that I love you,' he replies. Now the number three is significant in the Christian tradition — the Trinity and all that. But I think the real significance here is that Peter denied Jesus three times. And so three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him.

Again, there's a specificity here that speaks to the intimate relationship between Jesus and his most trusted disciple. Jesus never blames Peter for the denials; it is a very human response of self-preservation in the midst of oppression and violence. But through the resurrection, through this interaction, the three denials are transformed into three affirmations of love. And then Jesus ends his interactions with Peter with the same words which began the relationship: "Follow me."

To love Jesus is to follow him. And so these three questions are also addressed to each one of us. Jesus asks us, "Do you love me?" And at first, we might shrug our shoulders and say, 'why, yes, I love you.' We might even think to ourselves, 'of course I love you, I'm at church aren't I?' And then Jesus gazes into our eyes to really get our attention and asks us again, "Do you love me?" And that's when we might ask ourselves, 'yes, but how exactly am I living out this love in the world? What am I doing to demonstrate this love to others?' And finally, Jesus asks us the third time, perhaps putting his hands on our shoulders and gazing deeply into our hearts, "Do you love me?" And just as we think, how can we possibly love Jesus enough, he says, "Follow me."

And that's how we love Jesus. By following him. By learning his story and then following his commandment to love one another as he loves us. We follow him by loving ourselves and by loving others. By sharing Jesus' love with the world. Even when it's

hard, even when it's uncomfortable, even when it goes against our self-interest. That's what it means to love Jesus; that's what it means to follow Jesus.

And we do this not in the abstract but in the specificity of 153 fish. Which means specific actions related to specific people in specific situations. I encourage you to think about the ways that you can embrace the spirit of 153 fish. What are some ways you can love and follow Jesus in your own life and among those in your circle and beyond it? Jesus will continue to gaze upon your heart, knowing of your deep capacity to love and follow him. Sometimes it takes some encouragement, sometimes it takes asking you three times. But connecting Jesus' love for us with specific actions of love for others is precisely how we answer that call to love Jesus and to follow him.