FISHING OFF THE WRONG SIDE OF THE BOAT
Sermon by Paul R. Powell
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans
Sunday, April 14, 2013

My Grandpa Barrett was the only grandfather I ever knew as my Powell grandfather died when my father was just a little boy. Grandpa Barrett was for many years a Sheriff’s deputy and jail keeper in our little town, which meant he knew just about everybody. He was a great fisherman and after he retired, he would often go fishing in the morning, come home for lunch and a nap, and then go back again in the afternoon. He always seemed to know where the fish were biting and just how to attract them to his line. Once when I tagged along with him we waded out in the water up to our necks, with just our poles sticking out above the water. On one such trip I happened to notice a snake swimming in my direction. When I mentioned it to Grandpa he said, “That’s just an old water snake, he’s not going to bother you.” To which I replied, “No he won’t, because I’m headed for the bank!” I could have cared less what kind of snake it was, it was a SNAKE and I had no interest in being eyeball to eyeball with it!

Today’s gospel lesson is once again a story from that short time between Christ’s resurrection and his ascension. These stories are filled with meaning, even humor, not only to reassure the disciples that he was indeed alive, but to remind them who they were and what they should be doing. It’s kind of a funny story in some ways. Apparently, Peter just announces that he’s going fishing and the others join him. But after fishing all night, they had caught nothing. As morning breaks and they near the shore, they see someone at a camp fire but didn’t know that it was Jesus. When they get near, Jesus asks them if they have caught any fish and they say, “No.” So, he tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and lo and behold they haul in the fish, big ones at that. This time as they return to shore, John the Beloved recognizes that the man on the shore is Jesus and tells Peter it is the Lord. So, Peter who had been fishing naked – what was that all about -- throws on some clothes and swims to shore not waiting for the boat to dock. Jesus asks them to bring some of the fish they have caught and so Peter goes to the boat and hauls ashore the net which contained 153 big fish. Now why 153, not 152 or 154? Just asking! At any
rate, Jesus invites them to breakfast of fish and bread. None of them had to ask who he was, they knew he was Jesus. Then, after they had finished eating breakfast, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him more than the others. Peter, of course, says yes. Then Jesus says a very unexpected thing, “Then feed my sheep.” Once wasn’t enough, so Jesus asks Peter again, “Do you love me?” and again Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus responds much as before, but this time he says, “Tend my sheep.” Third time’s a charm, so Jesus asks Peter again, but this time calling him son of John, “Do you love me?” Now Peter gets his feelings hurt and sort of blurts out angrily, “Lord, you know everything! You know that I love you.” And Jesus responds once again, “Feed my sheep.” And then Jesus goes on with another peculiar analogy: “When you were younger you could fasten your own belt and go where you pleased. When you get older, someone else will have to put your belt on for you and then lead you where you don’t even want to go. Then he simply commands Peter—follow me.”

Strange story, very strange, but here’s what I think Jesus was trying to tell Peter and the other disciples. First of all, if you rely on your own skills to reach the lost and the unchurched without having faith in Jesus, then you are fishing off the wrong side of the boat and will never catch anything. But if you follow the directions of the Lord and fish off the “right” side of the boat, you’ll catch enough fish and to spare, and big ones at that! There’s no great mystery here. We humans always think we can do whatever the task is better than God himself. You’ve heard that old saw, “God helps those who help themselves.” Hogwash! God helps those who cannot help themselves. If we have skills for fishing or for any other task, we should be thanking God for giving us those skills. But when we come face to face with a task or challenge bigger than ourselves that is when we are most likely to turn to God for direction and for help. And what’s more, when God tells us to do something we should do so without questioning, just as did the disciples when they went back out and fished from the “right” side of the boat. The immature Christian will usually think he can “put on his own belt” but as we mature in the faith, we come to realize that only God can “put on our belt” for us, and if we are indeed mature, we know to follow God’s leading.
But there’s more symbolism in the story. Jesus invites them to bring some of their fish and add to the fish and bread he has provided, and to sit down and eat breakfast together. They are quite simply invited to a potluck breakfast, where all are invited and all contribute something. It’s a lesson the disciples had apparently not yet learned as thoroughly as they should have. It’s one thing to allow God to lead us around by the belt, but that doesn’t alleviate us of the obligation to “do” what it is he’s leading us to do. And we see Peter in this story as the leader, not only of their fishing expedition, but apparently as the one who loved Jesus the most—an uncomfortable thought that Peter might love or not love Jesus better than the others. But sometimes, commitment to service requires a love and a faith stronger than others in order to be a leader. Perhaps Jesus was simply trying to get Peter and the other disciples to understand that service to others, attempts to win others to Christ, must start with love and then continue with feeding the followers, tending them, keeping them close so as to model the life that Jesus himself had come to earth to model.

There’s a beautiful Spanish-language hymn I learned several years ago that we have not sung here, but it has a terrific message based specifically on this gospel lesson for today. I wish I and all of us knew Spanish, because the Spanish lyrics fit the tune so well, the translation not so much. The original text and tune are both by Cesareo Gabarain:

Lord, you have come to the lakeshore looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones;  
You only asked me to follow humbly.

You know so well my possessions; my boat carries no gold and no weapons;  
You will find there my nets and labor.

You need my hands, full of caring through my labors to give others rest;  
And constant love that keeps on loving.

You, who have fished other oceans ever longed for by souls who are waiting,  
My loving friend, as thus you call me.

O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,  
And while smiling have called out my name;  
Now my boat’s left on the shoreline behind me;  
By your side I will seek other seas.
There are other hymns and texts related to the theme of this post-resurrection event, but one I recall with fondness is a children’s anthem with words and music by Natalie Sleeth that sums up the words of Jesus to Peter so very well:

Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, over all a vigil keep,
In my name, lead them forth, gently as a shepherd.

When they wander, when they stray, their protector be,
As you do unto my lambs, thus you do to me.

Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, over all a vigil keep,
In my name, lead them forth gently as a loving shepherd of the Lord.

Sometimes it takes words coupled with tunes to get the message across, and sometimes it takes dramatic events such as is recorded in this fishing story. But more than anything else, I think this strange and remarkable story from those few days after Jesus arose and before he ascended back into heaven, tells us that if we are to accomplish anything at all for ourselves spiritually or for the spreading of God’s love to those around us, we must follow God’s command and fish where he tells us to fish. Fishing off the wrong side of the boat, that is, seeking God or God’s lost sheep all on our own without any prompting from him will always result in failure. Only when we are willing to listen and then follow can we claim any sort of good results. It isn’t a matter of numbers, even though we have that strange figure of 153 big fish. Rather it’s a matter of living our lives in faith not fear as I have said so many times. We can either live by fear which reaps nothing other than more fear and failure, or we can live and serve by faith and reap an abundance of God’s blessings. It really is as simple as that. We can act on our own or be led by God’s Spirit. Ultimately the decision is ours.

We Baptists believe that all church members are ministers, that each of us has the responsibility and the privilege of modeling Jesus to those around us. What do those you live around know of Jesus as they see you live? Do they see a kind, good-hearted and loving person who brings peace and joy to everyone around? Can you trust God enough to believe that all that
stands between someone’s failure and success in life and in the faith is what they see in you? On Thursday we celebrated the life of Dorothy Brown, a long-time member and deacon of this church. The hymns chosen for her memorial service so clearly reflected her faith, simple in its trust but magnanimous in its fulfillment: *Open My Eyes, That I May See, Since Jesus Came Into My Heart, and Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. These hymns were so formative in Dorothy’s faith and in that of those of us who grew up in Baptist circles during the middle part of the last century. To some the words may seem corny, trite, not cool and even irrelevant to contemporary Christian sentiments. Yet, those old gospel songs expressed our faith in ways that younger generations would do well to emulate. I close by quoting from *Since Jesus Came Into My Heart*:

What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought
Since Jesus came into my heart!
I have light in my soul for which long I had sought,
Since Jesus came into my heart.

Words such as these grant Jesus his rightful place in our hearts and acknowledge the source of light that warms and fills both heart and mind. God stands ready to bring that light into your heart. Let today be the day you allow that light to bring about a wonderful change. And if you have long been a Christian fishing off the wrong side of the boat, recommit yourself today to follow the command of Christ given to Peter so long ago: Feed my lambs, tend my sheep.

AMEN.