Third Sunday of Easter

It seemed like a great idea. Several times since the Gospels were written, someone has come along with the bright idea of writing a Gospel harmony. Not a song, but one book that takes everything in the four Gospels, weaving it together in chronological order, giving an almost a day by day account of Jesus’s life and ministry.

Well, besides so many missing years from his birth to his baptism in the Jordan, there was another problem. John puts Jesus’ cleansing of the temple at the beginning of his ministry, while the other three Gospels place it at the end. Today’s Gospel is just the opposite: John has the miraculous catch of fish after the resurrection, before sending out the apostles, while Luke puts it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, when he calls the disciples.

How can that be? You could try to explain it as an issue of memory not always being accurate, but that isn’t it. Neither evangelist was writing a biography, and chronological order, wasn’t the goal. They weren’t trying to simply document history. They were helping believers and those called to believe to know and love the Lord of history. Their goal was to help people know Jesus, to believe in him, and to find forgiveness and new life in him. John tells us that at the end of chapter 20. He isn’t writing to record everything that happened. He is writing so we will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, we will have life in his name. All four evangelists were telling the good news, not writing a history book.

Not only that, in many cases, they had three layers they wanted to balance, three times and places woven together; the time of Jesus, the time of the first generation, and our time.

First we have the foundational experience. An event that took place in the life and ministry of Jesus. Something that happened, was witnessed, was remembered, preached, told and retold. There was a miraculous catch of fish. It had a tremendous impact on all who were present. Folks need to hear about that!

But the Gospel writers also knew as the story had been told and retold, often folks who came to believe through preaching, but had never even met Jesus during his earthly ministry, would chime in “that story reminds me of something I’ve experienced! I get it now … it was Jesus who worked that miracle in my life too! That memory from the apostles helps me recognize Christ in my life! I may not be a fisherman with a miraculous catch, but there have been times when I seemed to keep coming up with an empty net. I looked to see where Jesus might be. I have experienced Jesus figuratively telling me to throw the net on the other side, and the end result was truly amazing.”

But both John, and Luke had more fish to fry, as it were! They wrote the Good News so that everyone drawn to the Jesus story, and to Jesus, would know what to expect in their life with Christ. Sometimes we may put in long days and nights, and catch nothing. Don’t give up! Look to see where Jesus might be in it all. Listen close. Stop and pray. We too may hear Christ asking us: “Catching anything? Let me suggest an answer. Toss your net on the other side. You will find something.” Experiences like that are part of the life of disciples.
Sometimes I’ve tried to get a program or process going in a parish, and it just never got off the ground. Then I started really listening, prayed with more listening than asking, and suddenly an inspiration seemed to just fall in my lap. Looking closely, I could see it was from Christ. Next thing you know, it was like fish jumping into the net.

Now let me be clear. I am not preaching the slick Gospel of Abundance. You know … “God wants you to be rich. Just have the right attitude when you buy your lottery ticket, pray, believe, and those winning numbers will be yours.” That is NOT the Good News you find in the Bible or in the life of Jesus. It’s more like the Gospel lite, without the cross.

The miraculous catch was not so that Peter and his friends could sell the fish, make a bundle, and retire to an easy life. It was a sign that Peter, and with him, the other Apostles were to feed the sheep, the people of God. On their own, they might work all night and come up empty-handed. But look toward the risen Lord, listen to Jesus, be ready to try the other side, and they would have more than enough to feed his sheep. Lest there be any confusion, that Gospel of abundance thing, in this very Gospel account, Christ prepares Peter for the suffering he will experience on the way to glory.

That’s one message for us in the Gospel. Another picks up right after the catch. What else can we see about becoming or being disciple? Let’s look. For all the time the disciples in the boat had spent with Jesus, at first they didn’t recognize the resurrected Lord. What might that tell us? We may not always recognize Christ immediately either. A fellow disciple may help point out where Jesus is – as the disciple whom Jesus loved identified the Lord for Peter today. What a great spiritual director!

As we begin see where Jesus is, like Peter, jump in the water, swim to the Lord, or at least row in the right direction. Throughout the each Gospel, moving toward the Lord brings life. Moving away, emptiness.

Jesus wants to share a meal with us just as he did with Peter and his fellow disciples. Sharing a meals with Christ and his fellow disciples is central to our being a disciple, to living our faith. When we allow the Lord to feed us spiritually, emotionally, sacramentally, everything changes. When we invest taking our place in the community of believers, we have access to tremendous blessings.

Please take a bulletin with you today, so you can look at the picture on the cover. It is the Gospel scene, Jesus, on the lakeshore, sitting by a charcoal fire with the apostles in our Gospel today. Sense the fellowship, the joy, the peace as the disciples share a meal, share about all that has happened, begin to discover what the future may hold (like the call to tend the sheep).

Fellowship, joy, peace; a purpose worth devoting our lives to: those are gifts that come with being a disciple.

Now as we heard in the first reading, it’s not all easy going. But the gift Christ offers is the path to being able to draw strength from community, finding peace deep inside through Christ’s love for us, and experiencing the peace deepen as we give ourselves to loving in return. It is a deep, abiding peace, a ‘being in Christ’ that nothing can take away. Within that peace, hear the Lord’s
call, and find the grace to join Peter in his response to Jesus’s question: Do you love me? “Yes Lord, I love you!”

That peace also helps us to hear Jesus’s response: Tend my sheep.

That board in the back of church, with a whole variety of creative ways to live out the corporal works of mercy – That isn’t just a Lenten thing. Works of mercy are a way we live in Christ. What are the works of mercy, but concrete ways we do tend his sheep?

So if you choose to take another little tag with a suggested work of mercy, think as you do so;

Yes Lord, I love you! Yes, I will tend your sheep!