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## **A Hundred and Fifty-Three Fish**

### **John 21: 4-11**

The Scriptures, the great passages, often admit more than one interpretation. For example, when Jesus turns to Peter and says, “Peter, do you love me more than these?” I have always been sure that his question harkens back to that night of great blindness when Peter blustered, “Though the other disciples might betray you in the clutch, I will not.” I have interpreted Jesus’ question to mean, “Do you still think you are superior to your fellow disciples? Do you still think you love me more than these disciples do?” To my mind, Peter’s answer reflects his growth: he answers with a chastened voice, stripped of his juvenile competitiveness and bravado. He simply says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” focusing on the matter of his own conscience and conviction before God.

Others, I should note, interpret Jesus’ question differently. They see an issue of lifestyle and vocation hanging in the balance. They see Jesus as confronting Peter with the fact that he has fled back to Galilee, fled back to his boat, fled back to his old life. Thus Jesus is asking, “Peter do you love me more than you love your former existence? Do you love the rigors of serving God more than the comforts of your old life, your old haunts, enjoying your old friends – do you love me more than these?”

Both interpretations are possible. But in my opinion the interpretive key to the passage hangs on the fish. That John included the detail of exactly one hundred and fifty-three fish caught in a net that could not be broken cannot be happenstance. Indeed, early church scholar Jerome went so far as to say that it was commonly believed in Jesus’ day that there were precisely 153 kinds of fish, and these 153 fish represented all the people of the earth. Jerome may have been on shaky biological grounds, but scholars have seen the netted fish as symbolic of the church’s mission: to trammel up all the many different kinds of people in the world, people of every culture, every nation, drawing them to God’s banquet table in the net of God’s powerful Gospel. The fish are a symbol that coheres perfectly with Jesus’ metaphorical command to “Feed my sheep!” Caught by Jesus’ command, at Jesus’ instruction, the 153 fish netted in a net that cannot be broken are symbolic of the totally inclusive kingdom of God, Good News that values every culture, every person, every nation. “Feed my sheep.”

The great preacher Fred Craddock tells of being stranded in north Minnesota, and the only place he could eat was a little bar which had one entrée’, greasy soup. But it was a bitter night, and the place was warm, cozy and convivial. Craddock was poking at his greasy soup when in walked an old woman in a thin coat, shivering and destitute. She slinked up to the bar and asked for a menu. The lady at the bar snapped, “We got soup.” “I think I’ll just take a glass of water,” the poor woman answered, and with that the lady behind the bar ordered, “Get out of here! We don’t need your kind in here.” The old lady started to leave. But then Craddock noticed something else. Everyone was quietly, wordlessly, leaving the bar, heading to the coat rack and starting for the door. Craddock thought, “There’s a movement going on here,” and he decided to join it. He started for the coat rack, too. The gruff lady growled, “Alright, she can stay,” and brought the old woman a steaming bowl of soup. Everyone wordlessly took their coats off and returned to their seats, as if nothing had happened. But Craddock said something *had* happened. When he looked down at his soup it had been transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. It had become symbolic of the Gospel that values every person.

Fish, bread, juice, crackers, greasy soup – a net that cannot be broken. Christ uses common elements to communicate a profound theological message: God's Gospel encompasses and values every person. We all count. Come, let us dine at our Lord's table together.

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