

Easter 3C
John 21:1-19
May 4, 2025

“Fish, Sheep, and Confirmation”
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After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to

him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

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I’m guessing you’ve all heard the witty one-liner: “If you want breakfast in bed, you’d better sleep in the kitchen.” But what about: “If you want breakfast on the beach, make sure Jesus is within reach?!” In all seriousness, it’s a good thing he happened to come along or the boys wouldn’t have had anything for breakfast when they returned from their unsuccessful nighttime fishing excursion. As it turned out though, when they got back to dry land, Jesus already had fish and bread cooking on a charcoal fire. They didn’t even need the 153 prevaricating *pisces* they managed drag to shore! It was an awkward meal and no words were exchanged. When they’d finished, Jesus addressed Peter, three times asking whether he loved him. Three times Peter said that he did. And three times Jesus told him to care for his sheep.

This morning, I’d like to make two brief points about this text and entertain one tangent, just for fun. We’ll begin with the tangent. 153 fish. That’s a curiously specific number, right? If, like me, you’re wondering what it might mean, I’ll save you the trouble of googling it later. The short answer is that if it ever had meaning, it has been lost to time and circumstance. The slightly longer answer is that people don’t agree on the precise interpretation of the number.

For Augustine, it was significant that it’s the 17th triangular number, the sum of the first 17 integers – seven representing the fruits of the spirit and ten for the commandments. Jerome believed 153 to be the total number of known species of fish in Jesus’ time, meaning that his followers would include people of every time and nation. It’s also been pointed out 153 is associated through Archimedes with the geometrical shape, the *vesica piscis*, which literally means “the bladder of a fish.” As interesting as all this is, modern biblical scholars tell us that the number 153 simply means “a lot” of fish.

On to point one. This is a story of restoration. Just three chapters earlier, John told us that Peter stood around a charcoal fire and denied Jesus three times. Now, once again gathered around a charcoal fire, Peter proclaims his love for Jesus three times. This is a story about second chances – our need for them and other’s need for us to give them.

Now to point two. This is a story of passing the mantle, passing the torch, handing off the ball. Each time after proclaiming his love for Jesus, Peter receives instruction: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Peter’s restoration was complete. This is the last chapter of John’s gospel. Jesus was passing transferring responsibility to the next in line. Peter, and by extension all Jesus’ disciples, would now care for the sheep and that care would be active – feeding and tending to their needs.

I find it serendipitous that this text was assigned for the day we chose to mark Confirmation Sunday – a day when we are literally commissioning a new generation to take up the mantle, to carry the torch, to run with the ball of this faith by working together to meet the needs of our world in love. That’s a heavy mantle, or hot torch, or slippery ball to take up at your age, confirmands. Don’t misunderstand me, we will continue to carry it with you though, and to work side by side. But today you are taking up this call to feed and to care for the world with us as full members of this church. In time, you will lead our efforts.

And to the rest of the congregation of New England Church, it is our responsibility to bring these young people alongside of us in the ministries of this church, to nurture their gifts, to build their confidence, and to model the roles we hope they will one day take up as their own. Together, only ever together, we are the church in this time and place, for the sake of our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.