

**Sermon Notes** for the sermon preached by the Venerable Allan Carson, Archdeacon of Loughheed and Rector of St. John's, Sardis, at a Celebration of a New Ministry for

The Reverend Allen Doerksen as Vicar of St. Thomas, Chilliwack, November 12, 2019

The Commemoration of Charles Simeon – Priest, 1836

Text: John 21:15-17

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' What is the *these* he is referring to? Peter has been out fishing with six other disciples throughout the night but they caught nothing. As they approach the shore, Jesus is standing on the beach but they don't recognize him. He tells them to cast their net to the right side of the boat and they will find some fish. So they do and they can barely pull in the catch. Is Jesus saying to Peter do you love me more than having an abundance in life and resources? Jesus has just cooked this group of seven fishermen breakfast. Perhaps Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him more than he loves his friends or more than his friends love Jesus. Matthew reports in his gospel that before Jesus died Peter claimed to love Jesus more than the other disciples. (Matthew 26:33) They have all been through a great deal together. They have experienced great uncertainty, they have walked through good times and times when everything appeared hopeless. Sounds a lot like life in the church. And now here they are showered with abundance enjoying a feast on the beach with Jesus being called to answer the uncomfortable question - where does Jesus fit in the loves of your life. It's a question we need to return to over and over again. We always need to renew our relationship with Jesus.

When Jesus asks Peter do you love me more than these it is after he has helped them land a huge catch of fish and cooked and fed them breakfast.

A similar thing happened when Jesus was first calling them to follow him. Luke reports that a huge crowd had gathered on the beach and Jesus got in a boat to go a bit off shore and speak to the crowd. They had caught no fish that night as well and Jesus tells them to throw in the net and they get an immense number of fish again. Similar story to what happens here just before the question - do you love me more than these? But there is some difference. In this account

which is after the resurrection Jesus is not physically in the boat with them and they don't recognize him. That is an encouragement to the early church and an encouragement to us. Jesus is proclaiming to them and to us - even if I am not physically present and even if you don't recognize me I am still able to help you and work with you. What has Jesus been telling this group of fishermen? Follow me and I will make you fishers of people. I will build my church, my community, through you. What is the mission of the church? - fishing for people. What does it mean to fish for people? My guess is most of you hear that and cringe because you immediately think of converting people and all the negative connotations that go with that. It means way more than that. It is an invitation into a whole new way of being that is so radical the word conversion is an appropriate word to describe it.

Symbolism was very significant to the ancient world. Symbolism is a profound way to communicate because you can say a great deal with fewer words. In the ancient world the sea was a symbol of chaos. It was cold and it was dark and it was unpredictable and it was often the cause of destruction and death. Fishing then is taking something from one realm to another realm. In his letter to the Colossians Paul talks about a transformation from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God's Son. He is saying he wants them to be a community of the King. A community under the Lordship of Jesus. We don't just bring people into a personal relationship with Jesus. We invite people into a new community, a new way of being. Another symbol that Jesus uses to describe who we are and what we are to be is a city on a hill. We are to be an alternate city, an alternate community. To be an alternate city, an alternate community we need all the same kinds of people who are out there. If the church is way more homogeneous than the community outside the church then we have missed it. How are we to be an alternate community and alternate city? How are we to fish for people - to take them from one realm to another realm? How are we to be different? That is something we all need to revisit and revisit but let me make a few suggestions. We are to be a community where money is not an idol, where looks and beauty is not an idol, where no matter what gender we treat each other as people instead of objects, where the beauty and the diversity of humanity is welcomed and celebrated and appreciated. In this little scenario at the end of John's gospel

where Jesus cooks them breakfast on the beach and asks uncomfortable questions we get a glimpse into what an alternate community under the Lordship of Jesus looks like.

Seven of them have gone out fishing and four names of those seven are mentioned. Nathanael and Thomas are in the boat. Remember Nathanael, he is the one who Jesus said he saw him under the fig tree long before Nathanael met Jesus and his response is - "you are the son of God". Nathanael is quick to believe. He is an over believer, I'm sure you've bumped into them, maybe you are one, they relate to everything as a divine intervention of God even finding a nice close to the door parking space when they go to the mall. I have a close friend like that. He can be so annoying. Then there is Thomas in the boat with him. Thomas who walked with Jesus through his entire earthly ministry. Saw the miracles, saw Lazarus raised from the dead yet won't believe the witness of the resurrection. Thomas whose first reaction is to lean toward unbelief. It can be tiring being around someone like Thomas constantly doubting. Generally Nathanael's and Thomas's hate one another and avoid each other but here they are in the boat together. The other two that get named are John, the disciple whom Jesus loved and Peter. John is a thinker. When Jesus tells them to cast the net and they get a huge catch of fish John says to Peter - It is the Lord! Peter on the other hand is quick to act, whether he has thought things through or not. He puts on his nice dry clothes that he has set aside and jumps in the water. He is a little impulsive. People who are quick to act drive the thinkers crazy and visa versa. Jesus creates a community where outside of his Lordship people would not get along. They would not be friends with one another.

How do we accomplish creating such a community? "When they had finished breakfast Jesus said to Simon Peter." They all hear his question to Peter it is very public. "Do you love me more than these". There is way more going on here than just do you love me more than your circle of friends. This was not simply a gathering of friends. This was a gathering of people called by Jesus who were all very different from one another. Jesus asks Peter the question three times and yes there is something very significant about Peter being asked three times do you love me when we have been told that Peter denied Jesus three times the night of his arrest. Each time

Jesus says if you love me feed my lambs. What we all need and all long for is to belong. There is good scientific evidence that says our need to be in relationship with each other, our need to belong, to have true friendship, is as necessary for our health and well being as our need for food and exercise. We all need true friendship. A friendship that will not abandon us when we fail.

To change the world we have to be a true friend. To build an alternate community, a city on the hill, which is what the church is called to do we have to be a true friend. To invite people to live in this new community, this new realm we have to be a true friend. When Jesus is on the beach and calling out to them as ones that he cares for he calls them friends. Some translate it as children, some as friends, some as little children. It is familiar intimate language addressing someone close to you. Back in John chapter 15 Jesus tells them he is making them his friends. He is telling them what is on his heart and that he is going to lay his life down for them. A true friend always lets you in and never lets you down. Are you open? Are you unconditionally there for others or do you use them? Is your friendship for what you can get out of them or for what you can impart to them? When we hear the word friend we automatically think of those whom we have let into our lives. Those who are already our friends. Those who we have chosen to be friends with. Jesus tells Peter - feed my lambs. Feed - the relationship is not to get fed but to feed. Feed my lambs - the needy, I don't know of anyone who has a lamb for a pet, lambs require a great deal of care. Feed my lambs. Feed the ones I send to you not just the ones you choose. We know how to make friends with people that we are attracted to and who are interested in the things we are interested in and who have relatively low levels of need. Jesus is saying to us don't only look at the people you have chosen but look at the ones chosen for you. The ones the Lord brings into your lives. Are you willing to welcome his lambs?

To be a friend you need a friend. Friendship is taught. Friendship lets you know that you belong. We cannot tell ourselves that we belong someone else has to welcome us and befriend us so that we know that we are welcomed and that we belong. A perfect friend lets you in and never lets you down. A perfect friend fulfills you. A perfect friend loves you unconditionally.

This interaction between Jesus and Peter reveals to Peter and to us the unconditional love of Jesus. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. He is saying Peter you know you failed me therefore feed my lambs. Peter you failed therefore you are in charge. Peter you failed me but here I am welcoming you, feeding you, caring for you, loving you. I died for you and in my resurrection I come to you to love you in your failing. We are more indebted to Christ than we thought and more loved than we thought. The first time Jesus miraculously filled their nets with fish after they had caught nothing Peter's reaction was to tell Jesus to get away from him because he was a sinful man. This time when Jesus miraculously fills their nets after they caught no fish Peter wants to get as close to Jesus as fast as he can. His pride has been dissipated by the love and the mercy and the grace of Jesus. Freedom from the pride that destroys community comes from seeing who Jesus is - the true friend.

If each of us are true friends to just a few we will build the community of Jesus. It is the witness of Charles Simeon whose memorial we are celebrating. Changing the world through friending people. The people Jesus brings into our lives. They might be people whose experience in life has taught them that they don't belong, that unconditional love is an illusion, a fairy tale. It is the work of the church. It is the call that is on all of our lives. It is what we celebrate when we gather to worship. That in Christ we are welcomed by God, we are nurtured and fed, we belong now and for all of eternity. May we welcome and love and befriend those that Jesus brings into our lives. May the Lord build his church through us.