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Do You Love Me?

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John 21:1-19

I remember being put to bed at night as a kid. My mom would do it because often my dad was at church in the evenings. She did what we called the One Hundred Kisses routine and could somehow, much more speedily than I can do, kiss me all over my face until I was laughing really hard. It felt silly and wonderful. Then, as she was tucking me in, she would whisper in my ear that she loved me more than every grain of sand on every beach in the whole world. I used to try and imagine how you could possibly count every grain of sand and, of course, I couldn't do it. That was the point. She loved us more than could be accurately articulated. Until I was older I thought she just made that up- the whole sand thing. But, it turns out my mom knew her Bible. It's a metaphor that's used throughout the Old Testament to convey God's love for us.

Sand was important to me growing up because we spent summer vacations on the beaches of Lake Michigan. I loved the long days on the beach in the sun- probably a little too much- and I loved watching the sun set over the dune grass and beach. Going to the shores of Lake Michigan brought comfort and a sense of home. And each year I look forward to the week we spend there, swimming in the cold fresh water, and now, getting to introduce my own children to this special place.

Until recently, I thought what I longed for was the place, the sense of family history, the coziness of my grandparents' tiny cottage. My grandparents are now buried just down the road at and I've stopped there on runs to say hi and let them know I love them. They are some of the people who taught me about God's abundant love. My dad has been writing a book about our family history, and what he has discovered is that the longing for this place and these people goes beyond a beach or a memory, because it's really a yearning to be at home with God. And I have found myself, lately, hungering for it even more.

Now, I must admit, for all of the years I have spent going to Lake Michigan, I have never gone fishing on Lake Michigan. Though, plenty of other more outdoorsy people do. For the disciples in our text for today, going fishing wasn't really an option- more of a necessity, as they needed to eat. But, we find them, too, with a sense of longing, because at this point they were grieving Jesus' death. And so, they return to the Sea of Tiberias to do some fishing. Maybe they also just needed something to do- something that felt familiar and brought back good memories. Tiberias, or more commonly called the Sea of Galilee, was near where the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 had taken place and where the Sermon on the Mount happened. It's also where Jesus walked on water and calmed a storm. So, the disciples got out of town and headed to the beach, a place of memories. And while it might have seemed like a good idea to begin with, after fishing all night long and catching nothing, they were left even more emotionally, spiritually and physically worn out- maybe even ready to give up.

At a very low moment, scarce of food and hope, Jesus appears on the beach, at first unrecognizable. They see him from a distance, with the fire already going, preparing fish and bread for them. He tells the disciples to put the net in the water one last time and pull up some fish. And they do- an abundance of fish. Then, the best thing ever happens. Picture in your

mind, for a moment, the scene where Forest Gump sees Lt. Dan on the dock and jumps off the shrimp boat to meet him. It's the same thing here. One of the disciples recognizes that it's Jesus and Peter is so excited he jumps awkwardly and half-naked into the water, filled with abundance and joy that his friend is back. I love Peter's response. He doesn't stop to check himself for appropriateness. He doesn't try to make sense of the situation. Peter is unabashed in his eagerness to meet Jesus on the beach and it's almost as if he loses his mind a little bit. He loves Jesus in an uncalculated, inexplicable way. And Jesus loves them, too.

I heard someone say once that this scene is so simple it's hard to know what John is getting at. But, maybe that's the point. It's an encounter of abundant love- no more and no less. It's a memory the disciples had that John decided to write down. And they probably left some parts out- how the fire on the beach warmed them after a long, cold night on the boat, the crackling sound of the fire and the smell of the smoke as it cooked all of the fish, the nourishment of good bread and protein after hours of hunger, and the safety and communion they felt in Jesus' presence. What a welcome, simple meal, after so much betrayal and death.

I still remember the meal we had after my uncle died, nearly 20 years ago now. Glenn was a doctor, who had gone with another uncle of mine to help open a clinic in Guatemala. They were there for two weeks and on their last day, out on a hike, Glenn suffered a heart attack and died. He was 51. They brought Glenn's body back to the US and we all gathered with my aunt and cousins for his funeral. After the service, the church had prepared a meal for us, and so we sat down and ate delicious homemade chicken salad on fresh rolls, potato casserole, fruit and brownies for dessert- I can still taste the love that went into that church food. And during the meal we cried and told stories, passing the microphone around the room. I will never forget the pain and love of that moment, when God showed up, in the abundance of a simple meal- exactly what we all needed in the midst of so much sadness and shock.

I think it probably goes without saying that, lately, we have all been dealing with our own shock and despair in this country. In many ways the story from John's Gospel is one of scarcity and fear, which does not seem far from where we are today. A basic meal of plentiful fish and bread and a God who shows up when hope seems lost stands in stark contrast against the forceful and scary regimes of Jesus' time. The disciples' initial lack of recognition of Jesus is a good reminder to me that scarcity can keep us from seeing abundance. Sometimes we miss the forest for the trees, when it feels like everything is wildly and irreversibly out of control. For the disciples it was grief over Jesus' torturous death and the loss of a future for the people of Israel. For us it's the partisanship and vitriol and lack of truth or accountability. I will admit, it is sometimes hard for me to imagine where God is showing up these days.

I recently noticed a book on my shelf (*Torture and Eucharist*) that I hadn't picked up in awhile. It's written by a professor named William Cavanaugh who studies Catholicism in the Global South. He tells the story of the Catholic Church in Chile under the communist coup d'etat and regime of Pinochet, during the years when people were "disappeared" and tortured. It was a time of extreme fear and scarcity. But even in this dangerous landscape some leaders of the church decided to stand with those who worked for democracy. In the same way Jesus showed up resurrected on the beach of the Sea of Galilee and fed the disciples, the Body of Christ, the Church, Cavanaugh says, must continue to show up and disrupt history and stay visible. In the disciplined act of showing up we the church forms us into a body that is not disappeared, but seen and heard and countercultural and subversive. It's an act of resistance to all that tries to dominate us. In our showing up we declare that scarcity does not have the final word, and there is, in fact, abundance to reveal.

I know many of us have been following what has been happening with the encampment over on Hiawatha that has grown rapidly over the last few months. It's estimated that over 300 people are living in tents along that stretch of road near Franklin. I drive by there to get home most days and am astounded. It's stunning to see so many homeless folks all together, in one place. Of course it's complicated by the mental health issues and addiction they are facing. But, it's also a community that was once disappeared, and now made visible. A body of vulnerable people, many of them Native Americans, sheltering on land that was once theirs. There is something about seeing a community form and take shape, even if it is dangerous and unsustainable. Those who were once disparate and hidden are now being seen by our city. I've read that there are volunteers who are showing up every day to cook a giant meal for everyone. And just this week Minneapolis decided to put \$1.5 million into getting them housing...

It's a complex situation filled with scarcity. But, there are glimpses of abundance, people are being fed, and we have to name these things, otherwise all the goodness in the world disappears and we are convinced that scarcity rules.

When the disciples are bringing their boat in to meet Jesus on the beach, he tells them to put their nets down just once more to see what they can pull up. It's a really quick moment in the story that I've already glossed over, but John takes the time to mention that 153 fish are pulled out of the lake. Again, I don't fish, but can you imagine taking that much Walleye out at once? On a little boat? With a net that, as the story says, has questionable ability to hold them all? It's a crazy amount of fish. But, even crazier is that Jesus greets them in his resurrected body. Now, I know this is hard for all of us to wrap our minds around, but try to suspend your disbelief for just a moment, and imagine it. The raw wonder of it. The God we have shows up in a body and eats. It's real and messy- think of all the sand in the food. But, this is the posture of abundance. Eating together in the midst of grief. Showing up for a meal when all seems lost. And Peter, he not only says he

loves Jesus, but he shows up, too. When he hears it is Jesus standing on the shore, he lets nothing stand in his way — not his own knowledge, not a boat, not feelings of fear or regret, not a sense of unworthiness, scarcity or anything else. It is less about him, he seems to realize, and more about Jesus and the meal he has prepared and the love that is offered, and finally, what he can offer others.

Much like the memories and love I have for Lake Michigan, I also have deep longings for the church I grew up in as a child. I've been back a few times over the years, and there is always a sense of home when I am there. I recall my Sunday school teachers who brought donut holes for us to eat, choir teachers who put pieces of candy on our chairs before we came in the room, Wednesday nights spent in the kitchen preparing dinner, and pizza parties with friends in the youth room. God was there in those moments—God in abundance. We were fed, mostly with sugar, by people who loved us. And I've learned that is really what I long for. For the church to show up, to feed God's sheep in small acts of great love, over and over and over again, as many times and in as many ways as all the grains of sand on every beach in the whole world. This is how abundance stays visible. This is how we resist scarcity.

And so we must go and do as Peter did, without fear or rhyme or reason, with illogical joy and love. God shows up and so must we.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.