

“A Balanced Discipleship”

John 21: 1-19

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In December 1986, Dick Rutan and Jeana Yeager co-piloted the first flight to go all the way around the world without stopping or refueling. It took them 9 days, 3 minutes, and 44 seconds. They made aviation history, but a month later they set into motion a cultural phenomenon that would become even more well known than that famous flight. A month later, while eating dinner with Michael Eisner, the CEO of Disney, and his wife Jane, Jane asked the co-pilots what they were going to do next. They replied, “Well, we’re going to Disneyland!”

Their response inspired an ad campaign by Disney that has endured through the decades. The likes of Magic Johnson, Orel Hershisser, Joe Montana, Nancy Kerrigan, and Jeff Gordon have all been recorded saying that infamous phrase after their championship games and races. That ad campaign has become so well-known and ingrained in our culture that after major achievements or victories, we know to ask, “What are you going to do next?” and the victor knows the only correct response is, “I’m going to Disneyland!”

Two thousand years ago, Disneyland wasn’t around yet, but I imagine if it was, after living through the death and resurrection of Jesus, it’s what I picture the disciples doing next. But that didn’t happen. Instead, in those final Easter days, after the disciples moved from grief to confusion to disbelief to awestruck faith, they didn’t know what they were supposed to say they were going to do next. So after Jesus departed them not once but twice, and as the weight of their exhaustion took over them, as their minds were still reeling from the events of the past week – when the other disciples turned to Simon Peter and asked, “What are you going to do now?” Simon Peter said, “I’m going fishing.” Not able to think of anything more relaxing than a day out on the water, the other

disciples looked at each other and replied, “Us too. Let's all go fishing.”

At this point, the disciples needed to take care of themselves. After a week like the disciples had, we can only imagine that they would have needed comfort and healing and a time to recover both together and individually.

I like what happens next. It is almost as if Jesus recognizes their need, and he meets them right in it. They need to be fishing – to partake in the one pastime they have done their whole life – and they are having an unsuccessful day. So when Jesus appears, once more, and he helps them in this pastime. He shows them that if they just put their nets on the other side, they will catch all the fish they could possibly want. In this way, he validates and supports their decision to take time out on their boat.

Earlier in the Gospel, when Jesus first gathers his disciples, Jesus tells them to leave their nets, to put them down because they will only be fishing for people from now on. But this is a different time, a different place, and Jesus knows that what his disciples need is the comfort, familiarity, and joy of picking their nets back up. He no longer tells them to set them aside, but instead he assists them, allowing them to be where they are at and helping them get a good catch.

This resonates with me as someone who often hears people express guilt when they take time for themselves to do something that they enjoy. We are conditioned to believe that if we are doing something for ourselves – whether it is a bike ride or a nap or a retreat or an extravagant meal or a drink with friends – that we must be selfish or we must be denying something else more important in our life. This passage reminds me that not only is it okay to do the things we need to do to take care of ourselves, but that God might actually have a hand in creating those opportunities for us.

There is a reason we call God both our Creator and our Sustainer. Those moments of healing and filling up our spirits are God given. Jesus did not come back to the disciples to say, “What do you think you're doing out here on the boat? You need to get back to work!” Jesus did not say, “I

didn't die so that you could take a day off and go fishing!” Jesus said, “Hey friends, have you cast your net over here? There are some fish waiting for you. Go catch 'em.”

The second half of this story confirms this for me. After they catch the fish and they are in such amazement that it was Jesus who helped them, the disciples come to shore, build a fire, and fry up some of their catch. It is only at this point – when the disciples have been fed in many ways and are once again feeling full of life – that Jesus asks them to also care for others. He says to them, “Feed my sheep. Look after my lambs. Tend to the flock.”

It reminds me of the in-flight instructions to put on your own oxygen mask before assisting the person next to you with their mask. You have to take care of yourself first. The shepherds have to make sure they are in good shape before they can tend to the rest of the flock. What this story tells us is that part of caring for other people is caring for ourselves. You can't give of yourself without first making sure you have something left to give.

I think this is a critical part of discipleship, not just for individuals, but for the church as the whole. After all, Simon Peter did not go out on the water alone – the disciples all joined him on the fishing expedition. One of the things we pride ourselves on as a church is that we are a Mission Church – a church where members love to give their time volunteering and working hard and making a positive impact on the world. And this is great. We have that part of discipleship down. But when you start listening closer, you start to hear about burnout. You start to hear that it is often hard to retain volunteers because after a while people are exhausted. You start to realize that there are many people who you see on committee after committee and on all the volunteer projects, but you never see at any fellowship or faith enrichment events. Until one day they disappear, because they are tired, and they believe if they have nothing left to give, then there is no place for them here. That ethos leaves an unbalance in our community – instead of building up disciples, we end up burning them out and cycling through new ones after new ones.

Many of our longest volunteers and church leaders – the people who have served on every possible committee and done every kind of mission project – are also the people who most engage the opportunity for fellowship and renewal in the church. They are the people who go on women's retreats or show up to men's breakfast each week or play bridge every month or participate in book studies and potlucks and movie nights and winter ski trips and summer hikes. They are the people who have learned to take care of themselves as they take care of others.

The people I hear others talking about and saying, “how do they have such energy? Where do they find the time to do all the things they do?” are also the ones who understand the art of taking time away – whether it is traveling or connecting with family or just being with their church friends – to replenish their energy and begin again. I do not think it is a coincidence that our choir, who works hard every single week as worship and song leaders, not only takes the summer off, but throws the best church parties I have ever been to.

No one has perfected it, everyone I know struggles to find the balance, but it isn't until you begin to practice taking care of yourself before you take care of someone else that you can begin to see what that balance might look like. I wonder what it would look like if the cultural expectations at South Church shifted such that people were encouraged – even expected – to participate in something that brought them joy and relaxation. What would it look like if when the nominating team called searching for our next year of leaders, they would only talk to people who had participated in a retreat or a SALT group or a progressive dinner or an outdoor experience hike this last year. What would it look like if we took self-care as seriously as we take caring for our neighbor?

I think we spend so much time on the resurrection encounters of Easter – several weeks which is more than we spend on any one story – because it is the time when the disciples were figuring out how to be disciples. Before Jesus' death, they were pretty clueless. They listened to him

and tried to do what he said, but most of the time they got it wrong. After his death and resurrection, they were learning what discipleship was truly about, and they were preparing to take their roles as the leaders and founders of the Church. They were preparing to do this without Jesus by their side. It's the most critical moment for them. And it is during these leadership-forming days that we learn that being a disciple means also caring for yourself. Simon Peter knew this. So he went fishing. Jesus knew this, so he helped Simon Peter find the most rewarding catch of his life. As disciples today we are called to remember this: go fishing, feed yourself, and only then will you be able to go out and tend to the rest of the flock. Amen.