

The Third Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
1 May 2022

John 21:1-19

I have done over 40 hours of driving in two weeks, the result of a vacation and our desire to visit our kids and my wife's grandmother in Atlanta. One of the things my wife and I did to pass the time was to listen to the Podcast, "Cults." Every week, the podcast talks about a particular cult, their history, leaders, philosophy, membership, funding, etc. It is amazing to me how many cults use fear tactics to control and manipulate their members. The leaders convince them that they, and they alone, can unlock the secrets to salvation, and that without blind obedience to them, cult members are destined for eternal damnation. It is also amazing how many cults use door to door message-spreading as their primary tactic for member acquisition. I went to an Evangelical seminary, and as part of our Evangelism class, I had an assignment where the entire class was divided into groups of two. Each team was assigned to a particular block of the town where the seminary was located. We were to knock on the doors of our neighbors, identify ourselves as students from the seminary, and ask if there was anything we could pray for. If the opportunity arose, we were to speak about the Gospel and Church.

I remember feeling nervous as we approached the first home. I had always resented Jehovah's Witnesses and other high-pressure groups. I had always found their questions terrifying: "If you died today, are you sure you will go to heaven?" To me, these scary tactics never led me to ask any serious question about my faith and never inspired me to go to a particular church. Anyway, we knocked several times on that first door and I was extremely glad that no one opened. We knocked on several more doors unsuccessfully. My friends' knocks were confident, loud, resolute. My own partner was a man on a mission. His knocks had the urgency of someone trying to deliver a life-saving message. My knocks, on the other hand, were the knocks of someone praying no one would open their door. Surprisingly, we walked about half a block and no one opened the door, to my great relief. Then, we had our first response. She was a very old woman, who smiled at us and said, "It must be door to door evangelism week!" Then she told us that everyone on that block knew what week it was and no one would be rude enough to open the door and then close it on our faces. They would just pretend they were not at home until the knocking stopped. We returned to school and prayed for the unchurched.

In the passage from John today, we see Peter and six other disciples back in Galilee, fishing. This is perhaps an indication that even after Jesus has appeared to them at least two times, they had gone back to their former life as fishermen. You may recall a similar story in Luke 5:1-11, at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus gets in Peter's boat and begins to preach from it. After a while he asks Peter to go to the deep end and cast his nets. Peter says, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." After they did this,

they caught so many fish that Peter said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” Jesus responded, “From today on you will fish for people.” They left everything and followed Jesus. Now, three years later, after Jesus has died and risen from the dead, they are back fishing. They have been at it all night and caught nothing, but when Jesus directs them to cast their nets on the other side, they catch a large amount of fish. The similarity of these two stories at the beginning and end of Jesus earthly ministry are intentional.

This similarity gives us clues as to the reason for this story. Jesus wants to re-commission his disciples for ministry. If they had once been called to fish for people, what are they doing back in their old jobs? As they struggle to bring the large catch to the shore, they are reminded that their ministry will never succeed without Jesus. It doesn't matter how many doors they knock on; no one would open for them. Without Jesus the disciples are no more able to catch fish than I was able to get people to open doors for me. Jesus is the real evangelist and we are nothing but his instruments.

This story has great implications for any church. Sometimes churches do the same things they have always done, often getting the same old results. Sadly, few stop to ask the question, “Is this what Jesus wants from us?” I like the image that it took a tremendous effort to bring all those fish to the shore. Evangelism is a group effort. It requires the entire church, doing the hard work of bringing others in. But pay attention to the image of fellowship in this text. The disciples come to the shore and have breakfast with Jesus. It is within this fellowship that Jesus commissions his disciples again through Peter. Perhaps the message is clear. You can use hook and bait strategies to fish for fish, but you need the hard work of befriending people, developing relationships with them, and loving them before you can introduce a saving faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Inviting people in is only part of the job, you also have to feed, care for, disciple, and love them.

This story today has to do with the dual tasks of evangelism and discipleship. Evangelism is similar to fishing in the sense that an initial human action, such as inviting someone in, is required. Let me use a slightly different illustration: Right next door to this church, there is a store in which there is nothing but lamps: hundreds of lamps. Some are antique, some are new. Some are plain, some are ornate. Some of them are unplugged, but some of them are plugged in and show their light. I remember once going to one of these stores in Florida and overhearing a parent asking a child, “Which lamp do you like best?” To which the little girl answered, “I like best the ones where the light shines out.”

The best evangelism happens when others see the light of the Gospel shining through you. When you take the time to befriend people, and then introduce your faith to them within the context of that relationship. It is also important to remember the difference between us and the cults we talked about earlier: We do not seek to connect people to a leader, but to the Triune God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We place the spotlight on Jesus and not on the preacher or teacher. Second, we don't have a message of coercion, high-pressure tactics, and fear. We preach a salvation that is the free gift of God to his people in and through the person of his Son. Lastly, we seek to worship

the Lord in community, preaching and living out a message of love of God and love of others. In other words, we follow the light of the world by trying our best to become the light of our own homes, communities, and churches.

Most of the people who come to church for the first time come because they were invited by a friend, because they came to visit once and they felt welcomed and loved, and through the hospitality of existing members, they come to believe that Christ is the center of that Church. There are over 300,000 Christian churches in the United States. Some are antique, some are new. Some are plain, some are ornate. Some are not plugged in, and some of the ones plugged in keep their light mainly to themselves. God likes best the churches where the light shines out. I believe this is the type of church God is calling us to be at Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church.

Today, Jesus asks Peter 3 times if he loves him, reversing the three denials of Peter during his trial and passion. These three questions can be asked of us as well: "Do you love me more than your possessions, your wealth, your profession, your diplomas, your books... Do you love me more than the comforts of your life?" Let us think carefully how we will answer him because if we answer, "Yes, Lord, I do love you!" he will ask us to feed his sheep. The second question is harder, "Do you love me more than people? More than you love your own family and friends. More than you love being popular and well liked? More than being famous?" If we say "Yes, Lord, I do love you!" Jesus will ask us to tend his lambs. Then he will ask us, "Do you love me more than anyone else? Do you love me with single-minded determination and commitment. Would you die for me?" If we say, "Yes, Lord, I do love you!" he will ask us again to tend his sheep.

These three requests make it clear that love requires action. It does others no good if we say we love them, but fail to care for them. It helps no one if we say that we are on the side of the poor, but never actually do anything for them. How can we say that we love our friends, but never take the time to listen to them? How can we love them and let them die in their own isolation and fear? How can we love them and fail to introduce them to Christ, the true source of freedom and happiness? My friends, love is action! Love is as love does! Jesus tells us today, "Let your love so shine before others that they will give glory to your Father in heaven."

I pray that today may be the day you let your light shine. Amen!