

Fruitfulness

Easter-Powered Lives:

Ephesians 1:18-23; John 21:1-14

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My father loved to fish, and he loved to eat fish. However, we did not live in places where you could escape for an hour and fish. Consequently, fishing was a fun, but rare diversion. I caught so few fish over the years that I never became adept at preparing them for eating. In fact, on a canoe trip I caught a good-sized northern pike. Someone suggested that I fillet it, but when I was done, there wasn't much fish left. I lost motivation to fish because the fun is in the results. The joy is in the fruit.

We see that in the 21st chapter of the gospel according to John. Author John was a fisherman along with his older brother James. They were companions of Peter, another fisherman. They had all left Jerusalem after the resurrection and traveled to Galilee as previously instructed. They hoped to see Jesus there for he had promised to meet them there. I don't know if they spent a lot of time in prayer and discussion. Whatever, Peter had enough. He decided to go fishing. Six others joined him including John and his brother.

Having earned their living do this, they were quite skilled with the nets and at judging where the fish were apt to be. They did everything right except that their results were no different from unskilled me. All night long, hour after hour, they did the right thing and came up empty. It appears that they were discouraged and ready to give up... at least for a time. They must have been cashing it in because they now were close enough for a man on shore to see that

there was no fish in their boat. Can you imagine what it felt like when they heard from this guy: “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” I can feel the sting of embarrassment in my cheeks. I remember a men’s fishing retreat where we came back with nothing. We even took a picture of our empty stringer and then bought fish from a supermarket to eat. The Bible tells us that these disciples answered “no.” I suspect that there was a lot of humor in their answers with a zinger flying here and there. Incidentally, we did not repeat our fishing retreat. The joy is in the fruit.

The risen Jesus called out to them: “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” These skilled men could have said “no.” They actually did not know who was talking to them. Should they delay their return and follow the instructions? Peter, James and John had done something like that once before. Years earlier they had become familiar with Jesus and he had chosen to sit in Peter’s boat and speak to a crowd. You can read about this in Luke 5. Once Jesus had finished his talk, he told Peter to push out into the deep and let the nets down. Peter and his partners had fished the same area the entire night before and hadn’t caught a thing, but because Jesus said it, Peter decided to do it. Peter’s net grew so heavy with fish that he called James and John over with their boat. The catch nearly sunk both boats. It was then that they decided to leave their fishing business and follow Jesus as his disciples. Now an unidentified “friend” told them to put their net in the water on the other side of the boat. Perhaps, it was that memory. Whatever the case, they did it. They followed his instructions. John tells what happens. The seven men could not get the net back in the boat because it was so full of large fish. John realized that the anonymous friend was Jesus, so he told Peter. Peter grabbed his coat, jumped into the lake and waded ashore. He wasn’t interested in the fish anymore! The other six were still interested in the fish. They worked until they dragged the net up to the beach. It not only contained big fish. It contained a lot of big fish. They counted them.

There were 153 of them. Do you sense the joy in the details that John gives us? Do you sense the glory of it all?

In the deepest way we want to be productive and fruitful. We want to know that our life has value, that we are loved, and that our living is valuable, it matters, it makes a difference. Now skills can help us increase our productivity. Excellence is important. God is worthy of excellent effort. However, skilled fishermen can come up empty. Skilled husbands and wives can breakup. Skilled businessmen can go broke. Skilled believers can fish for people all night and come up empty. The key to productivity is the favor of God, especially through the presence and power of Jesus. Jesus did not leave us in the 1st Century. We have not missed the fishing boat, so to speak, because we live in the 21st Century. St. Paul taught in Ephesians 1 that the power of the resurrection is at work for believers today. He was so successful, despite daunting opposition, because the presence and power of Christ was with him in the Spirit. You and I can be as fruitful as anyone we read about in the Bible. We can be fruitful in our jobs, our homes, our personal lives and in our ministry together as Christ's church. Opposition is not what is important. Christ's presence makes the difference.

I want you to hear the instructions Jesus gave his disciples in John 15. He said:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful... No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:1-2, 4-5, 8, NIV)

Jesus tells his disciples that the key issue for them is their connection to Jesus. He also tells them that the Father is going to do some pruning, and that it is for their benefit. In the end

they will be more fruitful. He goes on to use two words to help his disciples make and keep a life-giving connection with him. The first is *obedience*. The disciples need to know what Jesus says and obey it. They can't keep connected to Jesus if they don't hear, trust and obey what he says. Peter, James and John would never have experienced those great hauls of fish if they had not heard and obeyed Jesus' words. Are you applying Jesus' words to your relationships? Are you reflecting on them and implementing them? We can't remain in Jesus' without doing that.

The second word that helped the disciples connect with Jesus is *love*. They could not stay connected with Jesus and speak evil of one another or to one another. They could not stay connected to Jesus and hold resentments against one another. They could not stay connected to Jesus unless somehow in their brokenness they served one another. They had to give up the right to judge one another, so they could fulfill the call to build one another.

This didn't mean that they stopped having concerns. This did not mean that they stopped expressing their concerns. This did not mean that they ignored problems, nor dismissed skills and knowledge. It meant, instead, that they received one another as a gift from God and their assignment to love. That is what Jesus did for us, what he demonstrated on the night he knelt before his disciples and washed the dirt off their feet, and what he expects of us. Nothing less! That is how we become fruitful and bring glory to God. The Bible says that love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). We don't separate because of dirt. Instead, we patiently serve one another in removing the dirt.

I spoke this past week at Maple Manor Nursing Home, and our brother David Hardke, a resident there, quoted for me this poem by Clay Harrison:

*Life presents us with challenges that we must overcome,
And sometimes all the detours can leave the senses numb.
Life is filled with stumbling blocks we pass along the way,*

*But it can become a stepping stone when love comes into play.
Wherever there's an obstacle that we must rise above,
It helps to overcome it with an attitude of love.
For anger never solves a things and stress will bring us down,
But love unlocks the doorway where hope and faith are found.
So many things divide us through the human race,
But love's the great uniter, the smile on mankind's face!
Life presents us with challenges that we must rise above,
And blessed is he who can maintain an attitude of love.*

Are you ready for a boatload of fruit? Then reconnect with Jesus and you'll see Easter power working right through your hands.