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John 21:1-19

WHAT'S ON THE MENU

What was on your Easter dinner menu? Ham seems to be the traditional Easter fare, but some people serve lamb or beef. It is traditional in American society to gather with friends and family for a big meal on Easter Sunday. These meals matter a great deal, not only because we need to nourish our bodies and satisfy our hunger, and because good tasting food is an important pleasure in life, but also because such meals combined with the company nourish our spirits and souls.

Scripture tells us that Jesus cared a lot about food. The four gospel accounts of Jesus' life have a lot of differences for sure, but one story they all agree about is the story of Jesus' feeding the five thousand people with the most meager of resources. In the Gospel of John's version of this story, Jesus feeds the multitudes with just 5 loaves of bread and two fish. And when everyone had eaten their fill, the leftovers gathered up filled twelve baskets. It is a feeding story centered on the topic of God's abundance in which not only were people's bodies nourished but also people's souls.

Our reading today from the Gospel of John reveals that the *risen* Jesus remained interested in food and in feeding people, as well. After the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the disciples went back to their hometown region in Galilee. You might imagine them sitting around feeling lost and confused when Peter announces, "I'm going fishing." And the others say, "We'll go with you." Maybe you've had an occasion like that: in a time of grief or loss or confusion, and you don't know what to do with yourself. So you just start doing what you know best: you load the dishwasher, vacuum the living room, mow the lawn. The disciples fish all night but

catch nothing, when Jesus appears on the beach and tells them to put out their nets once again. And this time, they catch an enormous load of fish--153, to be exact. The specificity of this number of fish seems like a strange detail and scholars have long debated what it might mean. But suffice it to say, it was a heck of a lot of fish! And in that moment they realize that the man standing on the beach is the risen Jesus.

And when the disciples get to shore with their giant load, Jesus has a fire going and has prepared breakfast for them. And what is on the menu? Bread and fish. Bread and fish--just like when Jesus fed the five thousand! What we have here is a reprisal of the feeding of the multitudes, only in reverse: instead of feeding thousands with a small amount of food, this new feeding has Jesus feeding his small group of disciples with an enormous haul of fish. Like the Last Supper feeding story in the other three gospel accounts, what we have here in this beach breakfast is a eucharistic meal--a meal symbolizing more than just the food they were swallowing.

And we know that because of the conversation that takes place between Jesus and Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him. And Peter assures Jesus he does indeed love him. To the first response, Jesus says to Peter, "feed my lambs." To Peter's second affirmation of love, Jesus says, "tend my sheep." And to Peter's third affirmation, Jesus says again, "feed my sheep."

Three questions about Peter's love of Jesus. And then we recall another time Peter was asked three questions: on the night of Jesus' arrest when Peter was asked by those in the crowd if he was with Jesus, and how three times Peter, out of fear for his own life, denied even knowing Jesus. And suddenly we realize that these three questions Jesus asks Peter as they eat breakfast on that beach are given as a moment of forgiveness to Peter, a chance for Peter to redeem

himself. Three affirmations of love in place of three denials. What we realize is that there was more than just bread and fish on the menu for breakfast. Grace was on that menu that morning, God's love and forgiveness, served up to Peter and to all the disciples, grace served up in giant heaping quantities, abundant quantities, symbolized in a haul of 153 fish. It is a grace so powerful as to take away Peter's shame and convert a failure like him into Christ's chief apostle.

Let's take stock of just how remarkable this change of circumstances really is. Jesus chooses Peter to lead his ministry. After such a failure, after such a betrayal, how could Jesus possibly trust him with the important message of the gospel? Would any of us pick the person who had just shown great disloyalty to be the one to head a crucial project? Not likely. We'd probably go find another candidate, a loyal candidate, a trustworthy candidate. That Jesus could believe in Peter after his colossal failure was indeed remarkable.

And yet, ironically, it is Peter's failure that makes him perfect for the job. For it is often those who have themselves been in greatest need of God's abundant grace and kindness in the face of their own brokenness, who truly understand the profound meaning of the gospel of love and new life. Peter better than most could appreciate the message of God's grace, and love, and goodness. Because he had dined on God's grace that morning on the beach. And it sustained him in body and in soul for all that would come.

That is what we also are invited to dine on here at this Table. God's grace, God's love, God's kindness are on the menu here for all of us in great abundance. Like Peter, it is our own weaknesses not our strengths that qualify us to live and proclaim the gospel and the message of resurrection. For we, like Peter, have received God's kindness in abundance, and we, like Peter have been commissioned to live out God's kindness to the world around us in abundance.

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye wrote her poem called *Kindness* after a distressing experience in the country of Columbia. She and her husband were traveling on a bus throughout South America on their honeymoon when they were robbed of all their money and possessions. Another traveler on the bus was killed in that robbery. As you may imagine, they were terribly shaken and disoriented after this experience and a stranger came up to them in the small town plaza and extended kindness and compassion to them. That is when Nye wrote her poem, which she says came to her as a gift from beyond herself. Nye maintains that she was merely the scribe for this poem which came to her as she sat in that town square in the aftermath of this ordeal.

Nye writes:

Before you know what kindness really is
 you must lose things,
 feel the future dissolve in a moment
 like salt in a weakened broth.
 What you held in your hand,
 what you counted and carefully saved,
 all this must go so you know
 how desolate the landscape can be
 between the regions of kindness.
 How you ride and ride
 thinking the bus will never stop,
 the passengers eating maize and chicken
 will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
 you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
 lies dead by the side of the road.
 You must see how this could be you,
 how he too was someone
 who journeyed through the night with plans
 and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
 you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
 You must wake up with sorrow.
 You must speak to it till your voice

catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

That shadow or friend that Nye calls kindness, we Christians also call by another name:
Christ. Christ is that shadow, that friend, that kindness that accompanies us through the hard
regions of life, through our own failures, through our weaknesses and beckons us with the simple
message: "Come and eat."