

ACTS 9:1-6, (7-20)
PSALM 30
REVELATION 5:11-14
JOHN 21:1-19

Third Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2022; Year C

Count Them One by One!

“Name them one by one,” so goes part of the refrain of the old Gospel Song “Count Your Many Blessings,” written by Johnson Oatman, Jr. and published in 1897 sometime toward the beginning of the American revivalist movement. Johnson Oatman, even the name has an evangelistic ring about it! Well on this first Sunday in May—May Day, May Day—I am using Oatman’s “gospelic” musical imagery to take a rather different and circuitous route on our homiletical journey as we explore today’s Witness from the Gospels in John. A twofold idea came to me as I read this resurrection vignette one more time, trying in vain to read it as if it were the first time, to use a little Marcus Borg analogy. In this story we find a miraculous catch of fish, just like back in the good old days when Jesus first met, through a most chance, serendipitous encounter, some of his soon-to-be called novitiates, each disciple a want to be apostle, green and raw, yes, young and wet behind the ears, back when the rabbi’s early mission and ministry was fresh and new, an exciting adventure, exhilarating and invigorating, no crosses or threats of destruction or death anywhere on the radar. It was all virginal, like fresh fallen snow! We then read in this same text of more escapades by the always gregarious Simon Peter, the one called the “Rock” and presumably not because he was a blockhead, though he often unwittingly and frequently played the part. We learn in this story that Peter enjoys fishing naked, perhaps unafraid and unashamed, television series and biblical imagery intended. Why anyone would put their clothes back on and then jump in the lake I have not a clue, but that is what this narrative tells us that he purportedly did, in all honesty no doubt

embarrassed to be seen by the risen Lord this way, in the buff in his birthday suit! It is all right there in this rather odd biblical text! But I digress; I often do! In this tender and yet sternly worded story, Jesus admonishes the once denying disciple to feed the lambs, tend the sheep, feed the sheep, a triune command set in stone for the future, the rabbi's mission and ministry now manifest in the capable hands of his graduating pupils. Jesus' teachings now moving forward under new leadership, about to be led by this now singled-out disciple. All his and his colleagues' service would from here on out soon have a glaring hole, in short order would be without Jesus' steady advice and constant companionship. Minus their leader, the disciples could no longer count on their coach to poke and to prod! The disciples would be on their own, no longer able to depend on Jesus' comforting aiding and abetting. Time to grow up and put on your big boy pants! Both these short stories gave me a "one at a time" idea, reminding me that so much of life is all about the slow and steady progress we can make by taking one small step at a time. As Neil Armstrong said as he put his foot on the moon, "One small step for a man; one large leap for mankind," sexist language forgiven! Wish he had said "humanity!"

I will never forget one of my not-so-finest moments. I have shared this story with Dale and Pat because they are great friends with this individual. I am almost too embarrassed to tell this one, but I might as well own up to it and I have a sermon to preach. In the days prior to the church where I served in Atlanta becoming a bonafide affiliate of the United Church of Christ, the Southeast Conference did a fair share of courting the congregation, knowing our interest. I got invited to all kinds of denominational meetings at the local level. Well, it just so happened that the General Minister and President at the time, John Thomas—yes, the same John Thomas who has attended worship here during vacations—happened to be the guest speaker at a stewardship gathering down on the Georgia coast. I was invited and gladly accepted the invitation to be near the ocean for a few days. Well as fate would

have it, or not, John led a Bible study that evening and today's lection from John were the verses John selected as his biblical text for the evening. During the course of his presentation, John Thomas made the very innocent mistake of pointing out to the group that a grand total of 154 fish were caught on that fateful day in question. Well, indeed that is a mistake, a very, very, minor mistake, but still just flat out wrong! It was 153 fish, and for some reason you know who had the arrogance, the temerity, to point out to the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ the correct number. What an idiot! Not him, me! It slipped out of my big mouth before I could corral my piehole and make a total public fool out of myself. Pride indeed going before a fall! John was gracious and received by correction with grace and decorum. Again, not my finest moment! Might as well tell it all! But in fairness, to me, **when any of us goes fishing, keeping score, counting the exact number of our catch is always a concern, vital to our competitive spirit, yes, of utmost importance. Bragging rights are on the line! So, to speak! In all candor, I am convinced that this verse containing the 153 fish is the only literal verse in the Bible because I know how meticulous fisher people are about these things! I'm just saying!**

As we engage this interesting and definitely intriguing narrative today, I want us to be mindful of how important, even essential, it is for us to be cognizant of the little things, to be attentive to the smallest details, the minutiae, to be intentional as we seek to build our own personal and private spirituality and together, as we corporately and communally strive to build beloved faith community, one step at a time, one issue at a time, and most importantly, one person at a time. Let me count the ways! Our hope is to never get ahead of ourselves in the process. Without attention to every detail, without focusing on the small things, all the minute concerns that go into this larger ecclesial enterprise we call the First Congregational United Church of Christ, not only will we fail at the larger tasks before us, all the goals and objectives at hand, but we will never fully grasp

the impact or import that every decision, every act has on our daily living, individually and collectively as a congregation. As two familiar songs remind us, we should be taking each day “day by day,” “one day at a time, sweet Jesus!” After all, for every action there is either a response or a reaction and the difference is palpably and noteworthily critical. While the remaining apostolic eleven went on their morning fishing trip, call it a three-hour tour designed to help them forget all the horrors they had just endured. Oh, how they longed for a case of permanent amnesia! Now surely sunk in a deep depression, despondent, defeated, and demoralized, they obviously made the decision to resume their previous careers and hopelessly hoped against all odds to get back to normal. They so longed to move on with their lives as shattered as their newfound existence for all intents and purposes was. Of course, the disciples were using nets and catching fish in multiples, this abundance absolutely killing my metaphorical analogies. We will work with what we’ve got! After all, for most of us as we embark on our varied fishing expeditions, patiently or impatiently, we use a rod and reel in our expensive pursuit in the hopes of catching one piscatorial prize one at a time, delighted with each and every member of the Pisces family we can coax onto our lines. So much tackle designed to catch anglers, not fish!

I love the dialogue that takes place between Jesus and Peter, somewhat playful, yet poignant and painful, a subtle dance nuanced between these now estranged brothers and friends. Jesus’ gets in his justifiable digs, all his sharp admonishments apparently designed to get his sobering points across to this leading disciple who would supposedly one day lead the Church, assumed to become its first Pope, crazy mythology in the making! Jesus does not ask Peter if he still believes, if he still has even a modicum of faith, even an amount of faithfulness the size of a tiny mustard seed. Perhaps Jesus could not have cared less at this tenuous stage of their rebuilding, redeveloping, relationship! Who knows? No, rather Jesus asks what had to also be a

painfully piercing question, far more than a mere prick, pierced being the operative word here, recalling the spear thrust into Jesus' side, "Do you love me?" My hunch is that the delicious breakfast of broiled fish—where did he get them—this scrumptious meal Jesus had just prepared for them, now suddenly was not sitting so well as it turned in Peter's suddenly upset stomach as he chafed and churned with grief and guilt. Yes, it is that uneasy, queasy, nauseating feeling we get when our last nerves are frayed, when tension and anxiety is riding high. Where is the Tum's or the Rolaid's or how about some Pepto, a little Nexium or Prevacid? We have all been there at one time or another, probably far more than once. "Do you love me?" The very fact that Jesus felt the need to ask the question not once, but now twice, reinforced what surely must have been a heightened level of pent-up frustration was definitely, supposedly all the way to hell and back, Jesus totally exasperated with his aspiring and promising protégé from whom he expected so much better, so much more. As they say in Montana, "If I told you "onct," I told you "twict!" Surely these haunting words would have poked at Peter's already fragile and wounded psyche, deeply saddening this disciple who always longed to please his rabbi. Surely Peter was now grieved at the deepest level, this disciple who so wanted to make his master and mentor proud, who so wanted to be "the man" among the other men, the main cog in the discipleship wheel. And now he was being questioned as to the veracity of his relationship with the one he dutifully, obediently, and yes, religiously, followed for the last three short, long, years. Again, with emphasis, "Do you love me?" the words, a barrage of convicting imagery now reverberating a not-so-faint echo recalling the hollow sounds of doubt, denial, and deceit, each syllable ripping at Peter's heart and mind. The trifecta strategically reminding Peter of his not-so-delusional deniability. Ask and answer! Point well made! The writer of the Johannine Gospel tells us that Jesus' words hurt Peter's feelings. Poor baby! Get a grip! Buck up! Grow up! You, Peter, helped create this mess in your thrice denials!

Love takes many forms and is expressed in many ways, verbally, emotionally, physically, and so forth. It appears as if in Jesus' estimation at this point in the game, love meant being proactive, yes, with an emphasis on action, of being intentionally active, yes, love demanding motive and method, movement and meaning, love calling forth a response, demanding that something be done, anything, and that something always meant doing for others, "others" being the operative word, others indicating those who are at least a degree of separation apart from us and our comfort zones, those who are not of our tribe and clan, our station, those who are not like us. It is easy to love those who are like us in so many ways, who think like us, act like us, like the same things we do, think along the lines that we do, are mirrors of ourselves and not mirages masquerading as human beings because they appear so different and thus disconnected from our sphere of being. Somehow these are the people who get compartmentalized with labels, sometimes branded as deviant because of their differences, less than, not equal to, not worthy, just not! For you see, no doubt Jesus was aware of a major fly in Peter's ointment, fully cognizant of a huge, ginormous, flaw in Peter's theological acumen and his subsequent actions. By the way, you will note how last week's sermon bleeds into this week's, and this week's will do the same with next week's. A disclaimer in the interest of full disclosure, but that is the nature of these similar resurrection narratives.

You see, Peter was a loyal follower of Jesus, despite his major trifold hiccup. Surprisingly, perhaps shockingly, perhaps not, after all Peter was very human, after Jesus' death it was this same boldly committed apostle who proved to be a solid "Rock," in a not so endearing way. With all the bravado he could muster, Peter stubbornly sought to maintain his staunch and steadfast interpretation of traditional Judaism. For the time being that proved to be Peter's Jewish modus

operundi as he seemed stuck, more focused on piety and religiosity than any kind of people principle. Peter dug in his self-righteous heels. As a clergy friend of mine once opined, “Ain’t no high like a self-righteous high!” Now, that would not have been a problem, not problematic in the least, had Peter embraced the inclusive aspects of traditional Judaism. Welcoming the outsider is clearly and fully, even if randomly, articulated throughout the Hebrew Bible in a host of various writers’ desires to address the desperate need to meet the needs of widows and orphans and to embrace the stranger, the alien, the foreigner in the midst. It was imperative that the Israelite nation welcome and include them as if they were kin, that they too were entitled as part of the chosen ones, absolutely embraced as card-carrying members of the tribes and clans of Israel. In no way could or would Peter dare to accept what he sincerely believed was a fallacy! He could in no way embrace that theology or those people, not in good conscience. The Rock’s stubborn and traditional, conservative, orthodoxy reflecting a narrow and inflexible interpretation of the Law, a sectarian and proprietary understanding of the great Shema Israel advocating for a universal love of God and love of neighbor and eventually interpreted with a love of self. Peter could not envision being “extravagantly welcoming,” expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and openly vulnerable to anyone other than his own. His edited, abridged, version of the Bible told him so! Peter’s Bible quoting was a convenient copout, a most suitable way of inhibiting, even prohibiting full hospitality to all people. Even Jesus of all people, once had to learn this great lesson the hard way in his impromptu sparring with a Canaanite, Syrophenician, woman, an interaction that would forever change Jesus’ perspective and his life. Yes, it took the temerity of a female and a Gentile, taking on the role of a rabbi, to pique Jesus’ conscience. Jesus even dared in that sacred momentary verbal exchange to call her a dog! Yes, it took her courage to exact a change in the rabbi! The other disciples evidently had gotten the memo and understood the message, but not Peter. **You see, Peter had remained a**

recalcitrant, unrepentant, holdout in a sure and certain attempt to preserve what he thought he understood completely, yes, self-righteously that which he knew to be his entitled heritage and his alone, believing the need to stand in the gap and protect at all costs the honor and the faith of his forebears, the purity of his faithful forefathers and mothers. It was all about avoiding people pollution and maintaining a false sense of purity, clean versus unclean, common versus uncommon, select or chosen versus the great unwashed, status quo the best and only option! Not! It all came down to those with whom you chose to sit at table and share a meal. Peter got it wrong! Time for a much-needed object lesson! Time was fleeting and wasting! Jesus was not going to be around much longer to hold the disciples' hands and change their diapers! He was going to ascend figuratively and even perhaps literally! He would soon be long gone and gone for good, permanently somewhere over the rainbow beyond the boundaries of space and time in orbit in whatever constitutes the eternal heavenly places.

Today's emphasis is a reminder that, again, just like the songs sing, we go day by day each and every day in all that we desire, that we long, to do. Jesus admonished Peter to feed his sheep, all those little at risk, vulnerable, lambs all in need of tender and constant care. In the final analysis, and the parable shows us clearly, we cannot focus on the ninety-nine if we fail to focus on, if we are not attentive, to the one, focusing on each one as if they are the only one. And not only that, but it is also good practice as we live our lives, that we find the ability to compartmentalize, to break down all the daily tasks that have the capacity to overwhelm us, to chew off bits and pieces as we are able, to do what is manageable and negotiable. What we will discover when we can see clearly each need is that all the largesse that is in front of us will follow suit and all of it can and will become attainable, doable in every way. A good analogy is the way that young NFL quarterbacks describe their becoming comfortable and successful.

They describe the game as slowing down in ways that allow them to see the field and each player, dissecting every play as if it were in slow motion. Just last night I saw a story on the news about a woman named Jacky Hunt-Broersma who just broke the unofficial record for completing 102 marathons in 102 days. She accomplished this feat after losing one of her legs to cancer, having never ran before this horrible incident changed her life, yes, for good! When asked how she managed to do such an amazing thing, her response was short and simple, “take each day one step at a time.” Enough said! Way to go Jacky! You are an inspiration to us all, especially those of us with a leg to spare!

There is an illustration that I love, and as you have learned I am not a big fan of illustrative material in my preaching, but it is the story of a man on the beach who is picking up starfish and tossing them back into the sea, no doubt stranded because they were beached by a storm or other unknown factor. A bystander, not minding his own business, watches from afar for a while as the man goes about his business of doing what gives him pleasure and satisfaction, saving as many starfish as he can possibly pick up and throw. The individual finally questions this individual as to why he is doing what it is he is doing, knowing that there are thousands of beached starfish in all directions, everywhere you look. The man critiques, “What you are doing makes no difference. There are so many!” Without hesitating or looking up, the man continues to toss starfish into the sea and says as he picks up one and lets it fly, “Made a difference to that one!” In my personal and professional life, I literally have made this story my mantra informing and impacting my style of ministry. Perhaps you have noticed! Some call it micro- managerial, but I call it attentive to detail. You pick! I am very detail oriented! My personal and professional goal is to make a difference by doing what I can when I can where I can and how I can with whatever “thing” comes on my radar, whatever is needed in a given moment, all intended to help and enhance the

“who!” Sometimes we cannot change our world, but we can certainly make a difference in our little corner of it. And if everyone would do likewise, if all persons would pitch in and do the same, we indeed could move the mountains that challenge our very human existence because of our human capacity as the very created images reflecting the Divine. Let me count the ways!

No doubt Peter surely learned a great lesson on that fateful day, assuming that parts or much of this story is accurate. He learned the power of forgiveness, the power of reformation, restoration, yes, resurrection, and the power of being empowered by a call, a divine call to do for others. Jesus says to “feed!” We are all smart enough to know that this is spiritual, not physical, conversation. It is open ended, meaning that we have no other option than to figure it all out as we go, yes, day by day, walking by faith and not by sight, trusting in grace to help us know what, when, where, how, and most importantly, who! Every fish we catch, every sheep we feed or tend, our goal and objective, our sincere hope and prayer is to make a concerted effort, always intentional in everything we do, to make a difference in someone’s life, to help create a better, even the best, pathway for their unique journey, “no matter who they are or where they are on” their life’s journey. In so doing, indeed we all change the world for the better. And in so doing, we all pay it all forward! A little sensitivity and kindness indeed go a long way! It is all about showing our humanity, our human capacity along with our human vulnerability, striving to be authentic, genuine in every way imaginable, all the time, every time, no matter what, when, where, how, or who. Peter indeed learned a valuable lesson that clearly needed to be reinforced as if for the first time. It is a reminder of a lesson we need to continuously learn as well. Next week we will hear a sequel about this disciple as I explore a hospitality tableau, in a sermonic discussion about Peter’s second, and perhaps most

important and most essential, conversion. Stay tuned for the rest of the story! We call that a tease!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and celebrates each and every success, counting them one by one! Amen and amen!