

The Love of Feeding and Tending

John 21.1-19

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I don't feel like I really have a right to this grief, certainly not the way her husband and family and closest friends do, but I am crushed. Other than the time spent reading her words, I only spent a weekend with Rachel Held Evans in real life. She stayed on the other side of our double on Panola Street when she came to New Orleans back in 2015; pregnant with her first child. We drove around and chatted, ate good food, and she led our first Mabel Palmer Lectures here at St. Charles on a Saturday then preached on Sunday--joining her voice to the long line of fine folks who have preached in this pulpit.

Time with her was easy. Like we'd been friends for years. We had Alabama football and our Southern, Christ-haunted landscape in common. She put everyone at ease and then allowed the expansiveness of her presence and the gentleness of her Southern accent to make the space she needed to untangle the old barbed wire of conservative evangelical theology that was choking the life out of so many of us. She held that space wide open for thousands of us.

It was three weeks ago tonight that I began to worry alongside so many others. She was hospitalized on Palm Sunday and shortly after was placed in a medically induced coma for all kinds of reasons the general public will likely never know. An infant daughter and three-year-old son. A loving, kind, gentle husband. Thirty-seven-years-old. The cruel, arbitrariness of sudden loss in one so young and so vital is nearly impossible to process. I so wanted her to wake up. I wanted a miracle. I wanted her to wipe the sleep from her eyes and mother her two little ones. I am heartbroken, even though I mostly knew her through her written words.

After some crying and a nap, I began to think about how in the world Rachel's shocking death speaks to us this morning here on St. Charles Ave. What do I say with my feet planted right where hers were? How does any of us move forward after with devastation and heartbreak in our bodies? What do we do with that

space she held wide open for us and that crucial untangling work that gave breathing room for the Holy Spirit to move?

The disciples went fishing. It was what they knew. Wherever they'd dry-docked their boats three years ago, they walked straight to the spot, uncovered those familiar friends, lost themselves in the slow and small work of sweeping out cobwebs and washing off seats and boat deck. One of them found their nets wadded up in a ball the way all of that fishing gear gets with many months of neglect. He sat in silence and did the slow and small work of untangling the thing, mending its tears, and getting it ready for time out on the water.

Slow and small work gets us through the times of panic, the times of depression, the times of hard grief when we feel like we cannot catch our next breath and take it all the way to the bottom of our lungs. Yesterday, when I needed to be slow and small, I made mint chocolate chip ice cream. And it was good. That day, friends got together the way friends do when the sadness is raw and the news is fresh. Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John, and two others. The gospel story tells us they were sitting along side the Sea of Tiberias when Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing." I imagine they were sitting in stunned silence. Every now and then one of them would tell a story or dare to crack a joke. Then the memories would catch in their throats until no one could speak at all. Finally, Simon Peter had had about enough of that and made the call to do something his body knew how to do without effort and his mind knew how to do without spinning. "We'll go with you," they all said in grateful unison.

Grief is a tricky and surprising beast. Is it a beast? A cycle. A roller coaster you never asked to ride. When we are deep in grief, there can be a natural instinct to revert to what has been safe and easy from before. Before the loss. Before the change. Before the catastrophe. Whatever "before the pain of this moment" is. I suspect the disciples getting on that boat fired up all of their muscle memories into a safe and small "before" that might easily have consumed them until they have these encounters with the risen Christ—a call from the shore, dragging in nets of 153 fish. A grilled breakfast on the beach. Bread broken and shared. There is no going back to before. They have been changed forever by their journeys with the Christ and the truth of his death. Resurrection doesn't fix it. Resurrection doesn't change that their time with Jesus has come to an end in the way that had known it

to be. Resurrection means they move into the rest of their lives as transformed people, and they can't go back to those old boats and old ways because they aren't those people anymore.

But who they are is beloved, and Jesus reminds them of this as he feeds them. He draws them back into his story rather than letting them flee to a time before they knew him. He whispers to them of that day when he called them off of their boats before and said, "Follow me." Even in grief, even when everything has changed forever, even when they are tempted to run and hide in lives that are too small for who they have become, Jesus comes to find them. He calls them back to the love of feeding and tending.

I've been sitting with this quote from Cynthia Bourgeault for a few days, "Jesus never asked anyone to form a church, ordain priests, develop elaborate rituals and institutional cultures, and splinter into denominations. His two great requests were that we 'love one another as I have loved you' and that we share bread and wine together as an open channel of that interabiding love." I do not think she is saying that all institutions are bad or the opposite of the Jesus path. I do think she is saying the Jesus path takes us deeper and deeper into an open channel of inter abiding love. And if the work we are about and the structures we are building AREN'T open channels of that inter abiding love, then we have busied ourselves with something else altogether.

Jesus wants to draw these friends back into the open channel. These post-resurrection stories are hard to process rationally, so it's likely best not to approach them rationally. Somehow Christ is with them but changed. In different form but same essence. And the way they know who he is not by recognizing his shape in the distance but in the way he speaks to them from a deep well of love and as he feeds them with abundant, generous ease. We have made it all so much more complicated than it needs to be or was ever supposed to be. I wonder if that's a symptom of grief, too. We know complex structures and institutions, so we busy ourselves with building complex structures and institutions because that's head work. That's muscle memory. We're safe in the busy-ness of our minds. But the love of feeding and tending is heart and soul work. We will be vulnerable there. We might get lost in all of our feelings. We might be rejected. We might

have to sit with our shame and hold it out in front of someone else. So the real work we are called to do becomes the last thing we want to do.

Friends, help me with these pieces I am holding because I don't know if my thoughts are fully formed yet. In the fog of grief (or pain or suffering or whatever it is we're living), sometimes we need a moment of small and slow work that allows us to move forward in a way that feels safe. But too much of that small and slow work can also drag us back to a place we no longer live and a self we no longer are. Distracting ourselves with the old and familiar is not a way forward in our individual lives or our life together. This faith we are seeking to live out means we take risks. We risk being rejected because the chance of being fully met, fully welcomed, and fully known is worth it. We stop playing it safe around loving people in loving community and we risk holding our shame and fear out for others to see. We do this because this kind of inter abiding love not only changes us to absolutely can and will change the world.

And whether we are talking about the disciples on their boats or us moderns and our love of organizational distraction, we're distracting ourselves from the true work of Christ-loving, tending, feeding. The gospel word in this story is that even when we have reverted and run, Jesus will somehow appear to us in our distraction and in our grief to call us back to who we really are and where we really need to be.

How are you distracting yourself from the grief you are holding? How do we let the familiar work of organizational busy-ness pull us away from the hard and true work of loving each other in our delicate pain? How can I better hold that space for us to tell the truth about our lives? The diagnosis we don't want to make a big deal of, and so we don't share the news. The shame of financial chaos and job insecurity, but we don't want to burden other folks with our private news. The fear of a marriage falling apart, and the shame is too much to allow us to invite anyone else into our story. The reality of mental illness, but not wanting people to pity us.

The risky work of inter abiding love is what we've actually been called to create and embody here, friends. Yes, we are absolutely and completely called the work of peace and justice. We are called to create systems and structures for good that dismantle the systems and structures of oppression. We are. I don't want to

diminish that prophetic calling. But that external work is an outward expression of an internal state.

We are called to love each other so well that people know we are followers of Jesus the Christ because of the love we embody. If we are busying ourselves with scrubbing the boat and mending the nets rather than feeding and tending and loving each other SO THAT we can feed and tend and love the world, then Jesus is going to call us out of that distracted pace. Too much is at stake for us to distract and work each other to death when we are called to love each other to fullness of life. The challenge to the disciples was to not give up on the love and presence of Jesus but to lean into it and hold that same space with their own lives. This is our challenge here, too. The space that Rachel held, the space that Jesus held, the space that generations before us held is now ours to love and tend and feed. Hear and accept this calling today, my friends. Amen.