

Feed My Sheep John 21:1-19

I'm sure that those of you who hunt and fish can sympathize with the disciples. No matter how much you know, no matter how great your patience, there's always the big one that got away, right? Or you remember those days when nary a deer walked within sight of your stand, or those days when every fish in the lake seems to have died, or at least to have gone on a diet. You know all too well that skill and experience are no guarantees of success.

But more broadly, who among us cannot recount tales of failure, even in our areas of greatest strength? What salesman always makes a sale? What banker can boast of never making a bad loan? What policeman catches every thief? What teacher has not had a student fail? Even Ted Williams in the year that he had a batting average that topped .400, still failed to hit the baseball six out of ten times. Skill and experience are no guarantees of success.

Peter and James and John and Thomas and Nathaniel certainly understood that. They had labored all night. They had thrown the net into the sea and pulled it in empty. Then they had thrown it again, and pulled it in empty again. And with each throw their hope shrank and with each hauling in their depression grew. Not even the rosy rays of the coming dawn could lighten their spirits.

And so when a stranger told them to try the other side of the boat, it was probably with more resignation than hope that they took his advice. Why not one more try before packing it in?

But this time, something was different. The net which had been all too easy to retrieve before was stubborn, resistant. Perhaps it was snagged on a rock – no, they could feel the net quivering, moving. They had finally caught something. And what a catch! The net was so full that they couldn't pull it into the boat at all, but had to drag it behind them as they strained against the oars, turning the bow of the boat toward the shore.

It was at this point that John suddenly realized that Jesus was the stranger Who had been speaking to them. What was it that convinced him? Was it simply because the stranger on shore had a supernatural knowledge of the location of elusive fish? Or was it that John recognized something of the character of Jesus – the Strong One Who provides all the needs of the weak?

Yes, Jesus had given the disciples all the fish they wanted – and more. But he had given them something else first, hadn't He – something that didn't look like a blessing at all. He had provided them with failure. He blessed them with failure.

And come to think of it, hadn't Jesus done the same thing when He fed the 5000? Before He did the miracle, He turned the disciples' attention to the fact that they were utterly incapable of

providing for such a crowd – at least, not in their own strength. It was only after they realized their weakness, their helplessness, it was only after He allowed them to experience failure that He blessed and broke the loaves.

But how can failure be a blessing? Well, isn't it true that those who have never tasted defeat are all too ready to place their faith in themselves? And isn't it the case that we tend to draw closer to God during our low times? Don't we seek His salvation all the more when we realize how close we are to the end of our own rope?

Just so, in today's passage from John 21, Christ allowed His disciples to experience failure at something they were good at, something they enjoyed. He thus showed them the limits of their knowledge and experience. It was only then that He provided a catch for them. It was only after their weakness was displayed that Christ chose to demonstrate His strength.

And what else did Jesus provide for His disciples? He served them a breakfast of bread and fish. At the announcement of the menu, we can easily imagine the disciples thinking back to the events described in our responsive reading, another time when Jesus served bread and fish on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. On that occasion, Jesus had taken five barley loaves and broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before a crowd of 5000 men, not counting women and children. After the feast, the disciples had gathered up 12 baskets of fragments. As they recalled that experience, the disciples must have been more convinced than ever that Jesus was capable of meeting all their needs.

But even more important to them and to us was the explanation that Jesus gave after He fed the five thousand: "And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst." More strangely still, Jesus had said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you."

Perhaps, as Jesus gave them bread on the morning of the fishing miracle, the disciples also thought back to the last time they had eaten with Jesus, at the Last Supper. Then, as he broke the bread and gave it to them, He had said, "Take, eat: this is my body, which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me." And now, beside the Sea of Galilee, Jesus was once again breaking bread, demonstrating His provision for them.

In other words, if Jesus first provided His disciples with failure, he next reminded them of His greatest provision for them – the gift of Himself, the bread of life, the blood of the covenant.

And as we remember Jesus' greatest gift for us, when we remember what Jesus did for us on the cross, can any of us doubt Jesus' ability to provide for us? After all, He has risen from the

dead, proving His power over our worst enemies, sin and death. It is this Christ Who bids us to come and eat of Him, to become one with Him. As we look at the cross and the empty tomb, can we imagine that the One Who gave up His very life for us would hold back anything from us that we need?

Yes, we see in this story of the empty net how Christ allows us to experience failure in order to draw us closer to Him in trust. And we see in the story of the full net the promise that the One Who has died for us, the One Who has risen from the dead will provide everything that we need through His love and grace.

But if we are not careful, we can look at these two lessons and come to the wrong conclusion. For it would be possible for us to combine our failures with Christ's providence and fall into the sin of complacency. After all, if we are as helpless and sinful as He is powerful, why should we try to do anything to promote God's glory and to expand God's kingdom? Why not just lay back and coast? Why not just "Let go, and let God?"

Now, such thinking is not totally irrational. It is, after all, true that Christ is the One Who enables us to trust in Him, in spite of our sin. It is true that Christ is the One Who overcomes our weakness with His strength. It is true that Christ provides for us everything that we need.

But Christ's blessings don't remove our responsibility to work for Him. No, we don't work for Jesus in order to be saved, but we should work for Him joyfully and thankfully because we have been saved. It is simply wrong to conclude that because of Christ's work on our behalf that we are thereafter excused from doing whatever He asks us to do. For remember: after providing for His disciples, Jesus gave them a job to do. After providing them a catch, Jesus says, "Feed my sheep." After serving them breakfast, Jesus says, "Follow me."

But it's precisely at this point that we can put all these lessons together in another, equally wrong way. Remember, we know that Jesus allows us to experience failure, and we know that He is the One who provides for us when we are unable to help ourselves. And so in the face of His call to service and discipleship, instead of falling into the sin of complacency, we might be tempted to lapse instead into despair. Knowing our failures and our inabilities could just as easily lead us away from humble service into the paralysis of weakness and fear.

It would have been easy for the disciples to say something like this, wouldn't it? "Lord, we couldn't even fish for fish successfully, and we have done that all our lives. How can you expect us now to fish for men? It wasn't a month ago that we ran off when You were surrounded in the garden. How can you expect us to feed others, when we are so weak in faith?"

And don't similar arguments come naturally to us? "Lord, I am but a child in faith. I want to do the right thing, but I continually fall prey to temptation. So, when people see my sin, why should they believe my witness or my testimony? How can I feed your sheep when I am so hungry myself?"

Yes, we know that we are saved by the grace of God, but just as focusing exclusively on the blessing of God's grace can lead us into passive complacency, focusing on our need for God's grace can also rob us of the confidence that God can use us as His servants. But the fact is that no matter how weak and sinful we may be, Christ does indeed ask us to participate in His ministry to the world.

For didn't Christ feed His disciples at least in part with the fish that they had caught? And if Christ put the fish in the net, didn't the disciples have to drag it to shore and bring it to the table?

And think back to the story of the feeding of the 5000. Christ broke and multiplied the bread, but the disciples were responsible for distributing it. Just so, Christ feeds us with the Bread of Life, but He commands us in turn to feed other sheep who are just as hungry, just as needy as we are.

So, how can we avoid both of these sins? How can we be shaken out of our complacency in order to feed His sheep? How can we gain confidence in the midst of our weakness in order to feed His sheep? We must remember that they are His sheep – in other words, we find the strength and courage to serve others because our greatest desire is to serve Christ. For how did Jesus ask Peter to show his love for Jesus? Not by wallowing in the guilt of all his past sins. And not by simply laying back and trusting Jesus to do all the work of the kingdom. No, Jesus said, "Peter if you love me, you will feed my sheep."

Now, Jesus never promises that this job will be easy. That's why He told Peter that Peter would experience the same sort of crucifixion that Jesus Himself went through. In fact, all the disciples except for John would eventually be faced with the choice to deny Christ or to die. And as each one of them chose death, and as John, the writer of this book, chose to be exiled to a barren rock of an island, they gave glory to God and credibility to their testimony to the risen Lord. By choosing to suffer rather than to deny Christ, they demonstrated their love for Christ in the clearest possible way.

No, we are not all called to die as martyrs. But even as we have been saved by grace, even as our failures and our weaknesses have drawn us to follow Christ in love and gratitude, we must follow Him wherever He leads us. Because of our love for Him as well as our love for others, we must feed the sheep as He did, no matter the cost to ourselves.

Yes, in the process, we might experience failure. People may refuse to listen to us. Our weaknesses will no doubt all too often get the best of us. But as we go on following Christ, as we go on living and loving like He did, as we go on dying to ourselves, taking up our own crosses, we can be sure, as sure as that net was full of fish, and as sure as the disciples ate that breakfast by the sea, that Jesus will provide everything that we need to take care of His sheep, and thus everything we need to express our love for Him.

Yes, it's easy enough for us to say we love Jesus. It's easy enough for us to say that we trust Jesus. But will we abandon our complacency? Will we shake off our dejection? No matter what it costs, will we feed His sheep? Will we follow Him?