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FISH TALE

John 21:1-14

Recently we have had a problem with our furnace in our home. We had the original heater in our house for more than 30 years. It was very reliable throughout that time, but about two years ago it quit working. We called for a repair man, and he told us the bad news that it would cost as much to fix it as it would to replace it with a new one. The choice seemed obvious. Fix the old, expecting there could be more problems down the road with the aging appliance, or get a brand new one. We got the new furnace. We were quickly pleased with that decision. The new furnace worked well and it was much easier to maintain. Replacing the filter in the old one was annoyingly difficult. With the new one it was ridiculously easy. Just flip open an easily accessible compartment, slide the old one out and put the new one in. It was so easy even a cave man could do it. Even I could do it. Then a couple of months ago our new furnace began behaving oddly. It still worked, but it was turning off and turning on repeatedly. Then one day we found it was running continuously. That obviously wasn’t good, but we discovered that it wasn’t actually heating the house. The blower was running but it wasn’t igniting and heating the air it was pumping into the house.

Great. Our old furnace lasted more than 30 years, this new one lasted 2. We called the guy we bought it from and he came out to see what was going on. What he found was at first concerning and annoying. He told us the HVAC system in our house was very poorly engineered and was a problem. The new heaters are all computer controlled. It seems that because the system in our house was badly designed the heater wasn’t getting enough air returned to it and the computer components, which the old school heaters didn’t have, would over heat and cause it to shut down. We were concerned that this was going to mean a very expensive overhaul of our entire system. Fortunately, it turned out to be a much easier fix. When we had replaced the filter in the unit we found out that there are different levels of filters, all the way up to a level for hospital operating rooms. We had reasoned that given my severe allergy problems we would want to filter out as high a percentage of irritants as possible. Could it be that the filter was the problem? That seemed way too easy. But we replaced the filter with a lower level one that is rated for medium sized residences, and now the heater works fine.

It was a reminder to me that more is not necessarily better. The process taught me that it is possible for more to be too much sometimes. It raised the question, how much is enough? The issue is not furnace filters and home maintenance, but it is all of life. In everything we do there will be the question of how much is enough. And that’s what I want to talk about today as we look at John 21:1-14.

JESUS PROVIDED FISH

Laurie and I watched a bit of a Padre game on Monday night last week. But the Padres pitcher gave up 4 runs early in the game. He was relieved by another pitcher who also quickly gave up 4 runs, so the Padres were losing 8-0. It wasn’t worth watching because the Padres’ offense went AWOL. It was dead in the water. It looked like they knew that game was hopelessly lost and they were just going through the motions to finish it. We turned the game off. Some time later I got a text from my son, Toby, about the game. He said, “What in the world is going on?” I thought he meant that the Cubs, their opponents, were scoring even more runs. I wondered how bad it was, so I checked on the game and was shocked. The Padres were in the process of scoring 7 runs in one inning, and suddenly an 8-0 blowout turned into a tight 8-7 game. In the Padres’ at bat in the bottom of the 8th inning Fernando Tatis hit a 2 run home run and suddenly, against all odds, the Padres were ahead 9-8. They won that game, their biggest comeback victory in years. They were totally amped up, their fans were euphoric. It was a huge win. It was awesome and surprising win. But the next morning they got up and it was another day. They had another game, and what happened the night before was in the past. They had to gear up and play another game because life goes on.

In John 21 Jesus’ disciples were in a place a bit like the Padres after that totally surprising win. They had just been through the best, highest moment of their lives. They’d gone from the lowest place when Jesus was executed, to the highest of highs when Jesus was resurrected. They were devastated by the death of Jesus, their hero, their Messiah. But then came the totally, unimaginable miracle, that Jesus came back to life. The excitement, the joy, the euphoria was uncontainable. But Jesus left them and they were asking, “Now what?” What were they supposed to do from there? Jesus told them to go back to Galilee, and they did. So then what? They’d had the biggest upset win in history, but now life was going on, and they weren’t quite sure what to do.

At one point 7 of them were together. Peter, Thomas, James, John, Nathanael and two unidentified disciples were in the area of the Sea of Galilee. I can imagine them talking about what they should do, and after some time Peter says, “Well, I don’t know about you guys, but I’m going to go fishing. I can’t think of anything better to do.” The other guys shrug their shoulders and one by one say, “I’ll go with you.”

I have heard and read some preachers and commentators who criticize the disciples for this. They say they were going back to their old life. There are some things I think we should keep in mind. Jesus told the disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit to come. That hadn’t happened yet. What were they supposed to do in the meantime? Jesus didn’t tell them what to do. They weren’t ready yet to go out and preach and make disciples. That would happen when the Holy Spirit came, but not before. So criticizing them for waiting as Jesus instructed seems unfair to me. Fishing was what they knew. They had to eat. They had to support their families. So they did what they knew how to do. They went fishing.

This wasn’t fly fishing or enjoying the thrill of stalking trout in a mountain stream, a thrill, by the way, that escapes me. This was about business, putting food on the table. It was a boat on the lake with a big net. There was knowledge and skill involved, but not fun. One of the things I didn’t like about fishing was the experts seemed to believe that fish are super early risers. So you have to get up when it was zero dark thirty and cold outside to go catch them. Well the disciples upped the ante on that deal. They went out at night and stayed up all night fishing. Their haul for the night was nothing, nada, zip, zero. They didn’t catch a single fish. They were supposed to be good at this, pros, but they got the same results I pretty much always got with my ineptitude. That had to be frustrating and humiliating for professionals.

As they headed toward shore they had the experience that many fishermen have had. A guy standing on the beach about 100 yards away asked the same question many others have asked. “How was your luck? Catch anything?” Humiliated they answered, “We got nothing. We fished all night long and didn’t even catch one stinking fish.” Then the guy said, “Why don’t you cast your net on the starboard side of the boat?”

Terrific. Now they’ve got some kibitzer giving advice to guys who were experts. He’s a football field away and he thinks he knows where the fish are. Right, of course, the fish would only be on one side of the boat and not the other. D. A. Carson is a great biblical scholar. In his commentary on John he wrote, “It’s hard to see how Jesus’ exhortation to throw the net on the starboard side greatly differs from advice contemporary sports fishermen have to endure…’Try casting over there. You often catch them over there.’ If there are some contemporary sports fishermen who have not yet experienced this delight, I recommend they take my children with them on their next trip.”

With remarkable patience, humility and politeness the disciples swallow their pride and frustration, say, “Yeah, hey, thanks for the tip. We’ll do that.” In resignation, likely figuring they didn’t have anything better to do on the way in, they toss the net on the right side of the boat, and when they try to bring it back in, they discover that there are suddenly so many fish in it they can’t even haul it into the boat! They had to row the boat to the shore towing the net, then collected the fish on the beach. John tells us there were 153 fish in the net.

Over the centuries people have come up with all sorts of theories about the significance of the number 153. One theory I encountered claimed there were 153 parts of the Torah, the Jewish law, that were to be read in a rotation. Another person claimed that if you assign numbers to letters in the Hebrew alphabet the numbers for the words “I am God” add up to 153. I’m sure that’s just what the disciples thought when they counted how many fish they’d caught.

Here’s my theory on the significance of the number 153. I believe it’s the number of fish that were in the net. It’s like John was saying, “There were 153 fish in that next! Can you believe that? 153! We’d never caught that many fish in one throw of the net. It was amazing!” Remember that John continually throws in details to confirm for us that he was actually there and saw these events. When John wrote he was a very old man. But his mind was sharp. As I look back on my life odd incidents and details have stuck in my memory. Lots of things have been forgotten, but there are a few significant moments that I remember and can recall little details from them. Apparently that was the case with John.

There are 27 varieties of fish in the Sea of Galilee, but only 10 species that fishermen seek. Those 10 break down into 3 broad categories. There is the Kinneret Sardine, but they are too small to catch in a net. Plus John says they caught large fish, which disqualifies the sardine. Then there is the biny, which is definitely large as it can grow to 4 feet long. However, it requires bait and a hook to catch it, not a net. So it’s out. The third category is called the musht, which is a type of tilapia. These usually are about a foot and a half long and weigh about 4 to 5 pounds. 153 of them would weigh somewhere near 750 pounds, which explains why they couldn’t haul them all back into the boat. Imagine a pile of 750 pounds of fish. If they put them end to end it would stretch 1000 feet, or the length of 3 football fields. No wonder John never forgot how many fish were in that net. It was a prodigious haul.

John knew who that man on the shore had to be. Jesus had pulled almost exactly the same stunt when he first called the disciples to follow him. Luke 5:4-10 tells about the incident when Jesus said, “From now on you’re going to fish for people, not fish.” They got the message. Luke says they left everything and began following Jesus. They learned that if Jesus wanted them to catch fish, he would make it possible for them to catch fish. If he wanted them to catch people, he would make them able to catch people. In this reprise of that miracle they connected the dots. It had to be Jesus on the beach. Who else could pull that stunt? Peter, ever impulsive, dove into the lake and swam to shore. He didn’t want to wait around to haul those fish back to the beach because he was no longer about fishing, he was about following Jesus.

JESUS PROVIDED BREAKFAST

When they all got to the beach and hauled the fish out of the water they discovered that Jesus had a fire going on the beach and was cooking some fish for breakfast. I wonder about that breakfast. Where did the fish come from? Had Jesus done a little fishing of his own and was he cooking what he caught? Or when Jesus wanted to make breakfast did he literally do just that? Did he just say, “Breakfast!” and it appeared there on the beach? John doesn’t tell us how the food got there, so we don’t know. There’s no indication of anything miraculous about this, so who knows how he came by the fish and the bread.

So Jesus gave them fish and bread to eat. If I were there I’m pretty sure this would have rung a bell with me. Hey, remember that time that there was a huge crowd that came to listen to Jesus speak? We got concerned because there were thousands of people and when it got late in the day we wanted Jesus to disperse the crowd so they could go get something to eat. The last thing we wanted to have to deal with was thousands of hangry people with no food to give them. Oh, yeah, I’ll never forget that. Jesus’ solution was to say to us, “You give them something to eat.” We thought he’d lost his mind. We were telling him to send the crowd away because we didn’t have any food. Boy that was frustrating. Right up to the point where he got those 2 fish tacos that had been that kid’s lunch, and he had us tell everybody to sit down in groups and get ready to eat. I remember thinking, “Oh boy, this is going to be great. Everybody is going to get one five thousandth of a fish taco. And these weren’t regular tacos, they were those little street tacos.” I will never forget my astonishment when he started passing out that little bit of fish and bread to us to give to the people, and it just kept coming and coming and it never stopped. We started with 2 fish tacos, fed thousands of people and ended up with 12 baskets of fish and bread left over.

Now Jesus is feeding us with fish and bread again. Remember what he was teaching us the day with the fish and bread. He was teaching us that he will give us all we need to do what he tells us to do. He told us to feed that massive crowd with the ludicrously small amount of food, and somehow he made it be more than enough. This incident today also connects us back to when he called us to follow him and become fishers of people, not fish. So that’s what he is telling us today he wants us to do. We are supposed to carry on that mission. It is an intimidating task and we don’t have the ability to do it. But today he’s reminding us, we didn’t have the ability to feed that huge crowd, but he did. What he gives us will be more than enough. That huge pile of fish we just hauled in is a graphic reminder that what he gives us will be more than sufficient.

IMPLICATIONS

This incident reminded the disciples of one major lesson. It is that God provides what we need and that what he provides will be enough. You’ve heard it from me many times. What God supplies is enough. The disciples were being reminded that what Jesus would supply them would be more than sufficient for them to do what he wanted them to do, more than sufficient for them to have fullness of life. This truth would be the foundation for their lives and for ours.

THIS PRINCIPLE IS WOVEN THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE.

Go back to the account of God creating the heavens and the earth. In that account you will find things repeated 7 times. For instance, the phrase “God saw that it was good” is used 7 times in Genesis 1. How many days of creation were there? 7. It is as though the writer wanted to pound into our heads the idea. of 7. There is an unfortunate chapter division in Genesis 1-2, because the 7th day of creation is separated from the first 6. It shouldn’t be. God intended that to be the climax of the story. But it is a very strange climax. It feels to us like the whole account builds to the pinnacle of the creation of humans, and in a sense this is true, for only humans are created in the image of God. But the real climax is the 7th day. Genesis 2:1-2 says, “Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing, so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.”

Wait, the big climax is God rested? Did creating take so much out of God that he needed a break? Creating the universe was exhausting, but then creating humans at the end of that tiring week put him over the top. He needed a day off. He did some really good work, but he needed some “me time” to recharge his batteries, apparently. Is that how it went? Not according to Isaiah 40:28. It says, “Do you not know? Have you not heart? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary.” Creating was not tiring to God at all because nothing tires him out. So why does it say that God rested? And why would that be the climax of the creation account?

We get some insight into that from the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20 we see those commandments which are a sort of Reader’s Digest version of God’s will for how we should live. These are 10 really big laws. Have no other gods before God. Don’t commit murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t lie. Don’t steal from people. And in the middle of those fundamental laws is the law that we should keep the Sabbath holy. Don’t you kind of think, “Hmm, which one of these is not like the others?” Don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, are all big, crucial laws. But take a day off every week? It doesn’t seem to fit. Exodus 31:14-15 is astounding. It repeats that we must keep the Sabbath holy then says, “Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death.” That’s crazy. Violate the Sabbath and you should die? Yikes. What’s going on here?

Imagine you are an ancient farmer in the Middle East. It is harvest time. You have a limited time to gather your crops. There’s a deadline. Your family’s livelihood is dependent on that crop. So as soon as the sun is up you are out in the fields harvesting. You work all day until it is too dark to see what you’re doing. You can’t waste a minute. Then Saturday comes. It’s the Sabbath, so you must do nothing. You see your Gentile neighbor out in his fields working all day long, and you’re not doing a thing. You’re getting behind! The temptation to get back out there hustling is intense. God has a message for you. God is saying he is the one who will supply. What you get working on 6 days will be enough, so you can relax on day 7. You will not miss out on anything, because God will make sure that what you get on the 6 days you do work will be all that you need. That is the meaning of the Sabbath. It shouted to the people that what God supplies is enough.

Adam and Eve were visited by a being who embodied the true meaning of a deadly snake. He told them that God was keeping something good from them because he really wasn’t looking out for their good. He was denying that what God supplies is enough for them to have fullness of life. They decided that the snake was right, what God gave wasn’t enough. And we are suffering the consequences to this day.

Abraham and Sarah were promised by God that he would give them a son, the one thing they wanted more than anything else in life. Having a son was key, they thought, to fulfillment in life. But then years passed and no son showed up. In Genesis 16 they decided that maybe God needed their human wisdom and help to fulfill that promise. They cooked up a scheme where Abraham would father a child with Sarah’s servant and they would adopt him. It was up to them to make it happen. God wasn’t coming through. So they carried out their plan and it was a disaster. One of the central conflicts in the world today can be traced back to them not believing that what God supplies is enough.

Jesus taught that we should pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” In other words, trust that God will give you enough for this day and don’t worry about tomorrow. What God supplies is enough. Paul prayed that God would take away some disability he had that he called a thorn in his flesh. It limited his ability to function and to minister he thought. He prayed repeatedly for God to take it away. And the response he got from God in 2 Corinthians 12:9 was, “My grace is sufficient for you.” What God supplies is enough.

THIS PRINCIPLE IMPACTS EVERYTHING IN OUR LIVES1.

The most urgent, fundamental issue for every human being is how can we get right with God and be connected to him. Until we have the sufficient answer for that question we will never be whole, never experience true life. So what do we have to do to gain God’s favor, to know him and be in his kingdom? That’s where this principle so radically impacts us. The question isn’t what do we have to do? The question is, what has God done for us? In Christ he made it possible for us to become his children and live in his kingdom. Here’s the key, what Jesus has done is sufficient. We don’t do anything but accept and trust what God has done for us in Christ. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this not of yourselves. It is the gift of God.” It is a gift. What do you have to do to get a gift? You accept it. That’s it. You don’t earn it. It is given freely and you just receive it. That’s how we get right with God. It is by what Jesus has supplied for us and for no other reason.

You might remember that there used to be an NFL team here in San Diego. That was before the perfidious Dean Spanos and his greed ripped them away from us. Many years ago Laurie and I had a friend who for 3 years was the head coach of the San Diego Chargers. One time he offered us the chance to go to a game and watch it from his box. We jumped at the chance. We had to hustle out of church on Sunday morning and make our way to the old Qualcomm Stadium. Our friend, Mike, had given us passes. When we arrived at the stadium we got to the entrance of the parking lot and I got out my wallet to pay the parking fee. But I also had to show them my pass. When they saw the pass they just waved us in. We didn’t have to pay anything. We were directed to a special area of the parking lot that was right next to the stadium. We went to the gate where people were entering, most of whom had paid a hefty price for a ticket that gave them admission to the stadium. We didn’t pay anything, but when we showed our pass they waved us in and directed us to a special elevator. We got to the elevator, which on my efforts I had no right to use, but we showed our passes, and they let us right in. When we got to the correct floor they directed us to Mike’s box. Again, we had earned no right to go in there. We had paid nothing and had done nothing to deserve entrance, but we showed our passes, and they let us in. During the game they brought food into the box, whatever we wanted. How much did we have to pay? Nothing. Our friend had done all the work to deserve to have whoever he wanted in his box. We did nothing. We accepted the pass and got all the goodies just by trusting in what Mike provided. What Mike supplied was enough.

This is what Christ has done for us. He has given us entrance into God’s kingdom and all the blessings that come with it. We have the forgiveness, God’s love and acceptance, his presence with us, the peace, the joy, the love, the hope of eternal life, the fullness of life. It is not dependent upon what we must do. It is totally based on what God supplies, and what he has supplied is sufficient. Nothing more is needed. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” He didn’t say, “Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you a whole bunch of stuff you have to be and do and will weigh you down even further.” He said, “I will give you rest.” We can rest because what God supplies is enough.

A big lesson in this story is Jesus was promising his men that he would supply them what they needed to do what he wanted them to do. What he supplied would be enough. I found this to be a hugely important truth to live by in my particular role. I launched off in ministry as green as pastors come. It started off well, but it wasn’t long before we encountered some bumps in the road. I found out that I disappointed people. I wasn’t what they wanted me to be. This was hard because, like the majority of humans, I tend to be a people pleaser. It’s tough when you find out that despite your best efforts you aren’t pleasing people. What really made it difficult was I had people coming at me with different perspectives on what my deficiencies were. I would hear that they were leaving our church because I should be something other than what I was, and what really made it hard was, they didn’t agree on ways I needed to improve. I tried to hear what they said, tried to do better, but slowly I began to realize I was never going to make them all happy. I was never going to be what they wanted because in many cases no matter how hard I tried and worked on some things, I just wasn’t good at it. It just wasn’t part of what God has made me to be. It almost defeated me. And then God was able to get that message that he gave to Paul through my painfully thick skull. My grace is sufficient for you. What God has made me, what he has supplied me, is enough. Time to just stop trying to be something I’m not and never will be. Am I deficient? You bet I am. But God doesn’t need my sufficiency for whatever ministry he gives me. He is the one who supplies what is needed. I just need to be faithful to what he has given me to do.

And the same is true for all of us. We don’t have to be something other than what God has made us to be. I hear the sayings that people throw at us a lot. March to your own tune. Be yourself. Yeah, but how do we do that when the world doesn’t like our tune and when ourselves are not enough? This is the great message: what God supplies is enough. God will make the little bit of manna I have gathered be sufficient. In that truth there is huge rest for our souls. There is peace.

This principle comes into play in every area of life. What if I feel like I don’t have as much money as I want right now? What God supplies is enough. I can be content and rest because I have enough today. What about down the road when I have to retire because people won’t put up with me anymore? What God supplies is enough. It always has been, it always will be. What about my sense of worth? The world doesn’t think I have all that much value. It’s not about the value I think I can produce. What God supplies is enough. Trust in that great principle.

In his book, *Ruthless Trust*, the late Brennan Manning told a story from the life of 14th century theologian, John Tauler. Tauler, weary of his own flaws, prayed for God to send him someone who could show him what he called the “way of perfection.” One day while he was praying he felt like God was telling him to go outside and he would get the answer to that prayer. Outside he encountered a dirty, barefoot beggar in rags. Tauler greeted him, saying, “Good morning, dear brother. May God give you a good day and grant you a happy life.” The man answered, “Sir, I do not remember ever having had a bad day.” Tauler was stunned, given the man’s woeful state. The man explained, “Whether my stomach is full or I am famished with hunger, I praise God equally; when I am rebuffed and despised, I still thank God…My experience of God has taught me that whatever he does must of necessity be good. Thus, everything that I receive from his loving hand or whatever he permits me to receive from the hands of others…I accept with joy and see it as a sign of his favor…By the outpouring of his grace, I have merged my will with his so that whatever he wills, I will too. Therefore, I have always been happy.” Tauler learned from that man the way, not of perfection, but of grace and joy. That man taught him what it means to live by the truth that what God supplies is enough, and that truth is revolutionary and life giving in every way, in every aspect of life.