

**More than Memories**  
**John 21:1-19 (Acts 9:1-20)**  
**May 1, 2022**  
**Rev. Joy Laughridge**

This week my daughter Vanessa and I were talking about what some of our earliest memories are. Most of my earliest memories are like snapshots or brief mental video clips of some short moment in time. One of those clips is of me looking up at some man in the A&P grocery store saying, “I’m not a boy!” because he had just remarked to me or my mother about what a cute little boy I was. In his defense, I had been given a very boyish looking haircut for some reason, but I wasn’t going to let it go without correcting him. Another early clip is of me standing in the driveway with our neighbor, Mrs. Hargraves, who was giving me a small porcelain jewelry box. I don’t know why those little scenes stayed with me, but those are some of the earliest memories that remain in my accessible memory bank and over the years countless others have been added. Our memories are things that are always hanging around in our brains somewhere as we go about our lives, but we don’t necessarily think about all of them all the time until something triggers a memory. Hearing a song, or smelling a smell, or finding yourself in a situation that is like a situation you’ve been in before – those are all things that bring memories to the surface.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Peter found himself in a situation like one he had been in before, and I began to wonder if the experience of making a miraculous catch of fish brought to mind the memory of the first time Jesus had performed a similar miracle. The story of the first miraculous catch is told in Luke 5. At that time, Jesus was just getting started with his public ministry. Peter was at the shore cleaning up the boat after fishing all night without anything to show for it, and then Jesus came by and got in his boat and told him to go back out and cast his nets again. When Peter did it, the fish filled his nets – there were so many that the nets were breaking, and he had to call for help. That day turned out to be a very significant one in Peter’s life, not just because he witnessed a miracle, but because on that day, Jesus invited Peter (and James and John) to follow him and become his disciples. Jesus transformed their vocation on that day saying that these men who fished for fish would now become men who fished for people. I don’t think Peter or the others fully understood what Jesus was saying to them on that day, and at that point they didn’t understand the cost involved in following Jesus, but they did know that they had been *chosen* and chosen to participate in something important.

When we get to the morning that John describes in John 21, it was a little bit of a disorienting time. Jesus had been arrested and crucified, but now they knew that he was alive. They had seen him twice already, but it wasn’t exactly clear what was going to happen next. Peter had decided to go fishing and 6 of the other disciples joined him. When morning came, their nets were still empty, and then this man standing on the shore told them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and when they did, the fish started filling their nets. You can see how this might have triggered their memories about the other time something like this had happened, and it could have been that memory that enabled them to suddenly recognize that the man on the shore was Jesus. Peter jumped out of the boat and started making his way toward Jesus. Maybe Jesus deliberately repeated the miracle so that they would recall how he had called them initially and understand that he was calling them now to follow him and carry on the mission in a new way. Maybe Peter was getting excited as remembered how Jesus had called him once and now maybe this meant there was being called and chosen to be part of ministry with Jesus 2.0. He was eager to get to Jesus anyway, but then, when he got to the shore he smelled something in the air. It was a familiar scent that was tied to a very different memory.

John says that when Peter and the other disciples got to the shore, Jesus had prepared a charcoal fire, and he was already cooking some breakfast for them. The smell of the smoke in the air was like the smell of the smoke in the air on the night Jesus was arrested. In John 18 we’re told that on that night while Jesus was in the courtyard of the High Priest being interrogated and falsely accused, Peter was

standing outside of the gate with some other people warming himself around a charcoal fire. While he was standing around that fire, 3 different people questioned him about his affiliation with Jesus, and all 3 times, Peter denied knowing Jesus. He had promised to be loyal to Jesus no matter what, but then, in Jesus's darkest hour and moment of greatest need, Peter had abandoned him. When he got to the shore and got a whiff of the smoke from that fire, did the blistering memory of his failure and all of the associated feelings of shame and guilt and unworthiness come rushing back? Did any earlier enthusiasm he might have felt about being part of the mission 2.0 get squashed when he remembered this ugly thing he had done?

I wonder about Peter, because I know that having memories of personal failure and memories of regrettable things that we've said or done is not an experience that is unique to Peter. Everyone has them. In our other Scripture reading we heard the story of how the risen Jesus appeared to Saul when he was on his way to Damascus. He was on a mission to intimidate and terrorize the followers of Jesus, and he was far enough along on the mission already to have built up a bank of memories that involved other people's suffering that he was responsible for. People have confided in me about mistakes that they've made and things that happened in their past that they wish could be undone. I have my own memories of things that make me feel stupid, or ashamed- things I wish could be erased from my memory and the memories of anyone else who can still recall them.

We all have the memories that we wish we didn't have, and sometimes, they can be haunting-like they are always just hovering there in your consciousness as you try to go about your life. There may be other ones that just pop up from time to time when something like the smell of a fire triggers them, and the problem that so many of us seem to have, is that we don't just remember the thing happened. What seems to happen so often is that we remember the thing, and then we start feeling all the feelings of shame, or regret, or embarrassment that we have about the thing. And when we feel those things, then so many times we start to hear and listen to a very unkind voice inside that says all kinds of things. Like, how could anyone love you or trust you after that? You're *just* a liar, or cheater, or whatever – and that's all you'll ever be. You don't deserve friendship, or forgiveness, or any more chances. There's no hope for you." Our brain supplies these quality, HD tapes of the memory again and again, and the soundtrack that goes with them says "this is what defines you." When these tapes and soundtracks start playing it's terrible, in part because it just makes us feel bad, but it's also terrible because when we feel terrible it has a real effect on our lives and actions. We may disengage from relationships because we see that memory and hear that soundtrack saying we'll just mess it up anyway. We may back away from opportunities to minister to others, because that memory and its soundtrack have convinced us that we are not worthy of ministering to others.

Was something like this going on in Peter's mind, when he smelled the smoke from Jesus's fire? Did he go from feeling hopeful about the future and what he and Jesus might do next to feeling discouraged and fearful when he remembered the terrible thing he had done? We don't really know what Peter was thinking and feeling, but we do know how we feel when we remember the things we wish we didn't remember and what happened next is good news for anyone who has ever seen those bad memory tapes and heard their soundtracks playing over and over in your head. There are two things here.

First, before anything, Jesus fed them. Did this spark another memory? The memory of the last meal they'd shared with Jesus when he broke the bread and shared the cup with them saying, "do this in remembrance of me." On that night, Jesus instituted a meal and a tradition that would help his disciples remember him- his life, his sacrifice, his forgiveness and acceptance, his choice to be joined to them. No matter who they had been before, no matter what they hadn't gotten right, no matter how slow they were to catch on, and no matter what kind of bad memories might fill their minds at any given time, Jesus was giving them something that would trigger the memory of him. As Peter ate with Jesus and the others, maybe he began to feel more at ease, maybe the power of the bad memory and the shame attached to it seemed to lessen as he ate with Jesus and remembered that Jesus had chosen him and called him friend.

Again, we don't know what Peter felt, but Jesus invites us to eat with him at his table again and again and remembering him can give us relief and freedom from those bad memories that can haunt and hinder us. Today, if there is some memory that is troubling you, some tape from your past that plays over and over causing you to be discouraged or to feel disqualified in some way, Jesus invites you to come to his table again where you can take a rest from remembering your failure, and remember instead what Jesus did to set you free from the shame and guilt of that failure. You can come to his table and remember that despite any bad memories, you are loved, and chosen, and invited to be his disciple.

That is the first element of good news here, and this is a second. After Jesus fed Peter and the other disciples, he turned to Peter and asked him a question. "Do you love me?" he asked; and he asked him 3 times. The same number of times that Peter had denied him, Jesus asked him if he loved him, and each time Peter answered that he did. When he did, Jesus told Peter to feed his sheep. In this exchange, Jesus confirmed the good news for Peter. They both knew that Peter had betrayed him, but here Jesus gave Peter the assurance that that betrayal and the memory of it was not what would define Peter forever. Jesus had forgiven Peter, and Jesus was telling Peter that he was not disqualified. He was still his disciple. He still had work for him to do. Jesus still very much had a place for Peter in the post resurrection mission 2.0. If Jesus was willing to do this for Peter, he is certainly willing to do it for us. Sometimes those memories of our failures will rise up, and that soundtrack that goes with them that says we should just give up or get out of the way starts playing, but Peter serves as an example, Paul serves as an example, and countless others serve as examples of people with ugly pasts that Jesus has redeemed and carried into a future that they didn't think was possible.

Memories of our failures can be painful and paralyzing, but the message that is proclaimed to us today is that they don't have to be. When we remember them, we can turn them into occasions to remember and give thanks for the amazing grace that Jesus lavishes on us. Instead of thinking, "I am so ashamed of what I did," we can say, "I am so grateful that I am forgiven and loved despite that failure." Instead of saying, "there's no hope for me after that," we can say, "I am so grateful that Jesus gives second (and third, and fourth) chances." Thanks be to God. Amen.