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Sermon: It Is the Lord!
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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore, Ohio
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Acts 9:1-6, (7-20), John 21:1-19

Prayer: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts ...

One would think that after thousands of years of study and debate and discussion, there would not be anything more to say or discover about the Bible. WRONG!

I am a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, a worldwide organization of people who study and teach and preach from the Bible. As part of that membership, every week I receive by e-mail a set of reviews of new and recent books published by Biblical scholars from all over the world. Recently I received a notice about a book entitled Sound Mapping the New Testament. The description of the book says that modern understanding of the Biblical texts comes from translations based on silently reading to ourselves the written words. But in ancient times, in the Hellenistic world, writings were read aloud, heard, and remembered. That difference between ancient and modern approaches to literature, argue the authors, obscures the beauty and meaning in writings such as the New Testament.

Part of the notion here is that the meaning of the text is not just in the words laying there on the page, but that part of the meaning arises in the interaction between reader and listeners, in the interaction between performance and reception. So the very meaning of the words might depend on the speech, sound and the duration and control of the breath of the reader.

In this kind of approach, the text is not divided into chapters, paragraphs, and numbered verses. Rather the foundational units in sound mapping are the syllable and the breath length of the reader, organized into sound groups and patterns by all the ways in sounds are repeated. Sound mapping in many cases intensifies the meaning of the written Biblical text but sometimes challenges traditional interpretations.

I was reminded of sound mapping when I read our text for today. There is one phrase in particular in this story of Jesus' resurrection appearance that intrigues me. It is in verse 7. The disciple whom Jesus loved, saw a man on the seashore and heard him tell the disciples to cast their nets on the right side of their boat if they wanted to find some fish. The disciple said to Peter, "It is the Lord!"

And then we have what must have been a very funny scene whereby Peter tried simultaneously to put on clothes to cover his naked body and to jump into the water to try to get to Jesus. He must have looked ridiculous!

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I wonder if those who heard this story being read laughed? I wonder if the other six disciples laughed ... I bet they would have for sure if Jesus had not been there ... maybe they did anyway ... mmm, maybe Jesus even laughed!?

But back to that sentence “I have seen the Lord.” I gave the sentence a kind of “nothing” reading when I read it a few minutes ago.

Now I want to focus on a particular sounding of that sentence that is only one of many possibilities: Maybe the disciples looked up when they heard Jesus and there was a long pause that stretched out ... then maybe the disciple who Jesus loved, looked away, leaned over to Peter, and whispered in Peter’s ear, “Good grief! It is the Lord!” ... as if the disciples had been guilty of doing something wrong and now had been found out. And of course, they had ... they had abandoned Jesus in his time of trial and crucifixion!

When I was in college, I was a debater, a member of a debate group at Emory University called the Barkley Forum. Our debate coach was an intimidating figure, standing 6’3” and weighing more than 300 lbs. He spoke eloquently with a very powerful voice. He usually wore a very serious facial expression.

Anyway, those of us who were debaters were about half-afraid, half-admiring of him. Whenever one of us made a mistake and feared a reprimand from this intimidating figure, we might disappear for a couple of days, avoiding him. It came to be a common expression, even a joke ... when someone would ask where the absent debater was, “He’s hiding out.”

Maybe Peter and the disciples were hiding out from Jesus. John tells us that they had seen him twice in Jerusalem. Maybe those experiences were so unsettling that they needed time to figure out what was going on. After all, Jesus had not yet given them any instructions, any marching orders. So they went home.

And they might well have been afraid of seeing Jesus again. They had not been reprimanded or scolded during the first two resurrection experiences. But they must have felt very guilty about abandoning Jesus. Peter especially would have felt guilty because he had denied Jesus three times and he knew that Jesus knew about his denials ... had seen and heard Peter do it.

Peter must have felt awful ... guilty, shamed, embarrassed, and yet still longed for relationship with Jesus, whom he had served and loved. Maybe that is why Peter acted like a buffoon in throwing his clothes on and jumping into the water. He was at the same time ashamed and desperate to repair his relationship with the Lord.

What did Jesus do to these guilt-ridden, shame-faced, feet-shuffling, head-hanging-down disciples? He gave them advice on where to catch fish, so many fish that they actually counted and remembered the number! 153!! Must have been some kind of record ...

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Then he fed them ... bread and fish ... just like he had fed the multitude at a spot not very far from where they were standing on the seashore.

No reprimand, no scolding, no anger from Jesus ... just good fishing advice and food for hungry fishermen, up all night trying unsuccessfully to fill their nets.

And then Jesus asked Peter if Peter loved him more than he loved the other disciples, a second time “do you love me?,” and a third time, “do you love me?”

John writes that Peter felt hurt that Jesus questioned his love three times, one question for each of the times Peter denied Jesus that awful night in the courtyard of the high priest.

I would bet that each of Jesus’ questions hurt Peter as if they were one of those whiplashes Jesus endured from the Roman soldiers. I would bet that Peter was almost physically sick, nearly overcome with grief.

And then Jesus predicted that Peter would die with his hands outstretched Peter will die on a cross, as had Jesus, to glorify God. Finally, Jesus said to Peter, “Follow me.”

By these words, we know that Peter no longer had to hide out. He was again fully trusted by Jesus. Imagine the relief, even the joy that must have flooded Peter’s soul in that moment.

We do the same thing as Peter. We hide out from God. Many of us carry around a “bag,” as it were, full of all the mistakes we have made ... full of the hurts we have caused other people ... full of the shortcomings that keep us from being the people God wants us to be ... full of all the things of which we accuse ourselves and full of all the things of which we are certain God would accuse us.

That bag gets heavier every day. It is so heavy for some of us that we can hardly stand ... that we can hardly walk. It is so heavy that it brings us to a complete halt, making it impossible for us to shine out with the light and love and joy that the world needs in order to establish justice in the gate.

Here comes Jesus. What does he say to us?

He says, “throw that bag over the side of the boat. You do not need it. I know all about what is in that bag. If you truly desire my love, you are forgiven. You only have to carry my love, not all of that stuff in that bag. You are forgiven, completely and forever.”

“Now come over here by this fire and have a meal with me. Here is some bread and some fish, fresh-caught. Fill yourself with good food. Strengthen yourself for the journey.”

“Now, about your journey ... I need you to be my disciple. Follow me and be a shepherd like I have been a shepherd. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

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From now on, that is your purpose in life. That is the direction for your journey.”

That is what Jesus told his disciples who had abandoned him when he needed them the most. That is what Jesus told Peter, who had denied knowing Jesus three times, in Jesus’ hearing. Those disciples had a bag of shameful, hateful, hurtful stuff that was so big and heavy, they actually left town, left Jerusalem, to try to get rid of it. But it followed them to Galilee ... that bag went overboard and disappeared when they recognized Jesus and when he forgave them in word and in food and in direction for their lives.

Jesus tells us the same thing. If we seek Jesus’ love, it is ours already. We are forgiven. There is absolutely nothing that needs to stand between us and God. All we need to do is accept God’s love and forgiveness.

Let us pray:

Great Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit of Love, it may be that everyone who is present in this place today has already come to you and accepted your love and your forgiveness. It may be that everyone in this place has given you their bag of stuff and you have lifted that burden. If that is so, we give you thanks and praise you for your steadfast and never-ending love. Thank you for getting rid of the bag of stuff that gets in the way of our fulfilling our purpose of caring for your Creation and all that is in it. Thank you for the freedom and power to share your love and grace.

But, O Lord, if there is even one among us who is burdened, like your disciples so long ago, by guilt, shame and pain, come to us and love us. Embolden us to accept your love, to accept your forgiveness. Give us the will and the power to turn over our bag of stuff to you so that you can take it away from us forever. Send us on our journey unburdened and uplifted, committed to the work of justice and stewardship in your Kingdom.

Precious Lord and Savior, we continue our prayer even as we prepare to rise to sing our final hymn. Hear our prayer in the words of that hymn:

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation;
enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, oh, breathe thy loving Spirit
into every troubled breast;
let us all in thee inherit;

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let us find the promised rest.
Take away the love of sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
end of faith, as its beginning,
set our hearts at liberty.

Let all God's people say, "Amen!"