

Camille Cook Howe  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
John 21:1-17

May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022  
but by the grace of God  
Remember Niger Sunday

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7...99, 100, 101, 102...149, 150, 151, 152, 153. 153 fish! They counted them. It was a boatload of fish and like all good fisherman they need to measure their catch for bragging rights. Now this is only the third time the risen Christ has appeared to the disciples, yet they decided to spend their time counting their fish...I love the disciples. But they needed to know how many fish were in that humongous catch so they could make the story come to life and prove it wasn't just the usual fisherman's amplification. "We caught so many fish we couldn't even pull up the net", sounds like an exaggeration. But "We caught 153 fish", meant they had counted, and the fish were real, the story was real, Jesus was real. The number is a sign of God's abundance. God showing up in the form of the resurrected Christ to provide for their needs. Their nets were empty but now they are overflowing.

Sometimes just like that your luck changes. But saying it is 'luck' is just bad theology because it assumes God couldn't possibly be at work behind the scenes – working through people or situations or 153 fish. The Christian term is providence. God working for good in our lives and in the world. When good things come your way, or someone helps you out, or a prayer is answered, an solution is revealed – don't say, "I got lucky" – just say thank you in the right direction. The disciples after counting their 153 fish should have just stopped and said, "thank you, thank you so much!"

Our lives are fragile and can change in the blink of an eye. A car crash, a heart attack, a tornado, a missed train, a fire, a crime – one event can alter the course of our future. The best analogy I have used for this is being side swiped. You are driving along, going from point A to point B, and suddenly – BAMM – shows over – you will not be getting to point B today, if ever. Life is precious. Nothing is to be taken for granted. Not one of us is an exception to this reality. 'But by the grace of God, go I' is the expression that we understand just how fragile our lives our and humbly we trust in and depend on God, every single day.

Nadia is a school young girl in Niger who became acutely ill with a kidney infection. She was hospitalized for several months. Now she was a very intelligent girl who knew she was fortunate to be attending a public school in her hometown. When she recovered and eagerly returned to school the head of the school told her she was no longer enrolled because she missed too many

days. She did not have the chance to repeat the grade, her educational career was over. Just like that – side swiped.

When life takes these turns, we need God's grace, God's providence, God's miracles. We need safety nets to come along and scoop us up, we need light to shine into the darkness.

They fished all night – in darkness – until at daybreak the light of Christ appeared. Jesus performed a miracle, not out of thin air but by using what was around him, disciples, nets, a boat, water, Jesus' presence and power. 153 fish! brought the fish to the fire and cooked it for their breakfast. Once again, Jesus has called the disciples together to share a meal, to be nourished, to be cared for, to experience God's grace. Jesus was their safety net.

After experiencing this abundant grace from Jesus, Jesus speaks directly to Peter. He calls Peter by name, Simon, son of John, do you love me? And then the commissioning, "Feed my sheep." Do you love me? "Tend my sheep." Do you love me? "Feed my sheep." Remember three times Peter denied knowing Jesus before the crucifixion yet Jesus does not ask for an apology. By asking Peter three times if he loves him, Jesus is giving him a new start and then giving him work to do as his follower.

Theologian N. T. Wright has written about how the love of Jesus is the motivation for the things we do. He says, "Here is the secret of all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay and ordained, full-time or part-time. It's the secret of everything from being a quiet member of a prayer group to being a platform speaker at huge rallies and conferences. If you are going to do any single solitary thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is what it is built on. Somewhere, deep down inside, there is a love for Jesus, and though (goodness knows) you've let him down enough times, he wants to find that love, to give you a chance to express it, to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give you a new work to do."

The disciples after Easter, after the resurrection, had new work to do. They were to become fishers of men and women, they were to be shepherds to God's flock, they were to feed the hungry and educate the children and protect the vulnerable and care for the sick. That's where we find ourselves – in the post-resurrection season being reminded of how blessed we are, how nourished we have been, how indebted we are – and the work we have to do.

Remember Niger is one of the best ways our church has found to fill that commission from Christ. By raising money, by visiting Niger, by sponsoring children, by praying for their community, we have been feeding sheep in one of the poorest countries in the world for over ten years. We have helped build 18 schools with over 4,000 students. Our church helped build 23 classrooms. Our members sponsor 33 students. We have given nearly \$200,000 to Remember Niger. And as Georgetown Elder and Remember Niger Chairman Robert Bell said so eloquently to me this week, "That's real money!" We are not here today to congratulate ourselves but to humbly remind ourselves of our many blessings and the fragileness of our lives and to remember our calling to feed God's sheep. Nadia the girl, I told you about earlier became sponsored by Remember Niger, so she was able to go to a private school and continue her education. She is

thriving and wants to be doctor so she can go and heal others like she was healed during her illness.

There is another girl that I'd like to tell you about name Houge. Her life was side swiped by tragedy, but Remember Niger became a safety net for her, a providential miracle appeared in her life. But instead of just telling you about her, I'd you to see her for yourself.

INTRODUCE VIDEO - <https://youtu.be/Lqrn9ZniYIM>

She says, "I don't have words to really express my joy." Her face shows her joy. She wants to start a school to help other children. Because when you receive grace and mercy and compassion you want to share it. Houge and Nadia did not just get lucky – they were caught in God's net of love and grace, fashioned for them in the form of advocates and sponsors, and classrooms and teachers, pastors, church members, and missionaries. They were blessed through the power and the presence of God working through people who love Jesus and have accepted the call to feed his sheep.

This is the call for all of us. Whether it is committing to sponsoring a child, serving dinner to our homeless neighbors, tutoring local school kids, by engaging in philanthropy or acts of service – these things change lives, they communicate God's grace, they feed God's sheep. I feel proud of our church for partnering in this work and there is so much more that we can do to express our love for Jesus, and acknowledge our common humanity with those in need. I feel proud of Kara for being an ambassador for all of us. I feel proud of the students in Niger who live lives of gratitude and seek to be blessings to others. I feel proud of our members who take seriously their call of service to others.

As we leave the communion table today, I hope you remember and feel God's love and grace for you. And you leave today, I hope you feel joyful about the privilege of feeding God's sheep.

All who hunger, gather gladly. Christ will nourish our souls. All who have been fed, go forth with the love of Jesus in your hearts – for that is the only tool you really need. Thanks be to God.

Amen.