

Overflowing Need

John 21:1-8

Have you ever noticed, when you're listening to a speaker—whether you're in classroom, or a lecture hall, or maybe even church—your mind perks up a little when a number is spoken? Words, words, words coming out of the speaker's mouth, and then you hear “five things you should know” or “three points”, and suddenly everyone picks up a pen or the notepad on their phone and leans in a little. I think that's because a number suggests clarity. I'm not sure I'm going to remember everything the speaker said, or even much of it, but if you give me a short list, a message with numbered points, my brain hears: *This is important. Take this away with you.* A number is like a little hook that my mind catches on.

So—did your mind catch on the number 153 in that story we just heard from the Gospel of John? Let me put that number in context. The disciples went fishing, as they often did, at night, as fishermen do; and they caught nothing, which happens sometimes, even to the best fishermen. It was a discouraging catch, in a discouraging time. In those first weeks after Jesus' resurrection, life just felt flat for his disciples. These guys thought they were going to be able to leave their jobs and do something really exciting with Jesus, maybe even change the world. But now everything seemed up in the air. Jesus had been killed, his project aborted. They'd seen him a few times after he died but he wasn't around in any way you could count on. So they just went back to the business they knew: fishing.

There was this one unproductive, gloomy night when they didn't catch anything. Just before they're ready to pack it in, they see a figure on the beach, who seems to be waving to them, trying to get their attention. “Do you have anything to eat?” he calls to them—which I'm thinking might have sounded like the most annoying question to a bunch of guys who were tired and hungry themselves, rowing backward in an empty fishing boat.

“Throw your nets over on the right side of the boat!” this aggravating voice calls—but really, what do they have to lose at this point? So OK—they do what he suggests. They throw their nets out one more time, on the opposite side from where they knew the fish would be, if there were any fish to be had. Which there weren't, clearly.

And their nets fill. Suddenly, so many fish that they start to worry whether the nets will break from the weight of them. So many fish, that they had to count them, so they could tell their friends a story about this great night of fishing—because that's what fishermen do. And there in their net were 153 fish. The number is right there in the Bible. 153. Why 153?

Well, you know about numbers. Numbers in the Bible often have significant meaning. The number 3 *always* points you to Jesus' days in the tomb, after he died, before he rose. 3 is the span between death and new life. 7 is a hint at something universal, because that's how many days it took for God to create the whole earth. 40—40 is a long time. 40 days Jesus spent alone in the desert; 40 years the Israelites wandered around in the wilderness before they got to the promised land. 12 is the number of disciples, an echo of the 12 tribes of Israel, God's people

from the very beginning. The number of people God needs to start a new movement in the world.

153—what’s the significance of that number? Lots of people have tried to figure this out. Maybe it was the total number of people who were followers of Jesus at the time he died. Maybe it was how many species of life that had been identified by the science of that time. 153 is the sum of the first 17 integers, *and* it’s the sum of the first five positive factorials. It turns out, if you sum the cube of the digits in 153, you always get 153.

Well, there you go.

Or maybe it’s just a *lot* of fish.

Because this is a story about a lot. Actually, the whole story of Jesus, in John’s version, is about a lot. More than enough. An abundance. It’s there in the way Jesus fed thousands of people with just five loaves of bread and *two* fish. In jugs of water, suddenly filled to the brim with good wine. In God’s house where there are many places, *mansions* even, enough room for everyone. John starts his story of Jesus by calling him the one whose “fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” (John 1:16) He ends it by saying there is so much more he could say about Jesus, so many stories, that if they were all written down, there wouldn’t be enough space in the world to contain all the books those stories would require. (John 21:25)

When Jesus shows up, John is saying, when God is present, there is *always* a lot. Enough, and more than enough.

Sometimes that strikes us as good news, and sometimes it doesn’t. Think about those seven fishermen trying to deal with the 153 fish they hauled up on the beach that day. Fish are messy. They have slimy bodies, and scales, and you have to get all the guts out of them before you can sell them, and it all has to be done before the sun gets so hot that the fish start to smell and turn bad on you. Fishing is a manageable job when you have a manageable number of fish. 153—that’s a little overwhelming. Abundance can *feel* overwhelming. The call to be part of something that’s bigger or more than we planned for can seem uncomfortably out of control.

Which is exactly how this church feels to me at the beginning of Rummage Sale week. You who have been doing this tradition for years know that there’s a predictable rhythm to the week, but this was just my second LAUMC rummage sale, so I’m still a little wide-eyed about it. On Wednesday, when most of the donations had arrived and were sitting in piles of paper bags and soggy boxes, I thought ‘Oh my gosh, this is terrible. How are we going to get rid of all this junk?’ As I pulled things out of those bags and asked “What is this?” I kept wanting to put things in the *Free* pile out in the parking lot. One after another of the rummage sale veterans would say, “No, someone will want to buy that.” And so those tables that were occupying every square inch of Creekside until just a few hours ago filled up with stuff. Stuff on top of stuff. Boxes of stuff underneath other stuff. Some treasures, to be sure, but lots of stuff that looked to me like it had no value at all.

And then those volunteers—scores of people—you, men and women from this church and quite a few people I'd never seen before, young people, old people, people who flew into town just to help—went to work on those piles of stuff. Every single piece of used, worn, discarded *stuff* was held by someone in this church. Re-imagined into usefulness, priced individually, put into a place where it could be seen in its best light. You were not afraid to get your hands dirty. You forgot your age and wrenched your back. And you turned that big pile of stuff into something that looked like a department store—a place where a sweater could be bought for \$3, a picture frame for 50 cents, a couch for a fraction of its value. And half of that, even, if it was still there on Saturday.

On Friday and Saturday, people come. They line up early in the morning, long before the doors open. There's a system for keeping track of who gets here first, because rummage sale shopping can be a competitive sport. Some of the people are bargain hunters; at the cashier's table on Friday, I met someone who said she was shopping to stock her antique store. But mostly it's people who can buy at a rummage sale what they cannot afford to buy anywhere else. I watched a woman think hard for a full thirty seconds about a pack of playing cards she'd picked up for 25 cents, and then take it out of her basket. Many of the people who were here on this campus this weekend—thousands of people who are *our neighbors*—don't come here any other day of the year. Many are people who don't think of Amazon Prime as a necessity. They find treasures among the things that many of us are happy just to get out of our closets and garage. And here, for as long as they were here, sometimes as they came back two or three or four times, they—and the *stuff* they purchase—they are treated with dignity and kindness, warmth and good humor.

Why do we do this? Why do so many people in this church community pour themselves out to take in all that stuff that people like us just want to get rid of, mess up our beautiful campus for a week, redistribute things that could just as well be thrown away? It's not for the money. Every dollar of the \$40,000 you collected from the rummage sale goes out from this church, through our youth or given away to the United Methodist Women's community partners. But even philanthropy isn't enough to explain the rummage sale. Writing a check is a lot easier than a week of hard work.

It's so much work. It's so much stuff. It's so many people. It's *a lot*. And all those people and all that stuff is messy...just like fish.

We who can afford it can usually keep messiness at a distance. We sweep it into the corners of our houses and yards and neighborhoods, even our towns. But in this week we learn that sometimes, *messy* is exactly what abundance looks like. *Messy* is what happens when a lot of stuff and a lot of need and a lot of people who are quite different from one another find their way to the same place. *Messy* is where God does his best work...in us...with us.

That's the work we're being called into, people of Los Altos United Methodist Church. All these years of rummaging have prepared you—us—for the kind of messy abundance that we will find as our ministries overflow—

- onto a campus in Mountain View that houses a winter shelter and a Saturday morning breakfast program and showers for people who don't have a home.

- into the kind of complications we'll run into as Compassion Week expands into an event the whole community has its hands in planning.
- into experiments like the Changemaker Initiative and a newly-designed youth program, whose outlines are a little unclear as we begin.
- into the unfamiliarity of a new kind of church that meets over dinner instead of in a sanctuary, and that translates the stories of Jesus so that they mean something to people who don't claim any faith at all.

It's going to be messy. But that's the best way for the Church to be engaged in real life. Christians who are serious about changing the world have always been called out of comfort and into disorder—to go to places they've never been before, to do things they have never tried before, to follow Jesus straight into the messiness that all those fish, all that stuff, all those people bring with them.

So take a little rest, friends—that rummage sale was a lot of work. But today—even in your tiredness—this is the day for saying, *Yes, this is the kind of messy, wonderful, abundant life that I—and my church—want to be part of.* And then let's do it.