

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 3rd Sunday of Easter, May 5, 2019.

Jesus was a man of many talents. We see some of these talents in our lessons this morning, including the ability to help the disciples stretch their talents.

In the lesson from Acts (**Acts 9:1-20**), the Risen Christ confronts Saul, who is persecuting those who believed that Jesus really had risen from the dead. Jesus engages Saul through a disciple named Ananias. This engagement turns Saul's life 180 degrees. From Saul the persecutor to Paul the apostle. It's a remarkable story, with a remarkable outcome. From the conversion of one man in the first century AD, to the world-wide Church of the 21st Century. It can be argued that we're here today because of this conversion. Thank you, Jesus.

In the passage from John's gospel (**John 21:1-19**), Jesus turns unsuccessful fishers of fish into highly successful fishers of people. From no fish into twenty plus centuries of growth, including the establishment of this very chapel. Arguably we're here today because of the energy that Jesus provided Peter and the others at the Sea of Galilee. It's the greatest of all Fish Stories. And the reason that this Story is the greatest is because the Story is true. From a hundred fifty three large fish to millions of worshipping congregations. Jesus said "Follow me." And they did. And here we are. An authentic Fish Story. Thank you, Jesus.

In thanksgiving for this remarkable sequence of events, we repeat the words of the Hebrew people. From Psalm 30 (**Psalm 30:13**): "You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy. Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing; O Lord my God, I will give you thanks for ever." Again, thank you, Jesus.

And the lesson from Revelation (**Revelation 5:11-14**) reminds us that it is not just the Hebrew people offering praise, and not just you and me centuries later offering praise, but "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the seas" offering praise. Thank you, Jesus.

We have a choice. Believe this Fish Story or not. Many do believe in Easter. We're here. Many do not. For those of us who do believe, who do offer praise, there is an on-going assignment, expressed beautifully in our gospel today. There

are three parts to the assignment that Jesus gives Peter. Part 1: "Feed my lambs." Part 2: "Tend my sheep." Part 3: "Feed by sheep."

Now, if this was a classroom, one of the students, would say, "I don't get it." To which, Jesus would say, "Follow me."

Jesus is a tender and a feeder. I don't which comes first. Does one feed first and then tend? Or does one tend first and then feed? The correct answer, it seems to me, is that "It depends." Depends on what? Depends on where we are in our faith development. What is our immediate need? Are we starving or bleeding? And then, when that immediate need is addressed, how do we sustain the treatment? More careful nourishment or another round of bandages?

As many of you know, my work at Johns Hopkins was with the Center for Talented Youth, providing appropriate academic challenges for very bright pre-college kids. The principle which drives the work of CTY is called the Optimal Match. The Optimal Match of what? Of talent and challenge. Of ability and challenge. Of interest and challenge.

What I have come to realize is that this notion of an optimal match can apply to every part of our lives, including religious faith. For example, what is the right combination of tending and feeding? Not only which comes first, but how does one sustain the treatment? Once every day? Once every week? Once every year? The optimal match will vary from person to person and situation to situation. And it doesn't have to apply just to very bright kids. It can describe the relationship of a loving God and any hopeful human.

Think of the decision of Jesus to employ a meal of bread and fish on the seashore. Not unlike the meal of bread and wine in the Upper Room. Whatever the location, Jesus uses a simple and familiar meal as an effective means of reminding the disciples of his love for them and their responsibility to share that love. At each of those meals, he could have overwhelmed or underwhelmed the disciples. He chose to whelm just right. It was and is a wonderful example of the optimal match.

You do this in your homes and with your children and grandchildren. And your children do this as they think about their mom and dad. Always trying to make

the best of a situation through weighing alternatives, weighing options, and then making a decision.

Today's gospel ends with the ultimate advice of Jesus for his disciples. When all is said and done, "Follow me."

Now, this was not a decision arrived at quickly. This advice carried with it the possibility of the Cross. "But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

Would Jesus have said this to the disciples if he had thought "Follow me" was beyond their capability and interest? Would he have concluded that the optimal match of ability and challenge was somehow out of whack? Maybe too much challenge, too little ability? I don't think so. Jesus knew his disciples pretty well. He knew their strengths and their weaknesses. He would not have asked of them something beyond their means.

What Jesus did leading up to the crucifixion was what you and I do when we are picking out books for children and grandchildren or indeed for ourselves. We settle on material that challenges but does not overwhelm. We don't want to bore, but we also don't want to discourage. We look for an optimal match. We try our best to feed and tend in a really constructive way.

In today's passage from Acts, Jesus says to Ananias, "Go, for he (Saul) is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Jesus knew that responding to this choice would be a real stretch for Saul. After all, Saul was persecuting the very people Jesus was now asking him to rescue. Fortunately Saul, now Paul, was up to the task. Jesus knew something about this individual that justified the match of ability and challenge. A huge challenge, but, as it turned out, within the capability of Paul. This acceptance of a huge challenge would cost Paul his life, but the acceptance would also usher in a new religious era, which you and I are a part of 2000 years later.

Now, I find this stuff really exciting, and I think you do too, perhaps without the optimal match language. Whatever the description, we are in for a really exciting ride. Challenging, yes. But stimulating? Absolutely! And we like it that way. We like optimizing our potential. It's a sign of our Lord's trust in us, which is the real payoff for you and me. We are loved, we are forgiven, we are loved some more. And we have the privilege of sharing that love and forgiveness with a world hungry for the same. "Feed and tend my sheep and then feed them some more."

Our Collect this morning speaks of the Lord's "redeeming work." What a joy to share in that work. Do we have the ability to take on this challenge? Our Lord thinks so. He died for us, thinking so. And he rose from the dead, thinking so. And he continues by our side in and through the Holy Spirit, thinking so.

He has trust in us. And, by our presence here, we continue to develop our trust in the Lord. For this really special optimal match, we thank you, Jesus.

Amen.