

Carpe Diem (from Todd Wynyard, *Rewilding the Way*, Chap. 12)

Matthew 7:7-11, Matthew 17:24-27 by Patty Friesen (July 7/19)

Our scriptures this morning of God's providing fish to God's children who ask and the hilarious fish with a coin in its' mouth to pay the temple taxes are symbols of God's rich economic as well as spiritual care for us. God gives us our daily bread, our daily fish and everything we need to pay our taxes.

In 1985, a deep summer drought significantly lowered the level of the Sea of Galilee. The lower waterline revealed large swaths of sandy mud around its shoreline, exposing a shallow sea bottom rarely seen by humans. In early 1986, two brothers discovered a large, fragile boat sunk in the mud opposite the town of Magdala, which is where Mary Magdalene was from. Three things about the boat made it deeply intriguing to archaeologists: 1. It was two thousand years old, dating from the time of Jesus. 2. It provided valuable clues to the life conditions of peasant fishermen during that time and 3. Its' wood was still intact and extremely interesting.

Archaeologists spent a decade restoring and improving the boat's structural integrity before they decided it could safely be put on public display. What makes this two-thousand-year old boat stand out from other relics of the period? Certainly not its make and model: this eight by twenty-six foot boat was typical of reliable, workaday transport on the lake. Not its configuration: like many of its kind, it had a stout mast, a sail, four oars, a rudder, and could hold around fifteen people. No, what made this boat stand out was the absurd degree to which it had been repaired and reused.

Like an old jalopy nursing along with spare parts, duct tape and a prayer, this boat had been nursed along by skilled shipwrights using poor-to-bad materials. The

craft contained at least seven and possibly as many as twelve -different types of timber. Whoever built and maintained it were master artisans and may have literally scraped the bottom of the barrel for any wood they could get their hands on. Theologian John Dominic Crossan describes the vessel: The boat was constructed by cannibalizing other boats. Half of its keel was quite adequate ate - but reused - cedar wood and the other half was rather inadequate jujube wood. Furthermore, its planking had been replaced not with new boards but with bits and pieces patched together.

Then one sad day it was no longer seaworthy. At that point, Crossan tells us, the boat was completely stripped of anything salvageable - stem post and stern post, sail and mast, oars and rudder, every single iron nail removed and pushed into the lake for its final rest, sinking in a graveyard of discarded boats near the Magdala shipyard. Two thousand years later in 1896, a drought and two brothers brought it again to human attention.

This boat shows us a rougher, grittier reality for Jesus' disciples than most of us imagine. This boat shows what life was really like for peasant fisherman under the conquering, commercializing, industrializing Roman Empire. It is haunting that every single iron nail had been removed before the boat went to its nautical tomb.

Remember things had gotten tougher by Jesus' time. For generations, ordinary peasant families had lived close to the coast and been able to fish freely while the lake was called Galilee. But at the time of Jesus, its name was changed; it was to be called the Sea of Tiberias, as in Tiberias Caesar. It was property of the Roman Empire now. Everything about it was under Roman control. Nothing about the lake was free any more - not tossing a net, launching a boat, or landing a catch. All fishing activities were

likely taxed. King Herod's factories for salting, pickling, and drying fish took the lion's share of any catches, and the empire controlled all coastal businesses.

The scrap lumber used in the boat's construction is perhaps an ideal physical metaphor for the overall economic situation of the period. This excavated boat, represents and reveals the taxation and poverty normal to civilization in Roman times in Galilee. So what did Jesus and his peasant disciples do in the face of such oppressive conditions? History is not certain so we'll have to do some guesswork. If we turn to the Gospels for answers, do we hear tales of James and John wearing Roman aprons and working at Herod's fish factories? Do we read reports of Peter turning in his catch to the authorities for taxes? Or do we read stories about the disciples fishing *anyway without working for Herod?*

It makes us wonder, was freelance fishing an act of resistance to the Roman empire? Instead of joining Rome's ranks of serf-workers for the sake of wages, did Jesus' disciples choose a divine insecurity and trust in providence? Did they assert that the sea was God's and did they glean their daily meal from the bounty of the waters, as promised in the Lord's Prayer? Give us this day our daily fish.

Through this lens of fishing-as-resistance, the final place where the resurrected Christ appears in the Gospels becomes all the more intriguing. At the end of John 21, Jesus appears to the disciples who have been fishing all night. All night. It could be that the Roman Empire expected all fishermen in their employ to go fishing at night. Perhaps this was a normal, imperially compliant activity. But since Peter declares it out loud like a choice that they have been fishing all night; might it be that fishing at night was a subversive act of economic self-sufficiency? Was fishing under cover of dark-

ness a way to avoid unjust authorities? Peter's actions call to mind the tales of Robin Hood who felt it their right to hunt illegally to feed the masses.

Whether they were obeying empire or resisting it, Peter and the disciples eventually head back to shore only to find the risen Christ waiting for them at a campfire, roasting fish and bread on the coals. He takes the bread and fish and gives it to them, just as he had with the bread and wine only days earlier, before he had been crucified.

What profound words does Jesus utter when they come ashore? A phrase both heartwarming and familiar: Come and have breakfast. The risen Lord, cooking breakfast over the campfire, liberated from the clutches of empire, liberated from the power of death. I'm still here, Jesus seems to be saying. I'm still with you, when you're eating, when you're cooking, when you're fishing. Trust that your daily economic needs will be met. You can count on me.

If this reading is right, fish become the symbol of divine trust and freedom. It is food caught at night by untamed disciples in an uncolonized space, right under the nose of the empire. Give us today our daily sustenance becomes an exercise in trusting God's great economy, plying God's waters and resisting the state-controlled marketplace. How empowering it must have felt for a group of peasant followers of Jesus - an intentional community that Jesus called the kingdom of God - to experience themselves as self-reliant and God-dependent, acquiring enough fish and bread not to be shackled to Herod's industrial economy.

No wonder the symbol of the fish became such a powerful image for the early church. It was a swiftly drawn sign for a body of Christ on the move - a body of people who met in secret under government oppression, who freely took care of one another

without hoarding and had no regular gathering places, yet somehow thrived as a parallel society even under intense persecution by Roman authorities. The fish symbol was a code sign - like a secret handshake for these earliest followers of Jesus. Organizers in Jerusalem or Rome would draw it in charcoal over the doorway of a hastily arranged meeting place. The sign of the fish was the original graffiti. An underground Christian, wondering if a stranger might be a spiritual ally, would draw a single arc in the dirt and then the other underground christian would complete the secret sign by drawing the second arc, completing the outline of a fish. It was a doubly inspired symbol because the Greek word for Fish - ichthus - works as an acrostic for the Greek name - Iesous Christos Theous Uoios Soter or Jesus Christ the Son of God, Saviour.

For the early followers of the Jesus Way, gathering in caves and catacombs under the sign of the fish, the fish symbolized an utterly different society, the interdependent and self-sufficient kingdom of God, in which worship and possessions were shared. When joined together, the covenanted body became a socioeconomic alternative, a body that disciples counted on to provide daily bread - not just for themselves but for widows and orphans and all who relied on their generosity. It was a parallel economy that stood in stark contrast to the kingdom of Caesar, which for daily bread demanded sweat, labor, defence and allegiance. Our scriptures this morning of God's providence of fish to God's children who ask and the hilarious fish with a coin in its' mouth to pay the temple taxes are symbols of God's rich economic as well as spiritual care for us.

Let us pray...Generous God, you cared enough for the poor of Jesus' time to provide daily bread and fish for them and care enough for us to provide for we who ask. Thank you for the Gospel reading today, and help us to trust in you more and more.