

Acts 9:1-20 and John 21:1-19

While there are a lot of differences, both stories we've heard this morning speak to the responsibility of God's people because of our faith in Jesus and our love for him.

Saul, or as we usually know him, was called into ministry on the road to Damascus. After the stoning death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, in Jerusalem, many believers fled the city. Some went to Damascus, which is in Syria, about 150 miles northeast of Jerusalem. Damascus had a large Jewish population in the first century. We don't know exactly, but it was in the tens of thousands. And Damascus was located along some of the busiest trade routes in the Near East world. It was a place from which the gospel could spread quickly. Which is what the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council, did not want to happen.

So Saul goes on their behalf. Saul is noted for his "zeal." Zeal in Jewish thought was often thought of as the willingness to go as far as shedding blood in the defense of the true faith. Saul thought he was doing God's will by killing followers of Jesus. He is authorized by the high priest and the Sanhedrin. They claimed spiritual authority over all Jews, so the local synagogues in Damascus would be obliged to help Saul, even if the local officials would not recognize his authority.

But as we know, Saul is stopped short on the way by Jesus. "Why are you persecuting me?" Jesus asks. This tells us that if we belong to Jesus, we are so identified with him that persecution of us is really persecution of Christ. Saul is struck blind and spends the next three days fasting as an act of repentance.

God tells Ananias to go to Saul, heal his sight, and tell him his mission to the Gentile nations. Ananias, understandably, is reluctant: "Could God really use someone like Saul?" Yes, God can use anyone! And God will use Saul, convinced of the superiority of the Jewish people and that God's favor is only for them, to carry the message of God's favor to all the nations.

Saul is healed, baptized, and begins proclaiming the very message he had been devoted to destroying just a few days earlier!

Peter's story lacks the drama of Saul's story, I guess. He is back in Galilee with the other disciples after they saw the risen Christ twice in Jerusalem. Maybe he is at a loss to know what to do. And when you got nothing to do, you may as well as go fishing, right? It's kind of like work, but not enough like work that you wouldn't want to do it!

Jesus comes to them after a bad night of fishing and he repeats the miracle of the great catch of fish that we saw first in Luke chapter 5, when Peter and the other fishermen disciples were first called to follow him. And he makes them breakfast!

As I mentioned last week, there is a certain mystery to the resurrection body. It seems as if the resurrection body can pass through a locked door. But Jesus, in the resurrection body, also eats food and is touched by the disciples. And here we see him cooking them breakfast.

There is a somewhat strange detail in the story that many people have wondered about over the centuries. It is noted that they caught 153 large fish. People have wondered if there is some significance to that number. And some have tried to find significance. The early Church Father, Jerome, explained it this way: There were 153 different kinds of fish in the sea, and 153 different nations in the world. The net represents the Church, and just as the net is large enough to catch one fish of every kind, so the Church is large enough for all the nations of the world.

That sounds great, but there's a more likely explanation: They caught 153 fish. No fisherman worth his salt would catch 153 fish and then not bother to remember that detail. They'll tell you about it every chance they get. We don't need to find meaning in every little detail of every story in the Bible.

The real heart of the story is Jesus' exchange with Peter. It is an undoing of Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus. Now he affirms his love for him three times. It's a chance for redemption. Saul's story is a story of redemption, too, but that's not the aspect I want us to focus on.

After every affirmation of his love for Jesus, the response is the same: Tend to the flock of God. Love for Jesus must be demonstrated with both obedience to his commands and loving service to God's people. After all, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey my commands," (John 14:15) and the two great commandments are to love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself.

These are different stories but with a common thread. Faith in Jesus and love for Jesus are inseparable from obedience to Jesus' commands and our responsibility to love each other and tend to the needs of God's flock. Faith is not a private affair. Faith is not just "me and Jesus." Faith is a calling to do God's work.