

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
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HEY, MISTER, GOT THE RIGHT TIME?

John 21:1-12

I had seen her around. But it has been well over four years since I worked in New York City and I could not quite remember what bothered me about her. We were back in the City to preach at an installation of an associate pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. Jane and I were walking up Fifth Avenue when she approached and asked, "Hey, Mister, got the right time?" I answered, "It's almost 2:45 P.M." "No," she replied, "I mean the *right* time!" I answered, "Oh, well, it's exactly 2:42 P.M."

When I saw the bright gleam in her eyes, I remembered her. And I could have kicked myself. I had fallen for it again. She struck like a rattlesnake after a dazed mouse. She rattled it off: "**Now** is the acceptable time of the Lord! ... The time has come, the moment is here for you to stop sleeping and wake up, because now is the time of salvation!" Romans 13: 11. I ask you again, do you have the *right* time, Mister?"

I tried not to let my annoyance show. She was only doing what she had been taught by some group or another. And although I thought her misguided, she *was* doing something with her time.

This business of the "right time" is troubling, isn't it? It never seems to be the "right time" for so many things. I wanted to tell the woman that I dislike all forms of fundamentalism or "ambush religion." I do not want to end up as a "scalp" on anyone's belt of "trophies." I want to get away from all negative, shame-filled, damnation and hell motivational tricks used as sorry substitutes for the awesomely good news of God's lavish love. But it wasn't the "right time" to have a serious conversation like that on Fifth Avenue with someone already convinced that I was going to hell. Most of us want peace to cast her beautiful shadow over Iraq, Iran, Haiti, Chile, Africa, Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere. But it's not the "right time." I want the United Nations to get serious with genocide in Sub-Saharan Africa, but it is not the "right time."

Wes Barry referred to the "gap" several weeks ago in Wednesday Worship. And the phrase "the gap" kept wandering around in my mind. Where had I crossed "the gap" before? And then it dawned: Jane and I rode on the New Jersey transit system and New York subways for four years. And we were warned at almost every stop "please be aware of the gap." The public announcement said, "When leaving the train, please be aware of the gap." And that's it, isn't it? It's not the "right time." We are stuck somewhere in the gap, the gap between here and there. We are all modern-day Princes and Princesses of Denmark, "The time is out of joint: O, cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right!" Our time: out of joint, not the right time, living in the overlap, the time between the times, stuck in the gap.

Hey, First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, got the right time? Or are you stuck in a gap?

The followers of Jesus at the end of the first century were stuck in the gap and looking for the "right time." Back then, back in the day that the narrative from John's Gospel describes, Jesus' followers were terrified and hiding behind locked doors. Or they were wandering around their old and familiar haunts, places they had been when following Jesus and wondering, were they next to face Rome's

cruel punishment? Their leader, Jesus, was indeed guilty; he was guilty of supporting a kingdom that would overshadow Rome and all other kingdoms of this world. His was a call to radical, basic, insurrection. Were they, his followers, also on the government's "watch list?"

They don't know what to do. How do they get out of the gap and into the "right time?" Clearly, they need leadership! They need someone to stand up and speak out; someone to tell them what time it is.

Simon Peter stands up and says, "I am going fishing!" What a let-down! Here they are at the dawning of a new age, and Peter suggests they go back to the way it used to be, back to the old and familiar. It is a suggestion that sound like moving deck chairs around on the Titanic as she sinks into the depths.

Peter cannot stand living in the gap, waiting for the right time, any longer. "I am going to go fishing. I am going back to the old, familiar, traditional ways. I am putting back on my fishing vest and hitting the water. Come on with me!" Oh, how I understand that response. "Let's go fishing! Let's get out of this mess, pull in our horns, hunker down and go fishing!" Once upon a time when I thought of leaving the ordained ministry, a time when I was tired of the constant pressure of the disputes in the church over race, Viet Nam and the homosexual ordination issues, I said to Jane, "Let's get out of this. Let's find a gas station that has a book store in the back next to a world class trout fishing stream and buy it." Jane said, "Let's go for it!" Scared me to death! Sometimes it is easier to live in the gap and wait for the right time to dawn upon you. It is always a temptation to go back to something familiar when confronted with the new or the difficult.

And it had already been three to four decades since the resurrection. And Jesus was supposed to have returned in a glorious "second coming" and usher in the definitive kingdom of God's reign of righteousness and peace. However, it had apparently not been the right time. Frustration, disappointment, despair weighted the early church down. "I am going fishing!"

And to counter this kind of thinking and temptation, someone in the of John's church community sixty or seventy years after the resurrection of Jesus, someone other than the author of the first 20 chapters, adds this 21st chapter to John's story as a ringing challenge to that kind of thinking and leadership. This chapter is an appendix, an epilogue, an addition to John's story by someone who has experienced Jesus' continuing presence in the church gathering for meals, prayers and worship together. How do we know that? The style of this chapter is different from the rest of the Gospel of John. Twenty-eight new words, not used in the previous 20 chapters, are used. It is an insight into the early church's inner struggles.

Simon Peter has been a leader in the early church, but he is certainly long dead by the time this chapter is added to John's Gospel. So he is given due respect. He's going fishing. And the disciples, that is to say, the church of Peter's time, follow the leader. And they all go with him.

Ah, but here it comes. Don't miss it! They fish all night and do not catch a thing! Not a single minnow. Nada! Nothing! And then the disciple, the one identified simply as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," spots Jesus on the shore building a fire to cook a shore breakfast. And then the commanding presence of the risen and living Lord, the One really in charge, says from the shore, "Try the other side." It is as though, Jesus has said, "Cast your nets into the waters of grace and haul in the catch. Get back on task. Throw your attention and intellect into the pool of significant and meaningful ministry and redeem the times, whether it's the right time or not. For it is my time, and I am with you until the very end of all times!"

In other words, Jesus guides the church. Still, today, this very day, Jesus guides the church. He calls

First Presbyterian to focus on reaching out and drawing all people to him. He calls us to travel this awesome journey of faith together as loving brothers and sisters in Christ. "Try the other side."

"Try the other side." You tried the "other side" and Loaves and Fishes was birthed. You cast your nets on the "other side" and Christ Care Groups began. The "other side" was tried and a new experience of Maundy Thursday happened. What is awaiting First Church on the "other side" these days? Is it a renewed sense of community; a move forward in Young Adult ministry, a radical approach to hospitality, to generosity and a depth of stewardship that will foster joyful sharing? On every front we are being challenged to engage in the "other side." The opportunities of taking seriously "environmental stewardship" are breathtaking: bring your own cups to church and save a forest of coffee cups, get the church newsletter online.

Shall we fish all night and catch nothing, or shall we try the other side? The changing culture, the advances in communications, the new frontier of cyberspace - all are tidal pools teeming with life and opportunity for the cause of Christ. "Try the other side!" It is time, it is always the "right time, Mister" and way past time, to decide again and again whether we are going to sit around cutting bait or go fishing!

Let me tell you a story that points to the same challenge of the right time. It is about a young camel and his mother. The mother camel noticed that her son was worried about something. "What's wrong?" she inquired. "Oh," he replied, "the other animals are making fun of me. They laugh at my long legs, the hump on my back, the soft pads on my feet and my long and beautiful eyelashes."

"Darling," she said, "we camels are perfectly made for the hot desert climate. Our long legs keep our body far above the scorching desert heat trapped in the sand. And our humps carry enough water for us to travel from one end in the desert to the other end without needing extra water. Our pads on the bottom of our feet spread out on the soft sands and allow us to move fast and sure footed. Horses can't keep up with us. And when the winds blow and the sands drift into the eyes of the other animals in the desert, our long eyelashes protect our eyes. Darling, let them all laugh if they want, but we camels are perfectly made for the desert and its heat!"

The little camel thought for a moment. Then he said, "So we are made exactly right for the heat of the desert with our long legs, water filled humps, large soft pads on our feet and our long and beautiful eyelashes! Mom, then what are we doing here in a zoo?"

Amen.