

## “Have You Had Breakfast?”

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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John 21:1–19

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Have you had breakfast?

Most of you probably have. Perhaps a few of you did not, either because you weren't hungry or you didn't have enough time. And when worship is over, you'll be eager to make your way upstairs to the fellowship hall for any goodies that have been set out for coffee hour. Who says that breakfast can't be at 11:00?

For myself, I admit, breakfast isn't my favorite meal. I much prefer dinner. And breakfast is often just thrown together, something merely to get through, even at some restaurants that supposedly specialize in breakfast, but where the eggs are cold and the pancakes are heavy.

But even so, it's a meal I won't skip. I can't. If I don't have something to eat as I start my day, then I'm just not as productive.

I guess I listened to Mom, who knew that her children needed to eat breakfast if they were going to do okay at school. Mom was right, and so are lots of other moms as well. If you're going to handle the day, you've got to have your breakfast.

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The Bible passage I read a few minutes ago is about breakfast, and the importance of breakfast.

This was not your typical, everyday breakfast. This was breakfast made by an unexpected chef, and was served at an unexpected setting.

More about the chef in a bit. But the setting for this special meal, well, it was the beach. The disciples, you see, had been fishing, a job they had done for years, a job which had been their profession. They'd been fishing all night, but despite their years of professional experience they had nothing to show for their nightlong labor, nothing at all. Tired and frustrated, they were about to call it quits when a shout from the shore drew their attention. There, on the beach, was a man, calling out to them. “Hey, kids. Have you any fish?”

Now I think you'll agree with me: *Not the best question to ask.*

They could have ignored him, this stranger and his annoying question. But they don't. They answer him, truthfully. “Uh, no. No fish. Not a bite. Not a nibble,” they reply, trying (almost successfully) to hide their annoyance. And hoping he'll just go away.

But the man calls out to them again. “Cast your nets on the *other* side of the boat.”

Oh, yeah, right. As if *that's* going to work, as if there is some big difference between port and starboard for fish swimming to and fro down there. Gee, why didn't *we* think of that?

Well, what have they got to lose? So the forlorn and failing fishermen try one more time, and throw their nets out on the right side of the boat. And don't'ya know? The nets

that had been empty come back full, overly full, so full that the net with its catch could not be pulled out of the water and over the gunwale of the boat, but instead had to be dragged to shore in the water, like some aquatic trailer.

And then it was at that moment that one of the disciples realized, finally, what was going on: the stranger on the shore, the one whose seemingly senseless advice had made their empty nets full, it was Jesus, their master, their Lord.

Now it all makes sense to them. For so often in their time with Jesus, these supposedly experienced fisherman would find that they could catch no fish at all unless and until Jesus helped them. And when they did catch fish, with his help, the catch would be outstanding, even miraculous. That was how things always seemed to go with Jesus: failure without his help, overwhelming success with it.

And now it had happened again. They had been catching no fish, and then they received help from that stranger on the shore, help that led to a catch that was overwhelming, that was truly miraculous. *Who else* could that stranger be, but their Lord? Who else but Jesus could move the immovable, could have that effect on their effectiveness?

So they get to shore, dripping wet, their massive catch of fish flopping around and busting out of the nets. And sure enough, Jesus is there: *Jesus*, the one whose suffering had sent them scattering, yes, the one who had been dead, but the one who now was alive, whom they had seen alive over the last few days at moments of his choosing, surprising them, blessing them, breathing life and peace on them. Their Lord, not merely alive but *risen*, was there, on the beach.

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He stands there on the beach, and then he asks them a question, not a deep question, just a simple question:

“Want some breakfast?”

Well, after a long night at work, they no doubt needed breakfast. And, sure, they accepted his offer. But they knew, especially Peter, that this was no ordinary breakfast, that there was deep meaning in this breakfast, the kind of meaning that brings down and lifts up, the kind of meaning that makes you catch your breath with despair at yourself and awe at the Holy.

For as they near Jesus, as they arrive at the place of his invitation, they see that Jesus has prepared breakfast . . . on a charcoal fire.

Yes: a charcoal fire. And that’s when Peter must have been quite worried. For the last time Peter had stood near a charcoal fire was when he had denied Jesus.

That’s right. It had been when Jesus was arrested. Peter was outside the high priest’s palace, and he stood with others there around a charcoal fire, keeping warm. He tried to blend in. He tried to be inconspicuous, hoping that no one would notice him. But he was noticed. Three times he was asked, around that charcoal fire, if he was one of the disciples of Jesus. And three times he denied it. “Jesus? Who? No, I don’t know him. Never met him before in my life.”

That’s what Peter said, alongside a charcoal fire. So, to Peter, a charcoal fire was a reminder of his denial, his moment of greatest, deepest failure.

And now he stood near a charcoal fire again, invited there by Jesus, the very one whom he had denied. But what should have been a symbol of disobedience, failure, and shame

was now a symbol of forgiveness, acceptance, and new life. Lovingly, graciously, with the simple invitation, "Come have breakfast," Jesus takes a reminder of Peter's worst day and his most deplorable action, and transforms it.

As Peter approached the fire, I wonder if he worried at what this would mean, if he worried that his denial of Jesus would be matched by Jesus' own denial of him.

But, no: instead, the charcoal fire is transformed, from symbol of failure to symbol of grace. It becomes the setting for the meal Jesus gives to Peter and his friends. It becomes part of the "where" and "how" of Peter's being fed by his Lord, who does not reject him but forgives him.

So Jesus feeds Peter, and the other disciples, too. And then, alongside that charcoal fire, as if to mark its transformation (perhaps still unrecognized by Peter), Jesus asks him a question.

*"Do you love me?"*

*"Yes, Lord."*

*"Feed my sheep."*

Three times this exchange happens, to match the three times Peter had denied Jesus. And from that exchange, Peter learns something very important. Peter is to feed others, because he has been fed, a meal he has been given not because of his successes but in spite of his failures. He has work to do, but it's work that is based on grace and forgiveness, work that he cannot do *without* that grace and forgiveness. Just as without the Lord's help this experienced fisherman could not fish, so too without the Lord's help he cannot feed the sheep. He cannot do it, without first being fed by Jesus, who provides him what he needs as a gift of blessing and forgiveness.

Peter needed to have breakfast. For he had work to do, and there was no doing it without breakfast.

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The same goes for us. Jesus calls us, as well, to feed his sheep: to love them, to give to them, to bless them, to teach them. But he calls us to that labor after he has fed us. For it is work we are incapable of doing on our own. We cannot do that work unless and until we have been fed.

Let's not fool ourselves or flatter ourselves. To love each other, to give to each other, to bless each other: those sound like nice, easy things to do. But too often these seemingly simple tasks are truly beyond us. We have within us neither the capacity nor the desire to love as Jesus directs us to love. In and of ourselves, we have nothing to give as Jesus directs us to give. From within ourselves, we have no Christlike blessing to impart. On our own, we know nothing of importance to teach. When it comes to this task of feeding the sheep, we find we are stuck: distracted by our successes, trapped by our failures.

You see, the lost cannot lead. The blind cannot show the way. The hungry have no feast to serve. Without Christ we are lost, blind, and hungry.

It comes down to this: We cannot feed his lambs unless we have first been fed by the Shepherd.

But Jesus calls us to breakfast. And there he would feed us. We see the meal he has prepared, and it is served with forgiveness for our failures that he knows so well, and it is served with hope for our future, which he likewise knows so well.

We need this meal. We need what Jesus feeds us.  
For in that meal there is new life and new hope.  
In that meal is the power to raise the fallen and the failed.  
In that meal is acceptance for those who can't accept themselves.  
In that meal is promise for those who can't seem to keep promises and  
commitment for those unable to commit.  
In that meal, Jesus would feed . . . us:  
the fallen,  
the failed,  
the stingy in acceptance,  
the breakers of promises and the commitment-averse.

That's who we are, and Jesus wants to feed us.

And as Jesus feeds us, he gives us what we truly need. He gives us forgiveness, even when we've felt that we're unforgivable. He gives us hope, even when we've felt hopeless. He gives to us new possibilities, even as we've despaired of the burdens under which we struggle.

Jesus feeds us, and in that meal he gives us all these. And having been fed, then we are able to feed others, with the same meal that Jesus has given us: a meal of forgiveness and promise and possibility and commitment and hope. Fed by our Lord, we are able to extend that same grace to others.

And so I ask you:

Have you had breakfast?