A Meal on the Shore
John 21 as Resource for Theological Reflection in Ministry

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Theological reflection that is free to imagine a new world, enlightened by the vision of God’s reign, draws strength from communal styles of strategic conversation that shape collective action extending far beyond what any single member can do.

As a church with a rich and sometimes turbulent history, we draw upon a storehouse of tradition as we seek to bring the Gospel into ever-changing cultures, events, and circumstances. Like Matthew’s scribe, ministers are called again and again into that storehouse to bring forth “the new and the old” that will speak most authentically in our own times (Matt 13:52; all scriptural quotations are taken from The New American Bible).

In this article, I propose that the postresurrection appearance of Jesus recounted in the twenty-first chapter of the Fourth Gospel can become for ministers today both an “old” and a “new” source for practical wisdom through connecting this powerful narrative with the movements of theological reflection for ministry. After a brief overview of widely recognized elements in such theological reflection, I describe how the principal narrative movements in John 21 suggest a model for such reflection that can engage our pastoral imagination.

While scholars see John 21 as an independent account added to the “conclusion” represented by John 20:30-31, it appears in all manuscripts and thus is considered to be authentically part of the Fourth Gospel (see Brown, 1078). It draws on:

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The “decidedly ecclesial focus” of the chapter (Perkins, 984) makes it especially helpful for our purposes, as we consider its relevance for ministry today.

Before proceeding with this reflection, I recommend that you turn to John 21:1-25 and read it slowly and prayerfully. Notice the vivid details of setting, action, and words in this vital witness to the faith of the Johannine community. Place yourself in the scenes and pay attention to your reactions.

The Movements of Theological Reflection

Practical theologians such as Don Browning, Thomas Groome, Patricia O’Connell Killen, and John de Beer, Robert Kinast, and James and Evelyn Whitehead have provided approaches to theological reflection that ministers find pastorally supportive. In Kinast’s succinct phrase, the various methods of theological reflection represent “experience correlated with tradition for the sake of praxis” (Kinast 2000, 3). The rhythm that is common to these approaches typically begins with naming and describing the significant experiences of our ministry within the context of prevailing practices, including the key dimensions of culture. Then, these experiences and practices are brought into mutually critical, receptive, and imaginative conversation with significant aspects of Christian tradition, as that tradition is known through multiple practices and practitioners. In the insights that emerge, we reshape our practices so as to witness more faithfully to God’s kingdom. The conversation that is integral to this process can take place in multiple settings, groups, and pastoral endeavors: from parishes to academic institutions, from inner-city youth ministry to the strategic planning of parish councils to personal spiritual formation. Wherever it occurs, it can also appropriately be named as “practical theology”: “The structure of theology and the structure of these concrete practices are the same” (Browning, 9).

The models and methods of theological reflection, to use the Whiteheads’ descriptors, must be “portable,” “performable,” and “communal” in order to be adopted by ministers and sustained over time (Whitehead and Whitehead, 3). Such reflection becomes the context for transformation—of the participants, their ministerial settings and the world—for the sake of greater faithfulness to the reign of God. I believe that it must also engage the imagination in order to spark new theological insights and practical possibilities.
Practical theology is concerned with drawing forth, from the rich storehouse of Christian tradition, the things that can best orient our practices of discipleship today. Let us now consider John 21 as a narrative that illuminates the movements of theological reflection for ministers. Placing ourselves with the disciples in the boat and on the shore, let us imagine the “fish” in John 21 as the abundant resources—continually “caught” from our experiences, prevailing practices, cultures, Scripture, and tradition—through which grace is made available to us by a gracious God. The actions of Jesus and the disciples, then, can be considered as the paradigmatic movements of theological reflection that strengthen us for faithful ministry and growth in the kind of “wisdom” that, as outlined by Thomas Groome, is a “holistic human activity that includes cognition, affection, and volition and engages and shapes people’s whole ‘being’ in ways that are historically responsible and life-giving for self and others” (Groome, 32).

In the Boat: Casting, Catching, and Hauling In: “Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something.” (v. 6)

The first movement of theological reflection is evoked in the disciples’ casting, catching, and hauling the catch in to shore, at dawn, under the direction of Jesus. The futile fishing of the night before may be judged, in Brown’s striking characterization, as “aimless activity undertaken in desperation” (Brown, 1096). As Culpepper comments, the central interplay for the Johannine author between light and darkness is starkly evidenced here, in the lack of success for those who lack illumination (Culpepper, 246). Ministers today might consider whether we also are like fishers who blindly and stubbornly refuse to try another side of the boat, another part of the sea. Failures in ministry may open us to glimpse and listen to the figure on the shore who directs us to fish in new ways.

When we do see, hear, and respond, we may receive a surprising abundance! Interpretations vary regarding the significance of the reference in John 21:11 to the catch of one hundred fifty-three fish, yet scholars agree that it emphasizes the universality and magnitude of the church’s mission. For Christians today, the number and diversity of such a catch can invite us into a stance of reverent wonder at the wealth of “new” ministers and ministries emerging in our times. Having the trust to follow the directions of the stranger on the shore, we find our nets bulging with fresh species of fish to haul forth for our theological reflection. Consider some contemporary examples:

* The experiences of a fifty-year-old lay minister presiding at her parish’s wake services

* A campus ministry team of priests, vowed religious, and laypeople working toward collaborative styles and shared leadership
• A diocesan formation program designed for participation by peoples who have emigrated from three continents and several cultures

• Pastors struggling to provide sensitive pastoral care in the wake of sexual abuse scandals

• Feminist and liberation theologians uncovering scriptural insights hidden by patriarchy and oppression

• Christians engaging in new modes of cultural and social analysis that shape new forms of action for justice and for multicultural community.

In these and innumerable other examples, we are catching and hauling in new “fish.”

So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.” (v. 7)

Precisely in the moment of astonishing success, the Beloved Disciple is able to recognize the stranger on the shore as Jesus. Ministers today, in acknowledging the unwieldy profusion in their nets, are well reminded to grow in the disposition to “find God in all things.” Elizabeth Dreyer lays this out in her development of the trinitarian theological roots for what she calls a “spirituality of everyday life.”

First, the Holy Spirit breathes through our daily experiences as gift, as contact point for God and humans, and as creative power. Second, God, the Creator of all good things, has made that creation in God’s own image and likeness, so that even though marred by sin, the stuff of our daily existence in its profusion and diversity continues to carry that inherent goodness. Third, God become human in Incarnation has “irrevocably transformed” creation and history through intimate participation in them. “Therefore, our task as Christians is not to ‘bring’ Christ to the world, but to be on the lookout, to discover and uncover the Christ that is already present” (Dreyer, 63). Hauled in from the nets of ministry, the stuff of our individual and collective lives, treasured in tradition and newly emerging, can reveal the presence of the Divine.

On the Shore: Choosing, Cooking, Eating, and Conversing: “When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish you just caught.’” (vv. 9-10)

Having directed the miraculously abundant catch, Jesus nevertheless asks that some—not all—of the catch be brought to the meal. All is his gift, whether hauled from the sea or already frying on the fire; yet some fish will make a better meal than others. And so, the way we choose and cook our fish—that is, the criteria and style through which we bring together selected aspects of our experience, culture, and Christian tradition, to use the Whiteheads’ categories (see Whitehead
and Whitehead, 3–12)—significantly shapes the quality of our reflection and the resulting pastoral action. Our practical wisdom is needed to discern God’s work in our times and settings, to sift through the catch for the sources most necessary and nourishing for our communities.

For ministers today, the very abundance of practice-based experiences can threaten to break our individual and collective nets. Stress and burnout are occasioned, at least in part, by frantic activity without sufficient time and space for the meals and conversations on the shore. And yet, in John 21, the net does not break; unity in mission is maintained. Through regular and disciplined theological reflection, we can gain the ability and confidence to continue to fish and together to haul our catch in to shore, with confidence that despite the clash of ministerial styles and viewpoints, our own ecclesial nets will remain intact.

Jesus said to them, “Come, have breakfast.” . . . Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish. (vv. 12-13)

As the previous section implies, our preparation and engagement in the “breakfast” of theological reflection is guided at all stages by Jesus. The central question, “How is God working in our ministry?” assumes that God is present throughout. Having made possible the abundant catch, Jesus becomes the host: providing fire, fish, bread, and the skill and disposition to create a satisfying and enjoyable meal. Divine disclosure, for Christian disciples, is mediated through him. And yet, the fish of our ministry are only potentially disclosive of God’s grace. Through disciplined engagement in theological reflection, we can develop habits of choosing, cooking, eating, and conversing that give promise of most fully revealing the presence of the risen Lord for ourselves and, through our ministry, for others.

**Opening Our “Breakfast” Conversations**

Good hosts develop tried-and-true “recipes” for both cooking the meal and encouraging vibrant conversation among the guests. The leading scholars of theological reflection, likewise, have offered valuable models and methods. Their approaches deeply influence my own. With our present focus on John 21, I will highlight how three questions emerge from the characters in the Gospel narrative and resonate for our “breakfast” conversations:

**Simon Peter**

The first is from Simon Peter: Where we are being called that we may not want to go? The active witness and leadership authority of Peter in the Fourth Gospel represent important themes for the Johannine community. He receives special attention in John 21, as he is gently invited by Jesus to cancel his earlier, triple
denial of his Lord by a triple declaration of love (18:15-17, 18:25-27, 21:15-17; see Moloney, 186). Yet like Peter, ministers today are also, to our discomfort, reminded that we may be led “where you do not want to go” and that this may be a leading into death for the sake of discipleship (21:18-19). Theological reflection, if authentic in following the self-emptying model of Christ, should call us again and again to confront the hidden assumptions and unacknowledged needs of our ministerial communities, to “die to” that which is sinful in our prevailing practices, and to be open to changed ways of conducting our pastoral “meals.” Who has not been invited to our breakfast tables; or, invited, has not been allowed to speak? What inherited, supposed “wisdom” of our communities is actually, upon critical examination, blocking new sources of wisdom? How might the discordant voices in our communities be challenging us to alternative types of conversation?

María Pilar Aquino highlights the plurality inherent in the difficult quest for theological “truth” through such dialogue:

In this sense, we must understand truth not as a condition or situation but as a process. No theology and no culture can give us the truth but only the possibility of seeking it. The process of interdiscursive communication, in equality of conditions, is the means of turning into a whole the diverse voices that actively participate on the way to truth. (Aquino, 22)

Further, in a recent example, a ministry student of mine describes a striking example of transformation in disposition and practice gained through classroom conversation in theological reflection with her peers. She had brought to the group a story of conflict with a person who had been a source of continual irritation in her ministry:

. . . a couple of weeks ago when I came into class with my incident, and we started to talk, I really didn’t know where I wanted to go, again, it was one of these really painful situations for me, it was a really personal thing, and I didn’t really know what the course of action should be, but part of me wanted it to be something where I could “get in this person’s face,” and within a very short time into the process and with just a few remarks from certain people, my whole perspective changed completely. I began to think about some things that had not entered my mind before, and left there thoroughly convinced of what I needed to do. But absolutely amazed at what that was. Because I didn’t expect it to be that. And I hadn’t wanted it to be that. But when I left I wholeheartedly wanted it to be the course that I was directed to that night.

She went on to emphasize how vital the conversation with others had been in offering this new strategy:
[It was] hearing someone say something that brought out an element in this other person that I had not taken the time to look at before. And when I looked through their eyes at this person, everything became very different. Very different. I didn’t just feel my own pain then, I started to see [this person’s] pain and what they might be longing for in their life that they didn’t have much hope of having—and it really changed . . . everything. (Personal interview by author, 2003)

The Beloved Disciple

The second question comes from the Beloved Disciple: How may we enter more deeply into the mystery? Instead of answering Peter’s questions regarding this disciple, Jesus asks his own, cryptic questions: “What if I want him to remain until I come? What concern is it of yours?” (21:22). He thereby reminds us of the ambiguity of reflective conversation and invites us to “remain” with the mystery. If Peter embodies active witness in the Fourth Gospel, the figure of the Beloved Disciple—the one who “had also reclined upon [Jesus’] chest during the supper” (21:20)—upholds what Schneiders calls “contemplative receptivity.” Peter mediates the revelation received by the Beloved Disciple; both have necessary ecclesial charisms. “Contemplative receptivity to the life-giving revelation in Jesus is the source of the church’s proclamation, which grounds both the faith of the disciples and the church’s mission to the world” (Schneiders, 204–05).

Such receptivity is foundational to pastoral strategy and action. Therefore, as Kinast insists, whatever pastoral response we eventually discern in theological reflection should flow from the reflective conversation, rather than being predetermined and simply rationalized through talking about it (Kinast 1999, 79). Our understandable urgency to leap into action—Peter’s impulsive leap into the water provides a vivid image—must be refined, in the holy leisure of the shoreline breakfast, through the “contemplative receptivity” of the Beloved Disciple. It is in such receptivity, such disciplined “remaining,” that the Johannine author honors the insistent call to intimate, loving relationship with Jesus that transforms all ministry. My student again articulates the temptation to rationalization of a predetermined action and the alternative disposition that allows one to enter into the mystery:

When we’re trying to decide what to do in a situation I think most of the time we kind of have our mind made up at the beginning. . . . Theological reflection makes you put that aside for awhile and makes you really look at things that
sometimes you don’t want to look at, sometimes you haven’t thought to look at, it makes it much harder not to act with love. And not to act with the Spirit. . . . Once you know . . . you can’t go back to the way you saw it before.

The Boat Crew

The boat crew of seven disciples raises our third question: What is possible through the community’s fishing, eating, and subsequent action together that is impossible alone? While Peter and the Beloved Disciple are highlighted in John 21, the company of disciples is integral to the fishing and to the meal. They are a motley crew indeed: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, Zebedee’s sons, and “two others of [Jesus’] disciples” (21:2), among whom is included the Beloved Disciple. Several of these names evoke for us the faults and failures inherent in discipleship. Yet, named or not, these seven—the biblical number connoting fullness and perfection—struggle together in their unproductive night of fishing, haul in a groaning net after following Jesus’ direction, and respond to his invitation to share a meal. In their common endeavor we glimpse the importance for the early Christians, as for ourselves today, of calling forth the diverse charisms of all members of the community, for the sake of the hoped-for, abundant catch.

While theological reflection by the individual minister is unquestionably valuable, the church has been “[e]stablished by Christ as a communion of life, love and truth . . . taken up by him also as the instrument of salvation of all” (Lumen Gentium, no. 9). Evelyn and James Whitehead are especially insistent upon the corporate nature of theological reflection and the importance of viewing the faith community as locus and generator of pastoral insights and responses, not merely as recipients of these (Whitehead and Whitehead, xiii–xiv).

We have already noted the ecclesial character of John 21. Furthermore, for all the emphasis on the development of personal relationship with Jesus that characterizes this Gospel, it also remains passionately committed to the unity of the discipleship community: the unbroken net and the Last Supper prayer of Jesus for oneness in his flock (17:20-21) for their sake and the sake of those who will hear them. Theological reflection that is free to imagine a new world, enlightened by the vision of God’s reign, draws strength from communal styles of strategic conversation that shape collective action extending far beyond what any single member can do.

Leaving the Shore: The Specificity and Open-Endedness of Mission and the Need for Future Breakfasts—“Feed my sheep” (v. 17) . . . “Follow me” (v. 19)

Chapter 21 constitutes a narrative bridge for the Johannine community between the early, exalted experiences of Jesus’ resurrection and their unknown, continuing life of attempted faithfulness. As Schneiders puts it, “The first conclusion [20:30-31] is definitive; the second [21:1-25] is open-ended” (Schneiders, 207).
Such open-endedness implies continuation amid uncertainty, with the need for repeated breakfasts on the shoreline as companies of disciples engage in ministry. Practices and strategies envisioned through theological reflection are continually tested in their implementation. Our appropriation of the techniques of the Master are formed and reformed through performance and honest, supportive assessment of that performance.

At the same time, the nature of the witness required for followers of Jesus is clear: “Feed my sheep.” Through continued shoreline breakfasts of theological reflection, ministers regather to consider not only pastoral effectiveness and successful meeting of goals and objectives, but, above all, the call to self-giving service. Our protestations of love, like Peter’s, are to be made real in our washing of one another’s feet and in our hospitality at the communal meal.

Thus, the closing verses of John 21 affirm that ministerial practices and their ongoing reshaping through the cycle of reflection and action, however awkward and provisional, must continue without an end in sight. The final sentence of the Gospel (21:25) reminds us that, as the deeds and signs of Jesus can never be exhausted in the writing down, so the ecclesial community’s insight must turn to how these deeds and signs continue to be enacted among them, in our particular times and places. Amid these efforts, theological reflection helps ministers and all the faithful to claim and rejoice in the uncontainable abundance of God’s work among us, in the manifold presence of grace in everyday life and pastoral calling. As Schneiders explains:

Chapter 21 is about what is still going on: obedience to the word of Jesus resulting in fruitful ministry that must someday bring to salvation the whole world . . . and ongoing sharing of life with Jesus through the contemplative experience of eucharistic community in faith. . . . This experience of the glorified Jesus will be actualized every time the proclamation resounds, “It is the Lord,” and the disciples, weary from their ministerial labors, sit down to table with him. (Schneiders, 207)

References


