

Sermon 3rd Sunday of Easter Year C John 21:1-19 by Ron Kolanowski

I love a good fish fry. I loved them as far back as I can remember. For me it is the ultimate comfort food. I came from a fishing town on Lake Michigan. My grandpa fished nearly every day. It was a Catholic town and Fridays meant FISH FRY. Mostly every corner bar, and there were lots of them... had a fish fry. There were a couple of bars near our house, Red's Tavern and Frank's Place. The anticipation of the fish fry began when my mom would take out the grater to make Cole slaw. In those days you made your own Cole slaw for the fish fry. She'd take out the cabbage and carrots and begin.

I remember being sent down to Red's to pick up the fish fry when I was five years old. I'd walk into the bar and be handed a brown paper bag. I could feel the warmth of its contents. I could smell the fish and see the grease coming through the bag. It was always the same....French fries, fried perch and slices of white bread. I would walk home and we'd sit down, open the bag and get into it. The fish fry meant comfort, familiarity, connection with my family and pretty much with everyone else in town. (T)

It also meant that it was a safe time during the week in a household that wasn't always a safe place to live. Fish fry night meant it was going to be a good night in the house. It was an ordinary ritual, in what felt like, a house filled with chaos, confusion, alcohol, and sometimes violence. It seemed like an impossible situation—at least to a small kid—fish fry meant it was going to be OK. It was the absolute ordinariness of the fish fry that

brought order, relief, community and a sense of family that often seemed illusive.

Fish fries bring me comfort to this day. When I heard about St. James' legendary fish fries I knew this was the right place for me. When I return to Michigan to visit family the one meal I still insist on is a perch fish fry.

Returning to ordinary things that bring comfort...Seeking out everyday activities that help us make sense out of situations that often make little sense...Looking for common ground in those things that are familiar to us.

This is what happens in today's gospel. We find the disciples beginning to get on with their lives after the trauma they had just experienced. What did they do? They did what was most familiar to them. They decided to go fishing at night and caught nothing. At daybreak they came ashore and met a stranger who says to them, "*Children you have no fish, have you?*" Then he tells them to "*cast their nets to the right side of the boat and you will find some.*" They did as they were told and the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "*It is the Lord.*" Peter was so excited he jumped into the sea and swam to shore. What awaited them there?

Jesus was on the shore with a charcoal fire cooking some fish and bread. He made them breakfast...a fish fry.

This is the very last story in the very last gospel that was written. What is amazing as theologian Frederick Buechner points out is that the first verses of Genesis (the first book) and this last story in the last gospel contain a strong parallel. In Genesis 1:1-5 God creates light saying, Let there be Light. In this last story of the gospels, the resurrected Christ tends a

charcoal fire, keeping it going to cook breakfast for his friends. The God of all creation does a very human thing, tends the fire to cook food.

All of the segments of this scene, the disciples fishing at night, returning with empty nets, being sent out by Jesus to try again, catching so many fish the nets are near breaking, building a fire on the beach to cook breakfast....having a fish fry....are all familiar to Jesus and his followers.

It's not hard to imagine them doing this again and again during their ministry...when pressed by the crowds, Jesus and his followers steal away to fry up some fish. They would regroup and find connection. They would strengthen their bonds of friendship and belief in one another over a fish fry.

Isn't this the way it is with us? Isn't it true that in times of chaos, in times when we face impossible situations and we don't know where to turn, we find comfort in ordinary things?

Isn't it true that it is in the simple things that we can find connection with each other? Isn't it in the ordinary everyday encounters with each other that help us face a bitter divorce, endure chronic pain and illness, or maintain our sanity during disasters? Isn't it true that it is the simple kindness we find when someone says a kind word that helps us go on when we face unemployment or troubles in our families with drug or alcohol? Isn't it true that when we've lost a loved one, it is the casserole left on the doorstep, or the card that comes in the mail, or the hug or look of concern—the ordinary grace-filled things that help us make sense when things make no sense at all?

And, isn't it true for us at St. James' that coming together for six weeks of Lenten fish fries does something to this community, bringing it together, infusing new life in it, and strengthening the bonds between us all?

In the gospel we are reminded that this is how Jesus comes to us. He comes in everyday ordinary things. Jesus comes in something as simple as a visit with a friend over a cup of coffee. Jesus comes when someone takes the time to listen to our woes and we take the time to listen to another's trouble.

We come to here each Sunday, seeking something familiar. We gather in this room....broken, confused, maybe lost, not able to make sense of the chaos and change in life all around us, not able to make sense of a body that seems to betray us...and we hear stories, we sing some songs. We come to encounter Jesus and strengthen the bonds between us."

The Risen Lord unites earth to heaven by becoming a human being, who suffered what we suffered, who knew the joys we knew, who was comforted over simple things like we are.

It is in the simple things that we strengthen the bonds between us and find connection with God. Jesus reminds us today that it is in something as simple as sitting down over a fish fry that we can touch one another and in doing so touch God. You are blessed because you already know something about the power of something as simple as a fish fry.

May all of us here today remember that we can find God in ordinary things...in simple things of living day by day with one another. May we look for God in the simple things...may we find God in one another. Amen.