

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Breakfast

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John 21:4-14

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What do you do when things aren't going right? When it seems like you're wasting your time or that you've missed your calling? I'd wager all of us have felt that way at some point or another, and that more than a few of us feel that way right now. That's what our gospel story is about. The group called by Jesus to be fishers of men was back being plain ol' fishermen once again. They were working hard yet only pulling in empty nets.

What causes things to go bad? More importantly, what can you do to make things right? Well, the first step is to see things in perspective – and that usually means you need to tell a story. Not a serious one, no; one where you laugh at yourself, one in which you admit the comedy of life that turns all of us into punch lines and fishing failures at some point or another. The first step to getting things right is to say, "You know, a funny thing happened to me once..."

When I was in seminary, I had the chance to visit South Korea. I stayed with a Korean family, where only the father spoke English. One afternoon I noticed that the elderly grandmother had pointed at me and said something about me to her son. I asked the man what Grandma had said, and without a trace of hesitancy he told me Grandma thought I had a really big nose. I stayed away from Grandma after that.

A funny thing on that trip. The Korean family wanted to make me feel at home, so they asked themselves what do Americans typically eat? The answer, of course, was McDonalds hamburgers. So every evening the father would go out and buy a single patty McDonalds hamburger, which they would proudly put on a plate and serve me cold for breakfast the next morning. It was a good idea gone bad.

Second example. The Christian Science Monitor recently reported that the percentage of the world's population surviving on less than \$1 a day has gone down significantly over the past 20 years – a drop of 27% of those living in the most abject poverty imaginable. Yet the study also mentioned that when the foreign aid given to a struggling nation equals 8% of the nation's gross domestic product, it ends up having no measurable effect upon that land's economic growth. And if the aid exceeds 8% of GDP, it begins to have a negative impact on the recipient country's economy.

A funny thing happened on the way to helping ease world hunger. By giving too much aid to places without the skilled citizens or infrastructure to use the resources effectively, we actually make things worse. It is a reminder that we can do good badly.

Third example: There's a new trend in numerous baseball parks across the country, including our own PNC Park: all-you-can-eat seats. At least 13 of the 30 major league teams are offering all-you-can-eat seats for some or all of the 2008 season. Fans pay between \$30 and \$55 and can eat as many hot dogs, nachos, peanuts and soft drinks as they can wolf down. Many fans try to set personal records of consumption the first time they sit in these special sections, while on average a typical all-you-can-eat customer downs 3 ½ hot dogs, one 20-oz. soda, one bag of peanuts, one order of Nachos, and 32 oz. of popcorn – the calorie equivalent of four days of food. Beer and ice cream must still be bought separately.

A funny thing happened on the way to our national pastime: baseball – we combined it with our national vice: gluttony. Although the Centers for Disease Control report that 1 in 3 adults in this country are obese, we've created another example of binge eating and supersized fast food consumption to exploit our national weakness. Sounds like a marketing plan that only promotes a bad outcome.¹

Fourth example: There is an ongoing debate about the nature and content of sex education programs offered in our public schools and continuing on our college campuses. The current Congress and Presidential administration have directed hundreds of millions of dollars toward abstinence-only education classes in public schools, an approach that many contend blurs the line between science and religion. It is a messy debate in which conflicting data is tossed back and forth in the battlefield.

Focus on this topic was heightened when another recent statistic from the Centers for Disease Control suggested that 1 in 4 teenage girls has a sexually transmitted disease. Abstinence advocates claim this arises from providing too much information to our youth; some concerned parents here in Pittsburgh and elsewhere claim it happens from withholding information in watered-down, abstinence-only school curricula. Studies do show that students who take an abstinence pledge preserve a technical status of virginity longer than those who do not take such a pledge. However the same study shows the pledgers are much more likely to engage in other forms of active sexual behavior and that they are less likely to use contraception or be tested for sexually transmitted diseases when they do become fully sexually active.

A funny thing happened on the way to promoting responsible sexual ethics for our youth. While abstinence is an important virtue, given the risks of disease today and the challenges arising from premature intimacy or youth pregnancies, the conversation about sexuality has to be a complete conversation – involving parents and church and school countering the messages being promoted by the larger culture. It must help remove stigmas about sexual orientation while providing education about contraception and safe sexual behavior. Otherwise we take a good goal about sexual virtue and create worse results due to our silences and misrepresentations on the overall topic.²

Something happened during those days after Easter. The disciples didn't fully get it. Or at least they took a wrong step and before long they were heading in the wrong direction, pulling in empty nets, fishing off the wrong side of the boat entirely. Jesus

appeared to them, although they didn't recognize him, and had them put their nets on the other side of the boat. A simple act – a relatively small movement – and yet it would make all the difference in the world.

Abraham Lincoln had a great phrase for this type of new behavior. In a letter to Congress in 1862, on the brink of signing the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln told Congress that “the dogmas of the past are inadequate to the stormy present. We must disenthral ourselves.” Disenthral – what a great word. It means to free from a controlling force or influence. It means to step away from a path that is going in the wrong direction, or to pull up your nets from waters that are not bearing results or in effect making things worse.

We don't need to do good badly. We don't need to accept bad choices at bargain prices. We don't need to make things worse for ourselves or for others for any reason. Messages about disenthraling ourselves from bad behaviors too often are finger-wagging lectures. Yet, the beauty of this Easter resurrection story is that it doesn't wag fingers or harangue anyone into a stronger faith. It tells a story – a humorous story at that. Jesus' fishers of men for some reason became fishermen again. And it wasn't working for them. So Jesus appeared, but they didn't recognize him. They were told to fish on the other side of the boat, and suddenly the nets were full to overflowing. Peter dove into the water and splashed like a shaggy St. Bernard all the way to shore. The others, now short-handed, managed to drag the sagging nets onto the beach.

And what happened next? They had breakfast. No lectures. No handing out test scores or grade cards. The one they thought was dead was truly alive. In place of a final meal in a smoky, upper room, they were having a new, final meal on the beach – in the sunshine, near the water, with the Lord. It makes you laugh, it was such an amazing thing!

What do you do when things aren't going right? Disenthral. Step back for a moment. Fish off the other side of the boat. Choose to hear what the stranger on the beach is shouting to you. And lighten up! Remember life is basically a good joke when Easter is our punchline. Find someone and tell them, you know, a funny thing happened to me today....

AMEN

¹ USA Today, “Eating away the innings in baseball's cheap seats”, Michael McCarthy, March 6, 2008.

² New York Times Magazine, “Students of Virginity”, Randall Patterson, March 30, 2008, pp. 38-43; Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, “Sex-ed topic too narrow,” Joe Smydo, March 17, 2008.