



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
July 31, 2017 Sermon

Inspiring the Dispirited Self

John 21 (selected verses)

They call it the thousand-yard stare. The term became well-known in World War II thanks to Life Magazine, but it probably originated in World War I. The dictionary defines it as “a vacant or unfocused gaze into the distance, seen as characteristic of a war-weary or traumatized soldier.”

Marine Corps Sergeant Major Joe Houle described what it was like when he first arrived in Vietnam and saw his men, all of whom had been there months, in some cases, years, before him: “The look in their eyes was like the life was sucked out of them.”

That’s the thousand-yard stare.

And it’s not limited to battle. Yes, in war, the stare and the psychic damage it portends is often the worst; and its causes, the most horrific. But the stare is not limited to soldiers in war, or even those who have suffered similarly severe trauma outside of war. Without at all trying to minimize those horrors, I think we can agree that lesser versions of the thousand-yard stare are widespread in this world.

I’ve been in meetings where everyone —with the exception of the person leading it—had the thousand-yard stare. I bet you have, too. Classrooms—same thing. Look at people’s faces when they’re stuck in traffic or in a doctor’s waiting room or look at people mired in debt or look at exhausted parents at the end of the day—you’ll see the thousand-yard stare.

You know this, we all know this: there are times, there are situations, there are experiences—there are people, there are jobs—that suck the life right out of you. This danger of getting the life sucked right out of us is all around us. But precisely because it is, we sometimes get used to it. Like the fish in water, we get so used to it that we’re hardly even aware of it anymore. And because we do get used to the danger, sometimes the life does slowly get sucked out of us, and we’re hardly even aware of it. We need something, someone, to wake us up, to show it to us, to get us to see and feel the danger. And sometimes that something or someone is an artist—a musician, painter, or writer—J.K. Rowling, for example.

“There’s no chance at all of recovery. You’ll just . . . exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever . . . lost.” That’s what Remus Lupins says about the Dementor’s Kiss in the third Harry Potter book. Dementors are cloaked, shadowy beings—among the foul-

est on earth—that feed upon human happiness. You can sense, you can feel, the chill of their presence. And if a Dementor gets close enough, if a Dementor kisses you, the dreaded Dementor’s kiss, well, that’s when you lose your soul. With its kiss, the Dementor sucks the life—your soul—right out of you, leaving behind only depression and despair, leaving behind an empty shell . . . leaving behind . . . the thousand-yard stare.

Peter and the disciples don’t know what else to do. Yes, Jesus was resurrected; he appeared to them all on two separate occasions. But for all that excitement, now . . . now, he’s gone *again*. So what do you do? “I’m going fishing,” Peter says. “We’ll go with you,” the disciples say. You go back to your old life, the only life you know. So they go out in the boat . . . and nothing. All night long . . . nothing. Not one fish. And as the sky begins to lighten with the morning, you can imagine them looking out at the water . . . with their thousand-yard stares.

If some things are life-sucking, soul-killing . . . well, the opposite is true, too . . . There are things—activities, places, people, especially people—who give you life. You know this; we all know this.

The sky begins to lighten, and there, on the beach, stands Jesus; only the disciples don’t know that it’s Jesus. Jesus calls to them, “Children, you don’t have any fish, do you?”

A few dispirited voices come back across the water, “No . . . no . . . no.”

“Cast the net to the right side of the boat—you’ll find some.”

So they do it—halfheartedly, “Why not?”—and then, right away the net is full of fish, almost bursting—so many fish. Look at them! No, look at him! The beloved disciple is the first to see him, “It is the Lord!” he shouts. And when Simon Peter hears these words, he jumps into the sea and begins to swim toward shore—the life is beginning to come back into him.

Jesus fed people. Fed them to give them life. 5000 people from five loaves and two fish; 4000 people from seven loaves and a few small fish. And so now, as the rest of the disciples stagger ashore, hauling in all the fish, he feeds them too.

“Come and have breakfast,” he says, and then he takes the bread and the fish, and gives it to them. And so he gives them life, and a new way of life.

Jesus fed people—with his words, as well. During his earthly ministry, he himself said that his words were “spirit and life.” And Simon Peter responded: “Lord, you have the words of eternal life.”

And Peter needs those words now—he’s still shell-shocked. On the night Jesus was arrested, Peter, despite all his brave protests to the contrary—“Lord, I will lay down my life for you”—Peter denied Jesus three times . . . just as Jesus predicted he would. And you have to think that Peter, even with the excitement and joy of seeing the resurrected Jesus, you

have to think that Peter, whenever he thinks of those denials (and when doesn't he?), whenever he remembers (and how could he ever forget?) how Jesus turned and looked at him (how could he ever forget that look?) after the third denial—you have to think that Peter gets that thousand-yard stare all over again. He's shell-shocked. So what do you do, if you're Peter? "I'm going fishing."

And so Jesus says to Peter after breakfast: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

A second time he says to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Again, a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

[hurt bafflement] "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

Three denials; three affirmations. What the Dementor sucked out, Jesus puts back in.

Jesus' words give life, give Peter life; and give him a new way of life, "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep."

And so this life comes to us even today. If some things are life-sucking, soul-killing . . . well, the opposite is true, too . . . There are things—activities, places, people, especially people—who give you life. You know this; we all know this. A good meal, a good conversation with a good friend. Music. A good book. A sunny summer day. A good night's sleep. The sound of laughter from the porch. Taking a walk. The pattern and play of sunlight and shadow across the hills. The sound of water lapping on the shore. Some things give you life.

But the one from whom that life ultimately comes, the source of all life, that one has come to us, to our world. Because our world is haunted by Dementors that one has come to us, to feed us.

Take; eat; this is my body broken for you.

Take this cup; drink from it; this is my blood shed for you.

Jesus said to them: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. . . . Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

And I'll be the first to admit: I don't know how this works. I don't know how this bread and this wine becomes the body and the blood of Christ; and I don't know how the Holy Spirit works through this bread and this wine so that we are somehow become present with God, so that we, who are always in danger of being dispirited in this world—and it doesn't matter whether the cause of this dispiriting happens to us or as is the case of Peter denying Jesus is more something we do to ourselves; it doesn't matter—what matters is that we who are all in danger of being dispirited are, in truth, by this meal, inspirited. We are fed and we have life.

Jesus feeds people.

I don't know *how* it works, but I know *that* it works. I know it because I've felt it—I've experienced it. And I know that's true for many of you, too: you've told me so. A week that begins with taking communion on Sunday is a better week. That doesn't mean it's an easier week, or that nothing bad, or frustrating, or annoying happens during that week. No, no, no, and no. But it's a better week. It's better because I find life—more life—in myself, and more life in those things meant to give us life. A good meal; a good conversation with a good friend. Music. A good book. A sunny summer day. A good night's sleep. The sound of laughter from the porch. Taking a walk. The pattern and play of sunlight and shadow across the hills. The sound of water lapping on the shore. Saying "I love you" aloud to the one you do love. Being here in church together to worship God, to be fed. This is life, his life, our life. As we come to this table, let us prepare ourselves to receive this life that Christ gives to us.

Amen.