

Sermon, November 14, 2021

Romans 5:1-6

“Another Fish Story”

Over the years I have read quite a few books, and there are a handful of them that I return to again and again. One, of course, is *Moby Dick*, which I spoke of last week, another is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, but perhaps the one I have returned to most often is Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. There is something about the struggles of Santiago, the main character, which resonates with life issues that we all struggle with.

The late art historian, Bernard Berenson, once wrote a letter to Hemingway praising it, and mentioning the symbolism found in it. Hemingway replied with a rather terse letter declaring that people have read too much into it, that is just a story devoid of symbolism. But the fact is, it is chock full of symbols, and commentators have seen in it references to Christ, as well as suggestions of Taoist and Buddhist concepts. Once an author's book is published it is open to any number of interpretations.

The main character is an elderly, Cuban fisherman, named Santiago. (Which translated from the Spanish means, St. James.) At the time of the story Santiago sees himself as *salo*, which is a particularly bad form of bad luck. He has gone 84 days without catching a fish. He starts off early in his skiff into the Caribbean waters. For me, the ocean conjures up an image of life itself - a vast experience filled with possibilities - something that both gives and takes - provides and takes away - supports and destroys.

By noon time he has rowed quite away from land, in fact, wondered if he has gone too far. It is at that time that he hooks a great marlin, which he will fight for three days, the giant fish pulling him farther and farther away from land. Unlike Captain Ahab who felt tremendous hatred towards Moby Dick, Santiago seems to identify with his catch. They both struggle valiantly; they both suffer greatly. He even speaks of the marlin as his brother. We see Santiago in his skiff, his body aching, his hands bleeding from the rope that holds the marlin. Although he doesn't see himself as a particularly religious man, he is a Catholic, and repeatedly prays the Our Father, and the Hail Mary. The marlin remains an invisible force, until late in the battle he breaches the surface revealing his tremendous size.

We too venture out into this vast experience called life. We do so well aware of its potential for attaining happiness, experiencing beauty, knowing love, achieving goals. But we know it is also filled with powers beyond our control. Invisible forces like that great fish pulling us in unexpected ways - sometimes in ways quite unpleasant- sometimes in ways that bring suffering into our existence.

After three days of fighting the fish and facing the demons that can arise with such struggle, Santiago finally brings the fish up to his skiff, kills it, and lashes it to the side of the boat. He then begins the long and arduous trip back to land. Unfortunately, the body of the marlin is bleeding heavily, and begins to attract sharks, which rip and tear at the fish's flesh. Using his oar, Santiago fights valiantly, killing some and driving off others, but others shred his great trophy to pieces.

As John Lennon once pointed out, "Life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans". Sometimes when we see or desire our lives moving in a specific direction life throws other things at us, like the sharks attacking Santiago's Marlin. The unexpected comes our way disrupting our personal desires. Sometimes, like the sharks tearing at the marlin's flesh, the unexpected can bring pain and suffering.

The apostle Paul certainly understood such experience. In the course of his mission to spread the gospel he was shipwrecked more than once, as well as being imprisoned. Yet he saw such suffering in a positive light, stating that, "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope". Perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche said it in a more succinct way - "That which does not kill us makes us stronger". I can agree with both Paul and Nietzsche to a certain degree. There is no guarantee that suffering can result in the positive. It depends upon how we respond. Do we allow that which we suffer, that which assails us, to do us in, or do we find that which is necessary to overcome? We can struggle to find the inner resources we need, and, as Paul insists, we open our hearts to the love of God, and the infilling of the Holy Spirit. In and through the power of the Spirit we find what we need.

In a sermon entitled "Time to Face the Demons", Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of the biblical wilderness experience, which we can equate with those times in which life takes an unpleasant turn - and she points out that, again, from a biblical perspective, although it might be bad, it may in fact be seen as a holy place. It can be a holy place because within it "the people of faith can be sure to encounter God". In other words, in those times when life is full of struggle, it becomes an opportunity to face our personal demons. It is also often the time when we are most likely to turn in search of help from powers beyond ourselves. Even though he was not by nature religious, in perhaps the greatest struggle of his life, Santiago recites again and again prayers he had known since youth.

In the end of the story Santiago returns to shore with the skeletal remains of the great fish still lashed to the boat, which astounds the people of the village. Physically drained and tired he stumbles to his shack, stretches out on his cot and falls asleep. One thing we come away with is the reality that sometimes don't work out the way we want. Sometimes we can be defeated in our desired goals - but that does not mean we are defeated in the depths of spirit.

In various places in the novel Santiago reminisces about something he saw in his youth while sailing on a ship off the coast of Africa. It is the image of lions on a beach. It's an image from which he seems to find solace and peace. When he falls asleep in his shack after his ordeal he dreams about those lions on the beach. There is a sense of contentment in that. It suggests to me that although he was defeated in his struggle to bring the fish to shore, he was not broken in spirit. He did not win in terms of his goal, but he was a winner in the sense that he gave it his all. Amen.

**Let us pray:** Eternal Lord, God of mercy and grace, we gather this morning and invoke your Spirit to be present with us - the source of our inspiration, of our faith, and of our hope. Bless us this morning with an awareness of the depths of your love and guide us as we strive to extend that love to others. Teach us, day by day, to more deeply understand what it means to be your servant and lead us to those we need to serve.

Life has its struggles, and sometimes pain and suffering come our way; and so we open ourselves to you, trusting that you will help us find the strength, the courage, and the faith we need to rise above adversity.

May your Spirit bind us together as a congregation, giving us a vision for our future, and all that we need to move in that direction.

As always, we know you to be a source of healing, and ask for your blessing on those who hurt in body, mind, or spirit, and we remember to you...

Amen.