

## Lessons on Church from a Fish: *Romans 15:1-7*

Norwalk Christian Church, September 18, 2016, Pack the Church Sunday, Year C, Proper 20

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The earliest sign of the Church was a fish. It's been said that the early church, hiding from persecution, would often meet in hidden locations, marked only by that Jesus fish insignia that we now proudly place on the back of our family car.

It makes sense that a fish was the sign of the early church. Jesus feeds the multitudes miraculously with fish and bread. And after his resurrection, he appears one morning on a beach to his fishing disciples, and cooks them fish for breakfast. Our life in Christ begins in the waters of baptism. As our children have been learning in Sunday School, Jesus calls his disciples to be fishers of people. (One of our kids, when asked by Marti what they thought that meant, said "it meant they were going to catch merpeople!").

Fish are very much a part of our faith.

Which is why I couldn't help but think of the church this past week when I was reading about a spanish fish farm. No, I'm not that bored.... As many of you know, I've been taking a farming and ministry class called "Organic Ministry", taught by Tim and Lori Diebel at their farm just south of town.

This past month, our reading assignment came from a book called *The Third Plate*, written by the famous chef Dan Barber. And the chapters we read were all about fish. Barber also tells this story in a TED Talk from 2010.

Dan Barber was on the search for a sustainably raised, delicious-tasting fish. But he didn't think he'd ever find such a fish, with all the overfishing of the oceans and the cramped conditions and unnatural diets of farm-raised fish.

He didn't think it was possible, until he met a fish at a restaurant in Spain. At first sight, when the fish was served to him, he knew immediately that the chef had bruised it in preparation and then overcooked it. It was tough when he cut into it, yet he tasted it anyway. It was the best-tasting fish he had ever eaten. How could a fish, abused by a chef, still taste so wonderful?

The next day he went to where the fish came from, *Veta la Palma*, a fish farm on the southern-most tip of Spain. This wetland was once destroyed and depleted because of decades of cow-farming. Today, it is a beautiful, restored, thriving ecosystem.

Barber met the fish farmer, Miguel, who is not really a fisherman at all, but a biologist who says his expertise is in "relationships." All creatures thrive, he believes, when the ecological relationships are in balance.

That is what Miguel has done at his fish farm. He doesn't really even feed the fish. Instead, he creates for them a thriving environment. The wetlands have been restored. And the restored wetlands purify the contaminated river water that runs into them, cleaning out all the impurities. This naturally purified water allows a thriving population of phytoplankton, which the fish eat in delight--resulting in their delicious taste.

Barber writes, *"Miguel," I asked, "for a place that is so natural, how do you measure success?" Miguel nodded as if expecting the question, and in a perfectly (almost unbelievably) orchestrated act of good timing, he pulled alongside a shallow levee. Thousands of pink flamingos stretched before us, a pink carpet as far as I could see. "That's success," he said. "Look at their bellies." He pointed. "They're feasting." I was totally confused. "Feasting? Aren't they feasting . . . on your fish?" "Yesss!" he said, as proud as I'd heard him all day...and I laughed, but he ignored us, looking out at the flamingos. "There are thirty thousand flamingos. Overall, we lose 20 percent of the fish eggs and the baby fish to the birds here."*

*"But, Miguel, isn't a thriving bird population the last thing you want on a fish farm?" He shook his head slowly... "We're farming extensively, not intensively," he said. "This is the ecological network. The flamingos eat the shrimp, the shrimp eat the phytoplankton. So the pinker the bellies, the better the system." The quality of the relationships matters more than the quantity of the catch.*

Miguel goes on to tell Barber that these Flamingos travel to Miguel's farm every day from 150 miles away--a 300 mile round trip--and they get there by following the white lines on a small country highway. Why do they do this, Barber asks, and Miguel looks at him with a "Duh" kind of look: "Because my fish taste better."

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I know what you're thinking: what does fish have to do with church? Let me ask another question: What makes a good church?

Earlier we read those words from the Apostle Paul, towards the end of his letter to the church in the big city of Rome. This church was far from perfect. They weren't an old church, and were still figuring out what being a church even meant. They were diverse. Half the church were Jews, and the other half were Gentiles. That meant they believed different things and worshipped in different ways. They ate very different foods, they had very different customs. It was a mess!

It'd be better if they'd split into two churches, organized around their preferences, and be done with it. But what does Paul tell them: You who are strong, should put up with the weak. Seek to please your neighbor, to build them up, instead of yourself. Live in harmony with each other. Always welcome one another, as Christ always welcomes you.

In other words--Paul tells them--the quality of relationships among those in the church is what matters most. It may be messy, putting up with one another. But that's what makes a good, healthy church.

A healthy church is a church where all the diverse relationships are in harmony with one another. Church should be a lot like the fish farm Veta la Palma.

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I've been told that a good church is one that believes all the right things. Where people all agree on proper doctrine. Where the music is always great with top-notch programs for all ages, all served-up in an attractive, modern, state-of-the-art building.

Well, you've been around this church long enough to know--that's...not...us. The look of our Sanctuary may be dated, because, well, it is. It was designed in 60s and slightly a couple decades after that. Some of our songs may have been written in the 1660s, and the new ones written in the 1960s. Sometimes we miss cues, and sing the wrong notes, and stumble over our words. Our bulletins have typos. We are not always polished.

Last week, Doug Pierce, our worship leader, lovingly went off script and called his good friend, Don Darnell, the village idiot of Knoxville, Iowa. (You had to be there.) A few Sundays ago we were in the middle of communion and I realized our chalices were empty! And right in the middle of communion, Pastor Marti had to bring up the bottle of Welch's and fill them up. We are far from perfect.

And we don't even agree. On matters of doctrine--we are all over the place. Some of us wish our worship style was more traditional, and others wish it was more contemporary. We don't vote the same. We don't look the same. We don't eat the same. We don't believe the same.

And how boring would it be if we did? If you're hoping for a perfect church--we're not it. But perfect is not what we're called to be. This marvelous diversity, it may be messy, but it's what makes us beautiful. This is what church is! And we may look bruised and overcooked on the plate--but we taste delicious.

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On Miguel's farm, delicious fish come from a restored, healthy ecosystem, an ecosystem that is impacting more than just the fish. The restored wetlands are purifying the polluted river before it runs into the Atlantic Ocean. Our coasts are cleaner because of Miguel's fish. And Veta la Palma is not only a fish farm, but it's also a bird sanctuary. Not just the 30,000 Flamingos, but around half a million birds, 250 different species, find sustenance at this farm. It's the most important bird sanctuary in Europe.

Through these healthy relationships, Miguel's fish farm is changing the world.

And so it is with us. If you want to agree and get along with everyone, then worship alone at home. But if you want to become a better person--if you want your life to taste delicious--then you need other people. For it is relationships that transform us. And this life we share together as church--this is what changes the world.

When I marry a couple, I will have the congregation of friends and family stand and offer a blessing to the couple. I tell them I do this because no one can do life alone, and that's why they have chosen to make their commitment in the presence of the most important people in their lives--because we need one another.

It may be messy, but we are a family. We care for one another. You don't have to be perfect. We build one another up. We support each other. When someone is in need, we help. Faith is a journey, and we share that journey together.

As we bump into one another's quirks and intricacies. As the strong deal with the weak. As we learn to live in harmony with one another. As we welcome everyone--no matter what--no matter what we may believe, or who we're in love with, or what's in our past, or how much money we have, or how put together our lives may be--this fellowship of different makes us better people. This is what Church should be! This is a healthy, spiritual ecosystem. Birds, fish, shrimp and phytoplankton--all thriving together-in harmony.

We need one another. Together, in Christ, we are better. Together, we change the world.

Let us now bring all that we are--all our mess and all our beauty--to the table of Christ, where we are all welcomed, and loved, as we are transformed and sent out into to share God's great beauty with our world. Amen.