

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, January 22, 2023

3 Epiphany, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 9:1-4

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

Psalm 27:1, 5-13

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If you go today to the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the land by the sea called Galilee, and you walk into any restaurant, you're likely to be offered a nice plate of fish. St. Peter's fish, they call it. You'll get it grilled whole, rubbed with olive oil and salt, with a nice salad and some French fries on the side. And when I was there and asked what kind of fish St. Peter's fish was, I wasn't expecting the answer: tilapia.

Tilapia, I thought? The most basic, cheap, farmed white fish you get in every fish taco or fish stick these days? I came halfway around the world to eat tilapia? Surely this was commercialism at its worst, a globalized fish making its way even into the Holy Land itself. But I was wrong. It turns out tilapia are indigenous to the Sea of Galilee, along with other parts of the Middle East and Africa. There's an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for tilapia. So when Peter and Andrew used to cast their nets into the Sea of Galilee tilapia were one of the main species they would catch.

I wasn't wrong about tilapia today though. Back in the 1990s tilapia farming exploded around the world because tilapia are prolific, cheap to raise, and mild in flavor. They call it "aquatic chicken."¹ It's now the third-most popular fish eaten in the United States after salmon and canned tuna. But there's a downside. That same prolificness means tilapia are invasive. When they escape from a fish farm, or when they're introduced into a lake or river by well-meaning officials, they tend to outcompete the local fish for food and nutrients. Right now in Florida tilapia are driving local populations of bass, sunfish, and catfish down by 50-90%.² In India lake shores are pockmarked by the round nests the tilapia create in the mud.³

It turns out tilapia in the Sea of Galilee are part of a balanced ecosystem. But tilapia out of place can end up replacing the natural diversity of species that have evolved together over millions of years with just one species, all the same: a monoculture.

Today we heard St. Paul writing to the first generation of Christians in the city of Corinth and cautioning them against monocultures. There are factions in the church at Corinth. The members are divided among which teacher, which apostle, they look to. Some of the members follow Paul, some Apollos, some Peter (whom they call by his Aramaic name of Cephas). Some even say "I just follow Christ," which sounds good except when you're using that as just one more way of writing off other Christians you disagree with.

¹ Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Another Side of Tilapia, the Perfect Factory Fish," *New York Times* (May 2, 2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/science/earth/02tilapia.html>.

² Danielle Johnson, "Invasive blue tilapia now make up 86% of fish at Silver Springs in Marion County," *Ocala Star-Banner* (September 18, 2021), <https://www.ocala.com/story/news/environment/2021/09/18/invasive-blue-tilapia-represent-eighty-six-percent-total-fish-population-silver-springs/8337132002/>.

³ Aaron Savio Lobo, "Tilapia: How an invasive fish came to dominate our ecology, food and psyche," *Mongabay* (October 15, 2020), <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/10/commentary-tilapia-how-an-invasive-fish-came-to-dominate-our-ecology-food-and-psyche/>.

And what Paul writes is that the Corinthians should put away their divisions and seek unity. But not the unity that comes from all being the same. Not a monoculture. The real church needs Paul *and* Apollos *and* Cephas. Each of these leaders contributes their own gifts as well as their own flaws to the Body of Christ, just as each member does. It's been well said that unity is not the same as uniformity. Uniformity means a swarm of identical fish looking and acting the same. Unity means a balanced ecosystem in all its glorious variety. That's the kind of unity we're called to in Jesus.

Right now we are celebrating the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, a period that runs from the feast of the Confession of St. Peter on January 18 through the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul on January 25. Those two saints were the two most prominent leaders of the early church. And if you read the New Testament carefully it's clear they didn't always get along perfectly. Paul pushed hard to include Gentiles, non-Jewish Christians, as full members of the church without distinction. Peter was more cautious and wanted to hold the church together, making space for more traditional Jewish members who kept the Law of Israel on matters like kosher foods and keeping the Sabbath and believed the new Gentile converts should keep it too. It was a serious conflict a lot like many of the conflicts that have divided Christians from each other ever since, from the Reformation in the 1500s to conflicts about sexuality in the 21st century. How do we hold together the prophetic with the pastoral or the freedom of individuals with the need for common practice? The answers would be easy if we were all the same. But sameness isn't God's vision for us.

One of my favorite passages in Scripture comes from the book of Revelation where the saints are in heaven around God's throne and they sing a song of praise to Jesus: "You are worthy, O Lamb that was slain, for you have redeemed for God holy ones from every family and language and people and nation as a royal priesthood" (Rev. 5:9). From every family and language and people and nation. From every race. Every gender. Every culture. Every age. Every kind of body. Every kind of mind and personality. God made humanity as a glorious rainbow of diversity and every single piece of that diversity is created to enrich the new heaven and the new earth that God is creating. That new heaven and new earth includes Christians of every stripe, to be sure. Catholics and Seventh-Day Adventists and Presbyterians and nondenominational folk and even hopefully Episcopalians too. And it includes those of other faiths and no faith, I believe, because when Jesus says that all people come to God through him he doesn't stipulate that that means only those who know him by that name in this lifetime. And it includes, I think, the nonhuman creation too, the sunfish and the bass and the invasive tilapia, restored to their own right balance, because the universe wasn't made for our species alone.

When Jesus called Peter and Andrew to follow him, he told them from now on they would be fishers for people. And I love that the text makes it clear that Peter and Andrew are net fishers, not line fishers. You can fish in more than one way. You can put a specific kind of bait on a specific kind of hook to catch a specific kind of fish. Or you can throw a big old net into the lake and drag it around and then see what you come up with. I like that Jesus is a net fisher. May you and I be gathered up in his net, along with all the other fish in the sea, those we might choose to be with and those we might not, one giant wriggling mass of variety and beauty and abundant life.