THE CAMPFIRE
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John 21: 1 – 14
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Of the Easter stories about how people experienced the risen Jesus, this morning’s text is my favorite. Well, it has all my favorite things: boats, fishing, fishing gear, fish, sunrise, breakfast out, a campfire.

And I find myself wondering about that campfire on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that morning. “When they had gone ashore,” it says, “they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it. . . .”

A campfire that had burned down to cooking coals. I wonder about it.

I mean, was it started tepee style, with the twigs placed upright around the tinder? Or were the twigs stacked around the tinder, cabin style? Or was the fire started lean-to style, with the twigs placed at an angle on the tinder?

I realize this is probably not a big theological question, but to anyone who has tried to get a cooking fire started at a campsite on a damp morning, it is not an insignificant question.

It is a kind of art form – this matter of starting a cooking fire outside or a fire in a fireplace inside. And each fire Starter has her or his own style. I prefer the little cabin style myself, but if you’re starting the fire, I’ll respect your lean-to or tepee style. I mean, when you’re the fire starter, I won’t stand there and try to tell you how to do it or sneak in my own twigs when your back is turned.

For starting the fire is a very personal thing. You can do it your way. And then, when it’s my turn to start the campfire, let me build my little cabin.

But it’s not easy, is it - this living together with our different visions of how campfires should be started, or with our differing politics, or religious beliefs, or our diverse views about how anything in life should be done. One of the hardest things for humans to do is deal with this deeply human bias that “My way is the only way.”

It’s a bias that affects every relationship, from daily family relationships to politics to relationships between nations. And sadly, religion has too often been used to justify the bias – as in “Believe what we believe or else.”

So, when it’s my turn to start the campfire, I’ll build my little cabin. But when you are the fire starter, I’ll value your tepee or lean-to. That’s called love – isn’t it?

“When they had gone ashore, they saw a cooking fire with fish on it. . . .”

With dry-enough tinder, one match ought to be enough to start a campfire. And holding that first match to the tinder takes on a kind of ceremonial quality. The one-match campfire is honored.
But if it doesn’t go with the first match, others around the fire-starter need to keep their mouths shut. If the first match doesn’t do it, it’s best to turn away and feign business elsewhere while the fire-builder restacks twigs and finds more tinder. No one should say “I told you that style wouldn’t work. Here, let me do it for you.” On a damp lakeshore morning around a fire pit, love also knows when to keep quiet. And that’s true in lots of other places in life as well – don’t you think?

Sooner or later, one match or more, the first small flames begin to dance, igniting twig upon twig. The fire builder sometimes gets down low and blows gently to help the process. But blow too hard, and you can blow the whole thing over and out.

And that’s true too of other things in life – isn’t it? That a gentle breath is usually better than blowing too hard.

At some point, the fire builder can step back and say out loud “Well, I think it’s gonna go.” And those words are a kind of fire-builder’s signature, like an artist signing a painting.

But there’s still another touchy stage through which the fire-builder must nurse the newborn campfire. Sticks of increasing size need to be added, one at a time, at just the right time. Too many, too large, too fast can still kill it.

It’s also a basic economic and spiritual truth – that too much too soon is not sustainable, even as it harms the human soul.

And at this still early stage of campfire building, others can gather sticks, but their role is still to serve the fire-builder. No fire-builder appreciates some impatient gatherer who just cannot resist tossing in an armload of wood and smothering the whole thing, as if the fire-builder’s creation is not respected. “Oh, but I was just trying to help,” we say.

It’s a fine line – isn’t it – between helping and selfish intrusion? Love also asks “Who am I really doing this for?”

There does come a point when the fire is blazing and large enough to become a communal thing, when others are then free to add wood or to poke at it. And for the fire-builder, this involves the not-easy discipline of letting go of control.

For love does not need to mold things into one’s own image. And once the fire becomes communal and people forget who originally started it, that’s okay. Campfire building should not be done with the expectation of recognition or reward. If something is done for the sole purpose of a payoff, it’s probably not love.

“When they had gone ashore, they saw a cooking fire there, with fish on it. . .”

So there’s fire-building and there’s communal fire-tending. And then there’s fire-diddling. You know, fire-diddling – all the other stuff human beings do with campfires. Like holding the end of a stick in the flames just
to see how long it takes to light the end, then pulling it out to see how long the stick can burn by itself. Not long, which is also true of the fire of the human spirit.

Or using the stick to poke at a single coal in the fire, rolling it around, and studying the bright red thing from various angles. Fire-diddling.

And fire-diddling can lead to some serious soul-searching. For a good campfire is mystery. Oh, a scientist can explain how combustion happens. But around a campfire at dawn, or watching the flames dance in your living room fireplace, you’re not interested in combustion theory. Rather, you’re allowing the darting flames to lead you into the wonder of your own life.

Looking deep into the fire you can feel your own heartbeat and realize again the giftedness of life. You don’t have to be, yet here you are – a feeling, remembering, dreaming human being, who is just as imperfect as you often fear, yet capable of such love.

The dancing flames of a campfire or fireplace draw you in and help you regain perspective. Looking deep into the fire and into your own soul, you can sort out the important from the trivial. You can resolve again to not get obsessed with things that ultimately don’t really matter.

While fire-diddling, we know things again:

That we cannot take the miracle of this day for granted; that small things are important too; that we really could live more simply and love more grandly; that we should not make problems where problems don’t need to be; that we can be more attentive to how we speak, and smile, and greet, and say good-bye.

Fire-diddling, watching the flames move and change color, we understand again some spiritual basics:

That worship matters, and prayer, and giving; that gratitude is empowering; that our destiny in intimately and ultimately bound up with the whole of God’s creation and all of God’s people.

And there are other fire-watching truths as well:

That human beings can learn some other ways to deal with their fears and differences rather than just going at each other with nasty sound bites and labels, fists and guns; that we could become more clever, far more imaginative, in dealing with those near and far who think they hate us.

That the peace we create around us can contribute to peacemaking everywhere in this intricate and beautiful web of life we share with everybody and every living thing. . . .

These are fire-diddling, fire-watching truths. So you don’t ask someone holding a stick in the campfire, “What are you doing?” You don’t say to someone staring into the fireplace, “Why are you just sitting there?” Instead, you grab your own diddling stick, or you just sit quietly and watch the flames dance. You let the fire draw you into a deep knowing again:
That you were created for a reason; that your best efforts make a difference; that your voice and touch matters; that your love can help heal this world; that nothing in life, not even death, can separate you from God’s greater love.

Sometimes, you see, fire-watching and -diddling becomes a kind of praying. . . .

“When they had gone ashore, they saw a campfire there, with fish on it. . . .”

So I wonder about that campfire. Was it started cabin or lean-to or tepee style? Who did most of the fire-tending while the fish cooked? Did they all join in and do some serious fire-diddling? I wonder about it.

But having started and tended and diddled at my share of campfires, I believe the Gospel writer when he says that the risen Jesus was there.