

LET'S GO FISHING
King City United Church
York United Ministries
The Rev. Bruce J. Roffey
Sunday, May 1, 2022

For the past week or so, in the *Mutts* cartoon strip the cat Mooch and dog Earl have been discussing whether Earl is a working dog. In Friday's strip, Earl says, "**All** dogs are 'working' dogs. We try our best to bring joy, comfort and unconditional love to help de-stress our humans – and that's a **full-time** job."ⁱ

How do we de-stress, especially if we don't have a dog? How do we cope with life? For the past couple of years, I have been increasingly dismayed at the distress in which many people find themselves. Some of this is of their own making, but more often not. Sometimes it's due to our inhumanity towards each other.

I think about the disabled trying to live below the extreme poverty level. I think of valuable workers who are not valued by our society, especially their employers, and so not paid adequately. I think about parents trying to balance employment and parenting during a pandemic. I think about seniors and medically vulnerable people afraid to go outside. I think of divorced or bereaved folk adjusting to an altered reality. I think about those burned out who are trying to recover a normal life. How do they, how do we, cope?

In the passage we read this morning from John 21ⁱⁱ, there is a suggestion of ways to cope. This isn't the original message of the story, but I think a valid strategy all the same.ⁱⁱⁱ

The disciples had experienced severe stress. Jesus had been conducting a ministry of healing and preaching in Galilee. It had been revolutionary and very popular with ordinary people. He attracted large followings and chose 12 disciples. These disciples had great expectations, faith that wonderful things were going to be wrought by God. One of them faltered and betrayed him to his enemies. He was tried in a kangaroo court. Then they executed him in the most brutal way, a way reserved for

criminals of the worst kind and almost never used for a Roman citizen. What sorrow and pain the disciples felt. Their dreams were shattered, and they were disillusioned. They were frightened that the authorities might kill them, so much so, that the most loyal one, the designated leader denied him three times. To add to the tension, Jesus appeared to them. He who had died appeared alive, and he was sending them out into the world on a mission. How could they handle the stress? Simon Peter had the answer, "Let's go fishing."

That's quite a startling remark, I think. It's quite incongruous with the urgency of the situation. In the midst of inner and outer turmoil Peter decides to go fishing. And off they went - fishing.

This was the beginning of their attempt to cope with the situation. Peter was really implying, "Wait a minute! Things are going too quickly for me. I've got to slow down, get a new perspective, and regain control of my life." He decided to go back to the familiar and to re-root himself. He was a fisherman, so he returned to fishing.

This is the kind of thing Jesus did. We read often about how he withdrew either to be alone or to be with his friends in a quiet place. He needed to withdraw and to re-root himself. Considering that Jesus' ministry was at least one and as much as 3 years in length, we really don't know much of what he did, and I think that part of the reason for that was that much of his life was routine, a re-rooting in the ordinary in order to cope with the extraordinary, indeed, to do the extraordinary. This is the beginning of coping.

Back in the summer of 1975, when I was a graduate student in physics, I attended a retreat during which I received a call into ministry. I struggled with this call over the summer and then things really started to move. I visited Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto during the first week of classes. I ran into a friend from my church, and we had a long conversation during which he helped me confirm my call. Then a professor helped me confirm that I should apply there. Then the register assured me

of acceptance and registered me. Then the following Monday I began classes. Eight months of classes streamed by and then off to a summer internship in the Eastern Townships of Québec. Then another 8 months of classes. Then I needed to stop. Events were going too quickly. I felt that I was being swept along in the current and I needed more control. I needed to re-root myself. I needed to ascertain where God was sending me. So I took the summer off to re-root myself in the ordinary and familiar, to work, to relax, to enjoy life. I met my wife and I confirmed where we were going

That's what we all need in order to cope with life – a time of re-rooting. A sabbath time to rest, recuperate and cope. A time to putter. A time to smell the roses. A time to fish.

When I was still working full-time, I discovered that every summer I needed to withdraw from Church work and to worship on Sunday when I was not the presider in order to re-root myself in the faith. I think we all need a time of re-rooting in the deep soil of our faith and in the ordinary living of life.

For the disciples, re-rooting in the familiar gave them more control and a new perspective, and enabled them to be receptive again to Christ and to be responsive to unseen possibilities. One day when they caught nothing, Jesus came, unrecognized, and told them to re-cast to the right side of the boat. They did and made an overwhelming catch of fish. Responsive to unseen possibilities, they re-cast in hope.

When I was in my early teens, my brother Paul, a couple of cousins and I went camping at Algonquin Park with my uncle Doug. Early one morning we went fishing on a still pond with a bridge at one end. Under the bridge it was rocky and the water flowed quickly. Hanging over the edge we could see to the bottom of a quiet pool where there were large suckers, lazy bottom-dwelling fish. We spent all day trying to hook them.

My uncle, however, was responsive to unseen possibilities. He climbed under the bridge and up to the rapids. We caught muddy tasting, undesirable suckers. He caught trout, and were they ever delicious fried over an open fire!

To cope it is not sufficient to simply withdraw, but to withdraw with the intention of becoming receptive to new possibilities and opportunities, and then to re-cast with hope.

I saw a Mickey Mouse cartoon once in which Mickey and Minnie were in a rowboat. Mickey was fishing and Minnie was focussing her camera. "There," she said, "I'm ready. Catch a fish and I'll take your picture." It doesn't work that way. Sometimes we are lucky and catch a fish just by sitting, but certainly not on command. Instead, we cast and re-cast always with hope that this time we will be successful.

We were watching a video the other day of Deanna and I on the boathouse deck at a family cottage fishing when she was about 4 years old. Gaylia was the videographer. First, we would cast there for a while, then change and cast over a different spot, and then another spot. We caught a few sunfish, and then a bass!

Taking another try at it, starting again. It's the step of faith made in hope, "the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see."^{iv} It's the inner persuasion that there is something more waiting out there to be discovered. As the hymn writer Jessie Adams put it

I feel the winds of God today;
today my sail I lift,
though heavy oft with drenching spray
and torn with many a rift;
if hope but light the water's crest,
and Christ my bark will use,
I'll seek the seas at his behest,
and brave another cruise.^v

Part of coping is risking another cruise, being responsive to unseen possibilities and re-casting with hope.

Then comes reevaluation of progress. The disciples when they got to the shore would have done what any fisher does. They would have sorted the fish, keeping some and throwing some away. And that's what we have to do as part of coping.

We need to stop casting sometimes and examine the results of our actions. We find this hard to do in church because so often we are too busy with maintenance, too busy raising the budget, cutting the grass, finding the teachers, meeting the deadlines. These are necessary activities, but sometimes they preclude stopping and evaluating our progress. Are we doing the right things? Should we stop doing somethings or change how we do them? Are there other things we should be doing?

Reevaluating our progress corrects our course and it give us confidence to go on. Christianity always has a component of memory. When things get tough, when faith wanes we can look back to the victories and be inspired. And we can even be inspired by the hard times. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, "You gain in strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through the horror. I can take the next things that comes along.'...You must do the thing you think you cannot do."^{vi} Both good and bad experiences can be encouraging. We need to reevaluate our progress as part of coping.

Then the disciples and Jesus gathered around a charcoal fire and ate together a meal of bread and fish. This meal was one of the prototypes of Holy Communion. In this meal the disciples were reentering fellowship with Christ.

At times of death, no matter what the culture, there is a period of mourning. Following this, though, there is reentry into normalcy. No matter what we were dealing with, we need normalcy. We need to reenter the normal flow of life. We need the people, the community, the friendship. We need the support of loving, faithful people and symbols and practices that accompany it. We need the prayers, hymns, Scriptures, Sacraments, sharing. We need to reenter the fellowship.

The last stage, the truly Christian one, is recommitment to service of others. Today's reading ends with Jesus saying three times to Peter, "If you love me, feed my sheep." A few verses later, he says, "Follow me." As disciples ourselves, our coping must never end in a comfortable pew. Holy Communion, the

Lord's Supper, means more than being fed; it means being responsible to feed others, to feed the sheep. The friendship and fellowship of the Church also entails being a friend. The reception of the love of God commands sharing that love. Being blessed is in order to be a blessing. The final stage in Christian coping is recommitment to service in Christ.

It was Jesus who walked with us in the lonely times of withdrawal and re-rooting in the familiar. It was Jesus who, even though unrecognized, led us into new possibilities and instilled us with the hope and courage to recast and try again. It was Jesus who was the standard of the evaluation of our progress, and it was Jesus the crucified and resurrected Christ whose body it was that we reenter for fellowship and from whom we received joy as a gift. And it was Christ Jesus who calls us to recommit our lives to service and to him.

Not what, but WHOM, I do believe,
That, in my darkest hour of need,
Hath comfort that no mortal creed
To mortal man may give;--
Not what, but WHOM!
For Christ is more than all the creeds,
And His full life of gentle deeds
Shall all the creeds outlive.
Not what I do believe, but WHOM!
WHO walks beside me in the gloom?
WHO shares the burden wearisome?
WHO all the dim way doth illumine,
And bids me look beyond the tomb
The larger life to live?--
Not what I do believe,
BUT WHOM!
Not what,
But WHOM!^{vii}

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Patrick McDonnell, *Mutts*, King Features Syndicate, found in *The Toronto Star*, Friday, April 29, 2022.

ii John 21: 1-17.

iii Ideas suggested by Parker B. Brown, consultant to the crisis hotline system of Prince George's County, Maryland.

iv William Newton Clarke, 1841 to 1912, Baptist pastor and theologian, source unknown.

v "I Feel the Winds of God," *Voices United*, (# 625), words by Jessie Adams, 1907.

vi Eleanor Roosevelt, *You Learn by Living*, Harper, 1960.

vii "Credo", John Oxenham (also known as William Arthur Dunkerley). See. <https://www.best-poems.net/william-arthur-dunkerley/poems.html>