

“Go fish!”
John 21:1-14
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Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

During the early days of COVID, when everything was completely shut down, we faced the same dilemma as everyone else. How do you fill countless hours being at home? For Julie, there was sewing...especially masks in those early days. I banged away at our piano for hours on end. You might say it was a key to my survival. I don't want to say we watched a lot of television, but after six months of COVID we did have to go buy two new TVs. And we cooked and we ate, and we ate and we cooked, and...let's just say in some ways COVID was a growing experience...if you know what I mean. Thankfully, we also played cards. We play a two-handed game of Canasta that involves five decks of cards. To shuffle that many decks of cards requires about 33 shuffles per game. We played at least three games a day, meaning I shuffled cards at least 100 times a day. After one year, we had played a thousand games of cards, at least a thousand games of cards, and slow hand Bubba did the Canasta shuffle a minimum of 36,500 times.

So come Christmas of 2020, Christmas the first year of COVID, cards were on my mind...in a big way. Because cards were on my mind in such a big way, I had what might be termed an epiphany. You see, I realized there are 52 cards in a deck...and there are 52 weeks in a year. Like many of you, we had not seen our children for a long time due to COVID. I decided to use a deck of cards, a big deck of cards, a king size deck of cards to help our family stay connected for the 52 weeks of a year. Here is what I did. I found 52 things for our family to remember or to celebrate. There are birthdays, anniversaries, days when we lost loved ones, national holidays, Valentines, 4th of July, Halloween. It turned out to be pretty fun.

In fact, it was so fun, and so meaningful, I have continued to think about a deck of cards and all the possibilities of using a simple deck of cards to communicate. Follow my thinking if you will. There are four suits in a deck of cards. There are four gospels that tell the story of

Jesus. There are 13 cards in each suit. Each gospel has twelve disciples and one Savior named Jesus...yes, 13. I had the framework of an idea, but if you play cards you need a game. Living so near to the sea, walking by the sea, swimming in the sea, I kept trying to think what game would work. One day as I was walking by the sea...well, here's the story that I just couldn't get out of my mind. "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.'" (Matthew 4:18-20). How could I resist? It was so obvious. What does Jesus say to Simon Peter and Andrew? Go Fish! I had it. The perfect card game to tell the gospel story of Jesus Christ.

Lean in this morning and pay attention as the greatest card game ever played takes place right before our very eyes. To my left and to your right is the Gospel of Matthew. Closest to you is the Gospel of Mark. To my right and your left is the Gospel of Luke. And directly in front of me is the Gospel of John. Members and friends of the Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian, let's Go Fish!

A quick review if you have not played Go Fish in a while. Everyone has cards in their hand. When it is your turn, you ask another player if they have a certain card. You might say, "Do you have any aces?" If the person has aces, they give you the aces. But now here is the important part. If they don't have any aces, well, I hope at least some of you know what to say. If they don't have any aces, they say, "Go Fish!"

Let's begin with the beginning of the life of Jesus Christ. I'm asking Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the four gospels, I am asking them about the beginning of the life of Jesus. I know a thing or two about Jesus. I know he is the King of kings. I eyeball these four gospel writers. All the gospels tell about Jesus? Well, since Jesus is the King of kings, do any of you have a story in your gospel where Jesus is born into a palace, like a king should be, a rich and warm castle that is fit for a king, surrounded by servants, catered to by countless nannies, lavished with the royal treatment, luxury, opulence, and extravagance, all the things fit for a king. Surely this Jesus who is the King of kings, he must have come into the world as a king would come. Do any of you gospel

writers, do you have a story where Jesus is born as a king in a palace and where he is pampered with pleasure? All four gospels listen patiently and then they say with one voice, “Go Fish!” Oh, he’s not that type of king? No, he’s not that type of a king.

Let’s try again. Does he have a King size bed at least? Matthew shakes his head no. Mark? Not here. John? Me neither. No King size bed. But Luke starts to shuffle through his deck of cards. Does Luke’s gospel have a King size bed? Could it be? With a little chuckle, Luke hands a card over, that does indeed have a King size bed. All the other gospel writers grin and shake their heads with a knowing nod. Oh yes, Luke does have a King size bed. The card has a picture of a manger. That’s the King size bed Jesus was born into. And it fits him perfectly. Jesus would tell his disciples that whoever wanted to be great in the kingdom of heaven must humble himself. There is no more humble beginning than to be a King who is born in a manger.

With that humble start, the game is up and running.

- Speaking of humility, do you have any stories of the baptism of Jesus. I mean, if he was born in a manger, do you think he might also have taken a dip in the same waters as all those sinners who came out to be baptized? Do you have any baptism of Jesus stories in your gospel? That’s a good one. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell about the baptism of Jesus. The baptism card, in each of those three gospels, not only has Jesus coming up and out of the water, heaven above also opens up and God’s voice declares about Jesus, “You are my Son, whom I love.”
- With his baptism, those humble beginnings take a rather sudden turn. Heaven is open. God is saying, “This is my Son whom I love.” So, now do we get riches, fortune, and fame? Come on gospel writers. If you have any cards about Jesus being wealthy and lavished with creature comforts, and boasting and bragging about how great he is, hand ‘em over. I want all the cards you have about Jesus and his fortunes and earthly treasures. But once again, all four gospels listen patiently and then they say with one voice, “Go Fish!” Yes, he is God’s Son. Nevertheless, the road he walked

was not an easy one. His path was not paved with money and wealth and earthly treasures. If you are looking for that in the gospel stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you are out of luck. Go Fish!

- If he didn't have an easy path to walk, does that mean he faced temptations? Gospel writers, do you have temptations? Immediately, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all produce a card about temptation. No sooner does God say Jesus is my Beloved Son, than the devil goes to work to try to drive a wedge between Father and Son. Our love of Jesus grows as he and the devil play their own little version of our card game.

Devil: "Will you turn these stones to bread?" Jesus: "Go fish!"

Devil: "Will you throw yourself down from the high point of the temple, so we can all watch the angels rescue you and lift you up on their hands?" Jesus: "Go fish!"

Devil: "All the kingdoms of the earth will be yours, if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus: "Go fish!"

Jesus did not do what the devil wanted him to do. So what did Jesus do?

- Do have any cleansing of the leper? Again Matthew, Mark and Luke all hand over the leper card.
- Do you have any lame people who can walk? Now John joins the shuffle. All the gospels have lame people who can walk.
- Do you have any blind people who can see? We're on a roll. Everyone has stories of the blind who miraculously receive sight from Jesus.
- What about something similar to the great miracle of the Exodus, something similar to that amazing manna that came down from heaven. Do you have any miracles where Jesus did something amazing with bread? All four gospels, all four gospels tell the story about a few loaves and fishes and a feast that feeds a multitude. How many Matthew? 5,000. Mark? 5,000. Luke? 5,000. John? 5,000. Hand over those feeding the multitude cards. But before the feeding cards are played out, Matthew and Mark say, "I see the

5,000 and I raise you 4,000”. Matthew and Mark both record a second miracle where Jesus feeds 4,000.

- He did miracles on land. Did he do any miracles on the sea? Cards come from all the gospels, from all four of the gospels, tales of violent storms that were calmed and tales of Jesus walking on the water. By land and by sea Jesus did so many miracles.
- Filled with excitement, riding a wave of enthusiasm, convinced Jesus can do all things, does he come and establish his kingdom on earth? If all those miracles made us feel like we were on a roll, like we were on a hot streak, like the good times would never end, when we ask about a kingdom on earth all the joy and celebration come to a sudden halt. We thought we saw a pattern. We thought his kingdom on earth was inevitable. He healed. He did miracles. He taught. He blessed. He forgave. Our hopes were rising. But when we ask if there are any gospel stories where Jesus says he is going to establish his kingdom right here and right now on earth, maybe even in Jerusalem, that holy city, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to a person, they all shake their heads and say, “Go fish.” An earthly kingdom was not in the cards.
- Well, did he tell us anything about what would happen when he got to Jerusalem? Are there any cards where Jesus tells us what lies ahead for him? Matthew takes a deep breath. Mark slowly and with great sorrow surveys his cards. Luke combs through his cards with a heavy hand. Then all three of these gospel writers each turn over three cards. Three cards each. Three times in Matthew, three times in Mark, three times in Luke, Jesus tells his disciples a message like the one found in Luke. “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.” (Luke 18:31-33)

Go Fish is supposed to be a pretty easy card game. Little children play it from an early age. But when you play Go Fish with the gospels, it can be confusing. And if you know anything about the gospels, after Jesus says what lies ahead in Jerusalem, you can't be blamed for pushing back

against his predictions. You see, if you know anything about the gospels and about his entrance into Jerusalem, now would be the time to say...

- “Do you have any Triumphant entries?” That’s more like it. All the gospels throw down their triumphal entry card. He’s going to suffer? Yeah, right! How can there be suffering when he enters to such a resounding chorus of Hosanna? Everybody joined the branch swinging, glory ringing, mighty king bringing, hosanna singing, as Jesus rode a wave of popularity into Jerusalem. How do I know? I have four cards to prove my point. Jesus comes to Jerusalem as the King.

If you are thinking along those lines, you might take comfort in knowing you are not alone. It seems his disciples never could quite understand that his end in Jerusalem would not be a victory. They were prepared for a battle if need be. They had their swords. They were ready to flex their muscles. When they entered Jerusalem with Jesus, they were riding high. Those disciples were filled with hope. To a man they were expecting, they were anticipating, they were reveling in the hope and the belief that his kingdom would come. Unfortunately, it turns out Jerusalem was a terrible place for fishing that last week that Jesus was alive. If you wanted a king, if you wanted a triumph, if you wanted victory, if you wanted power, Jerusalem was a terrible place for fishing that last week Jesus was alive.

How about this. You ask those four writers of the gospels, you ask Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is there a time during Holy Week, when Jesus looks at his disciples, those ones who left nets and boats and tax tables and followed him up one hill and down another, is there a time during Holy Week when Jesus looks at his disciples and gives a Winston Churchill type speech, where he says to his twelve closest friends, his disciples, does Jesus ever tell them as the critical moment draws near, “This will be your finest hour.” Does Jesus ever say that to his disciples that last week of his life? Four heads shake side to side. No. Go fish.

You mean he tells them it will not be their finest hour? Do you mean he tells them they will fail him? They will desert him? They will leave him alone? Matthew and Mark exchange a sorrowful glance, and

then the two of them each lift one of the heaviest cards in the deck, the one where Jesus says to his dear disciples, his closest friends, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me.” But that’s not the worst of it. Now it is not just Matthew and Mark. Now all four gospel writers lay down a card. Now it is not just a card of desertion, of leaving Jesus in his hour of need. The card the gospel writers lay down is a card for denial. Simon Peter, first to follow, first to leave behind his net, first to walk on the water, first to confess Jesus as Lord, Jesus told Simon Peter he would not just desert Jesus, he would deny Jesus. This denial carries such importance, a whole stream of cards cascade in condemnation onto the card table. You see, Peter denies Jesus three times. He does that in all four gospels, making a sum total of twelve denials. Each card lands on the table with a resounding thud. I do not know him...over and over again. I mean to tell you, Jerusalem was a terrible place for fishing that last week that Jesus was alive. It was a terrible place for fishing if you were looking for glory and crowns and a kingdom.

But if you were the devil, you must have thought you had found the lucky fishing hole that last week Jesus was alive. You watched Judas betray Jesus. You watched the disciples desert Jesus. You watched Peter deny Jesus. And you watched with glee as the crowds changed their tune and shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Boy, the devil was absolutely convinced that the fishing was fabulous in Jerusalem, as he watched Jesus suffer and die on the cross. The devil was licking his chops when they laid the dead body of Jesus in the tomb. And so imagine with me that dirty old devil making his way to the tomb that first Easter morning. The devil got up early that first Easter morning. The devil got up real early, because he was going fishing.

Mr. Gospel of Matthew, you and your Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount, show me the tomb. Do you have the dead body of Jesus in that tomb?

Matthew, who the ancient writers pictured as a divine man says to the devil: Go Fish!

The devil turns to Mark.

Mr. Gospel of Mark, you and your immediately this and immediately that, show me the tomb. Do you have the dead body of Jesus in that tomb?

Mark, portrayed as a winged lion literally roars at the devil: Go Fish! Growing frustrated, the devil turns to Luke.

Mr. Luke, you of good news to the poor and freedom for the captives, you of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, show me the tomb. Do you have the dead body of Jesus in that tomb?

Luke, imagined by the ancients as a winged ox, stubbornly tells that old devil, "Go Fish!"

Down to his last turn the devil literally gives John a tongue lashing as he cries out desperately, "Do you have the dead body of Jesus in that tomb?"

John, depicted as an eagle, rises high above Satan and his nonsense and says, "Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He is not in the tomb. Take yourself and your army of demons and be gone. There is no dead body in the tomb. Go Fish, for Jesus is alive."

There you have it. All the cards are on the table. What a happy ending. Who could add anything to such a wonderful witness about the hope we find in Jesus? But before we shuffle up the cards and put them away for another day, let's turn to a story that is only in the Gospel of John. When all the gospel cards have been played, there is always one card remaining in John's hand. It's the story we read this morning just a few moments ago. It's the story of what Simon Peter, and Thomas, and Nathanael, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, and two other disciples did one day when they were back by the Sea of Galilee. This is after Jesus rose from the dead. This group of disciples all decided to go fish. So don't shuffle the cards, pack them up, and put them away just yet. Let's see what happens when Peter and his pals decide to go fish that day by the Sea of Galilee.

Well, once again, just like in Jerusalem, the fishing was no good. That whole crew had come up empty. They had no fish. How do we know they had no fish? Well, Jesus was there on the shore that day and he asked them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" They grumbled grumpily and said, "Nah! Nothing." Well, you heard what happened.

Jesus said try fishing from the right side, they did, the nets got filled to overflowing, and somehow they figured out it was Jesus, Peter swam to shore, and on the shore, Jesus and Peter played their own little game of Go Fish.

Jesus said to Peter, “Do you love me?”

Peter, oh he must have been so anxious to show Jesus that he did not want to be defined by those denials he had made, Peter hastily searched through his cards and found the one that said love and he gave it to

Jesus. Here’s the card Jesus. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

And then Jesus asked a second time, “Do you love me?”

Peter somehow produced a second love card and handed it to Jesus.

“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

It happened a third time. No explanation why Jesus asked Peter three times, but knowing how many times Peter denied Jesus...well, anyway, Jesus asked Peter a third time, “Do you love me?”

Something about being asked a third time hurt Peter. Nonetheless, he got that love card out again and gave it to Jesus. “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

I understand how that could have hurt Peter. But it also seems so clear Jesus aimed not to hurt, but to heal. I think Jesus wanted Peter fully restored. I think Jesus wanted Peter fully forgiven. I think Jesus wanted Peter fully prepared to take the love of Christ out to the world.

Here’s my take on things. Standing with Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, I imagine Jesus taking all the cards, those cards about humility and divinity, that marvelous and mysterious joining together of the human and the divine that took place when Jesus was born into this world, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, taking those cards filled with his words of hope and counsel and peace and forgiveness, taking those cards dripping with his blessings of healing and wholeness for the blind, the lame, the leper and the lost, taking those cards bursting with his passion, the cards that tell of his suffering and death, his atoning sacrifice, his laying down of his life because he loved this whole world so much, I just see Jesus taking all the cards and putting them in the hands of Peter...and James and John...and Andrew, and Thomas and Nathanael...putting them in the hands of his

disciples...even, even putting all those cards in our hands...for we too are his disciples...I see Jesus putting all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, gospels that tell the good news of God's love for the world given to us in the person of Jesus Christ...I see Jesus putting it all in the hands of his disciples and saying..."Go Fish! Go Fish! Go Fish!" For that is what he said on those very shores, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, when he called to his disciples, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Here on this Easter morning, with Jesus risen from the dead, may we take his word of hope to a world that is hurting. Followers of the Risen Christ, let us go fish.