

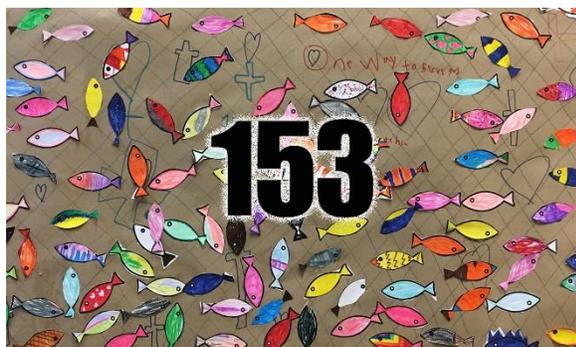
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**Title:** 153

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**Text:** [John 21:1-14](#)

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Numbers have great meaning in our lives and there are lots of them to remember. I still remember my phone number when I was growing up – CHERRY 2 – 1753 – back when "cherry" meant that you dialed a C and an H that you had to translate to a "2" and a "4." It seems confusing now but was so simple then. There is, of course, our

social security number and our date of birth. We're asked those on lots of things. Those who have served our country – thank you – can recite the number that was given to them at enlistment. Some numbers have good memories attached to them – birth dates of children, anniversaries – 5/20 – I've got to remember that one – it's coming up. Some numbers are unpleasant and hard – Debts that we owe, dates of the death of a loved one, 9/11. Last week, some heard Auschwitz survivor Eva Kor – she was A-7063. It's still on her forearm.

There are lots of numbers associated with scriptures. If I were to take a poll and ask what number you think of most when you think about scripture, I think I would get a lot of 40's and probably a lot of 12's and maybe even a three here and there. There were 12 sons and 12 tribes of Israel and 12 disciples. There were 40 days of rain and 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Jesus was tested for 40 days in the desert. Jesus rose on the third day, Jonah spent three days in the belly of the fish and we have Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the great Trinity. There are other numbers too – 10 commandments, feeding 5,000. For crying out loud, there is an entire book of the Bible called "Numbers" however it only takes its name from the opening two verses where it talks about a census.

Few of us associate the number 153 with scripture. But there it is, right there in the last chapter of the gospel of John. For John, this is the third appearance to the disciples after Easter – first in the house on Easter evening with everyone except Thomas, then a week later with Thomas in attendance and now, here, on the beach. The disciples had come out of hiding and had gone back to fishing on the Sea of Galilee – John calls it the Sea of Tiberias. There they are – Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael of Cana – who we haven't heard anything about since the first chapter of John – the

sons of Zebedee and two other disciples (nice of John to not even name these last two- perhaps they needed nametags). Simon announces that he's going fishing and the rest decide to join him.

Apparently, they fished all night. When the sun started to come up they had nothing – nothing – not one fish to show for their efforts. Jesus is walking along the shore watching what they are doing and shouts out to them although they don't recognize that it's him. You can almost hear the conversation. "Hey there, how's it going out there – any fish?" "No," they would say, "we've been out here all night and nothing, we're going to quit and try another day." The one on the beach would then suggest, "why don't you try on the right side of the boat? I think you'll be more successful there." So they do as he suggests and they are more successful. So many fish that they could not haul it in because the nets were so full. If you think you've heard this story before, Luke sets a similar scene when Jesus first calls some of the disciples including Peter.

But back here, in the last chapter of John, the beloved disciple identifies the person on the beach as Jesus to Peter and then we're given this odd little detail. I'm really trying to get to the number of fish but right before John gives us a number, he feels it important to give us this other little detail. "When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea." (John 21:7b). My preaching professor once said that if you didn't know how to explain a piece of scripture to your congregation, just read it and allow them to figure it out for themselves. That seems to be good advice here.

When the disciples get all the fish to the shore, Jesus has already built a charcoal fire for breakfast. "When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them..." (John 21:9-11a).

CUT – CUT – HOLD IT RIGHT THERE! You mean to tell me that we have ZERO details about Jesus' life from the time he was in the temple at age 13 until he called his disciples at age 29 or 30 – a 16 or so year gap in details but we know EXACTLY how many fish the disciples caught one morning on the lake? This just doesn't seem right. ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY-THREE FISH! It's a number we don't see coming. Shouldn't it be 12 or maybe 40? That would fit nicely into our preconceived notions but not 153? I don't understand.

I'm in good company. People throughout the ages didn't understand and have sought out the significance of giving us this detail of the exact number of 153 fish caught that morning. It's important to note that the analysis of numbers in scripture is not always hokey numerology. The analysis of numbers, called "gematria," has been used by the Jewish people in scripture for thousands of years. In both Hebrew and Greek, the letters of the alphabet can serve as both letters and numbers. For example, the book of Proverbs contains exactly 375 proverbs written by Solomon and 375 is also the numerical value of the name "Solomon."<sup>1</sup> When a precise number is used, there is almost always a deeper meaning. We'll not solve it this morning but let me give you a flavor of the kinds of hypotheses that are out there to explain this very specific number – 153.

Fourth-century scholar, Jerome, suggested that there were 153 different species of fish known at the time and Peter caught all the species of fish – in other words, all the people of the world come into the net.<sup>2</sup>

Mathematicians will tell you about triangular numbers. Augustine first noted that the number 153 is a triangular number, the triangle of 17. A triangular number is the sum of dots in an equilateral triangle formed from and filled by equally spaced dots. A triangular number is also the sum of all the natural numbers from 1 to the triangle of the number so if you add...

$1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13+14+15+16+17$ , you'll find that it equals 153

Incidentally, you get 17 when you add the 7 gifts of the Spirit with the 10 commandments.<sup>3</sup>

Many scholars point to Ezekiel 47 for another take on the number where it says that "Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish, once these waters reach there. It will become fresh; and everything will live where the river goes. People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-gedi to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea." (Ezekiel 47:9-10)

Stick with me here. Remember how I said that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have numerical values? The numerical value for the word *gedi* in the name "Engedi" adds up to 17. The numerical value for the word *eglaim* in the name "Eneglaim" adds up to 153. Coincidentally, the Hebrew word *gedi* is the 153<sup>rd</sup> word of Ezekiel 47.<sup>4</sup>

If you want just one more, someone has gone to the trouble to count the number of people that Jesus blessed or healed in each of the four Gospels. I didn't independently audit it but this person claims that Matthew has 47, Mark has just 3, Luke has 94 and John has 9. Anybody doing the addition – yep, 153.<sup>5</sup>

All of those are interesting and scholars agree that the number may have meant something to John and to the readers and hearers of his Gospel. They also agree that we may never know for sure what that meaning was. For us, it provides an opportunity to do some interesting theological and mathematical gymnastics but may get in the way of finding what it may mean for us in our time and place. Ultimately, we have to decide if, and if, then what, might mean for our spiritual journey. Let me suggest something for you to ponder.

Jesus' disciples weren't doing anything extraordinary that morning. They had gone back to fishing, likely needing to earn some money to support themselves and their families. In the midst of daily ritual for these disciples, the risen Christ met them where they were. For me, the 153 fish is a lot of fish. For me, this passage is a reminder of what Jesus did and continues to do for us in ordinary times and places.

Amid the blessing of Jesus in our lives, he continues to desire a relationship with us. I got so caught up in the 153 number that I haven't mentioned what happened next for those disciples. The net was full of large fish, 153 of them...

"...and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now, none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish." (John 21:11b-13).

I hope that you are reminded of gathering around this table when you hear those words – "took bread and gave it to them." I hope you are reminded that the relationship that is affirmed at this table is not confined to this table. That relationship is there on the beach around a charcoal fire, it is there at work, it is there in the midst of health challenges, that relationship with the risen Christ is there in your car when you've been cut off in traffic, that relationship is there in crisis and in calm.

Easter has come and gone. The resurrection was celebrated with the proper pomp and spirit. But now what? Well, we listen to the voice from the shore urging us to be about his business. That's a good reminder for our

community as well as for those first disciples. These Easter stories give the Christian community stories to share. And those stories remind us of who our focus is and what our mission is. They tell us of Jesus' continual call to his people to serve him by pulling people into community in his name. And we do that by sharing the stories of resurrection which we know and have experienced. We can never go back to the ordinary once we have heard that voice from the shore. We have been captured by a person who loves us and won't let us go. We have been captured by a story so powerful that we have been changed by its telling. And now, we must tell that story.

The late Robert McAfee Brown retired as professor of theology and ethics at the Pacific School of Religion. He said this in his book, *Creative Dislocation -- The Movement of Grace*, "Our faith does not come to us initially as theology, and particularly not as 'systematic theology,' but a story. Tell me about God: "Well, once upon a time there was a garden ..." Tell me about Jesus: "Well, once upon a time a little boy was born in a smelly stable in Bethlehem ..." Tell me about salvation: "Well, when this same boy grew up, he loved people so much that the rulers began to be frightened of him, and you know what they did? ..." Tell me about the church, "Well, there were a great many people who worked together: Mary and Priscilla and Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr., and John and Sister Teresa, and you know what they did? ..."6

Brown wrote this in the 1980s but he's looking now at us. We are the ones named and claimed in the baptismal waters. We are Christ's people in this time and place - people of the resurrection. People who fish for a living among one another. People who have a story to share and a faith to proclaim. That's who we are. The voice from the water's edge called them out of the ordinariness of their lives, to a new life and a new mission. The church of today needs to hear and heed that same voice. If What God worked in them when they saw Jesus, God will work in you when you see Jesus.

Just as he fed the disciples, he will feed you. It is a meal for nourishment and hope. It is a meal that fills us with love and forgiveness and strength -- for going from here to tell the most important story any person ever needs to hear. This isn't just any old fish story. This is a story about abundance -- for me, the 153 fish is about the abundance of grace that is offered to the hopeless disciples inviting them to tell a story of the power of the risen Christ in their lives. Clearly, they told that story. Now, it's our turn. Can you hear that call to tell the story of a risen Christ who lives and creates and shows forth in you? It's no fish story. It has power because it is your story too.

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<sup>1</sup> From the article, "Why 153 Fish in John 21:11," at [www.defendingthebride.com](http://www.defendingthebride.com)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> From the article, "What is the Meaning of the 153 Fish," at [www.torahportions.org](http://www.torahportions.org)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> From the article, "Meaning of Numbers in the Bible," at [www.biblestudy.org](http://www.biblestudy.org)

<sup>6</sup> Brown, Robert McAfee. *Creative Dislocation: The Movement of Grace*. Abingdon Press, 1980