

Do You Love Me?

John 21:1-19

April 18, 2010

I.

We have been at this for a while, haven't we? We started in the middle of February with Ash Wednesday and the period of Lent. Then came Holy Week and Easter Day. Now we are into the Great Fifty Days from Easter to Pentecost.

But I also hope we don't view Easter Day as the conclusion. Certainly it was the end of Lent, but it's also the beginning of a time when we explore more deeply the meaning of the events we celebrated earlier.

And today's readings certainly gave us a wealth of material to consider. We heard from the Book of Acts about the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. That event alone could be the basis for an entire sermon series about discipleship and following our Lord's teachings.

And today's Gospel offers several possibilities. The first part is about how the disciples couldn't catch any fish on their own, but when they followed Jesus' instructions they caught more fish than they could handle. The lesson there might be to trust in the Lord rather than ourselves.

The Gospel also tells of Jesus' appearance to fix breakfast for his disciples, most of whom ran off and left him alone when he was arrested. Seven of them were there that morning, and it's clear they were not carrying out the ministry Jesus envisioned for them. In fact, they were out fishing, which is what they did before Jesus ever came along. A sermon here might emphasize Jesus' example of faithfulness to people like us who falter and fall in our own lives.

Today, however, I want to focus on the part about Jesus and Peter. And as background, we remember that Peter, at the Last Supper, confidently told Jesus he would die for him (Jn. 13:37). But a few hours later, after Jesus had been arrested, Peter sat around a fire in the courtyard of the High Priest and denied three times that he ever knew Jesus (Jn. 18:17, 25, 27).

That had to have been Peter's greatest shame. When the chips were down Peter did not come through. To save himself he separated himself from the man he had followed and served for almost three years. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us that when Peter fully realized his disloyalty he wept bitterly (Mt. 26:75, Lk. 22:62).

Peter's disgrace, however, was only in his own mind. Jesus felt otherwise, and we soon will see how our Lord's grace and mercy enabled Peter to redeem himself.

II.

Sometimes when I read this part of the Gospel I think about an old preacher who had served the church for many years, and finally retired. He went home and put a sign on his front door that said "done preaching, gone fishing."

In some ways Peter did the same. Peter had not served the Lord as long as that old preacher, and his retirement was not voluntary. But his actions were similar. Peter also felt that he was done preaching, and it was all over for him. He had nothing to look forward to, and so he might as well go fishing again. Perhaps it was a good way to get away from it all.

And at this point, let's look at Peter in a little more detail. We recall from other readings that Peter was sort of a bombastic and good-hearted enthusiastic fellow who often missed the points that Jesus was trying to make, but at other times showed remarkable insights.

For example, there was the impetuous Peter who jumped out of a boat in a storm and tried to walk on water to meet Jesus and almost drowned (Mt. 14:29-31). But he was the first to understand the revelation that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God (Mt. 16:16).

It also was the Peter who Jesus described as Satan and told to get behind him (Mt. 16:23), but yet Jesus also said that Peter was the rock upon whom he would build his church (Mt. 16:18). And of course I already have mentioned Peter's duplicity in telling Jesus he would be willing to die for him, and then doing the opposite to his great shame.

III.

So, in the context of today's reading, what do we imagine Peter was thinking after he decided to go back to his old life, and then was surprised to see Jesus waiting on the shore the next morning?

The reading says that as soon as Peter realized it was the risen Lord he put on his clothes and swam to shore. We don't know why he did this, but we can speculate that he might have been worried that Jesus was angry with him, and he hoped for something to ease his conscience.

But then the Gospel suggests that Jesus and Peter sat in silence throughout breakfast. This must have elevated Peter's anxiety. He surely felt guilty about being a fair weather friend, but yet Jesus was casually fixing breakfast and probably acting as if nothing had happened.

I can imagine that Peter kept his head down and nervously looked at Jesus out of the corners of his eyes several times. I can imagine that Peter was sitting on pins and needles with his stomach churning and hoping that something could be done to set things right in his own mind.

Then, with no forewarning Jesus asked point-blank if Peter loved him. Peter said he did, and Jesus instructed him to "feed my sheep." Then Jesus asked basically the same question two more times, with the same answer from Peter and the same follow-up instruction from Jesus.

Three times it happened. Peter, do you love me. Lord you know that I do. Then feed my sheep. And we can look at this in two ways

First, by asking Peter the same question three times, Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to wipe away his three denials. Each reaffirmation around the fire on that beach cancelled out an earlier rejection around an earlier fire in the High Priest's courtyard.

But there also is a second aspect to this exchange apparent only in the original Greek in which it was written. And you know I usually don't talk about biblical languages unless there is a good reason. It is important in today's reading because of the fact that English has one word for love but Greek has three, all with different meanings.

The first is *ερος*, which is romantic love or passion from which the word erotic is derived, and is not applicable here. The second is *φιλια*, which describes friendship and loyalty to family and friends. The city of brotherly love, Philadelphia, derives its name from that meaning. It is a reasonably strong expression. And the third is *αγαπή*, which is the strongest expression. It is a self-sacrificing, unconditional, all-giving spiritual expression of trust and faith.

In the context of these distinctions, the first two times Jesus asked if Peter loved him, Jesus used the strongest unconditional all-giving form of the verb, but Peter responded with the more moderate friendship and loyalty form. This actually was to Peter's credit. He no longer was boasting of his love as he did at the Last Supper, but being greatly humbled probably just wanted to tell the truth and say that he loved Jesus as best he could.

The third time, however, Jesus came to Peter's level and used Peter's form of the verb that signified friendship. And Peter again answered with the same. This means that Jesus met Peter

where he was, and found it to be good enough. Jesus took what the sinful Peter could offer and redeemed him. Jesus let Peter know that he still had a calling as an apostle, and he enabled Peter to begin the ministry that eventually would lead to the founding of the church.

IV.

We probably can see what this reading might mean to Christians today. I could suggest two points as food for thought. One comes from Jesus' questions to Peter and Peter's answers. "Peter do you love me? Lord you know I love you." The other is in Jesus' instructions after Peter answered. "Peter, feed my sheep."

It is clear that Jesus wants us to love him so we will be loved by the Father (Jn. 14:21). And the first Great Commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Mt. 22:37).

But Jesus knows we are imperfect, and he does not want us to be self-satisfied in our belief that we love him. Jesus does not ask us to love him as Peter pridefully claimed at the Last Supper, but rather as Peter honestly confessed that morning on the beach. We cannot force it. Peter could not force it. We cannot dial it up on demand.

This means, as the original Greek of this story suggests, Jesus would rather have us sincerely acknowledge him as our friend than boastfully claim a pious all-encompassing love that exceeds our capabilities. He asks us to open our hearts to him and offer ourselves in his service, realizing that we, like Peter, will be contending with the fallen and broken world in which we live.

And if we do our part and love him as best we can, he will take our humble offerings and turn them into holy things. If we offer our strengths and weaknesses, our skills and shortcomings, our faith and our doubts, our successes and our fear of failure, our Lord will make us, as he made Peter, adequate to the tasks before us.

This leads to our call to feed his sheep. That is not just an instruction to minister to the hungry. It is broader than that, but certainly includes it. Jesus was talking about spiritual food, not just physical nourishment. He was speaking figuratively, in metaphorical terms, about evangelism, and discipleship, and the universal ministry of the baptized.

When Jesus said "feed my sheep" he was calling Peter, as he calls us today, to know and proclaim the Word of God, to pray to and worship our Lord, to reach into the community in Christian love and bring people into the church, and to do our best to live exemplary lives.

V.

In a way today's Gospel is a story of two resurrections. Obviously, the first was an appearance of Jesus after God raised him from the dead. The second, not as dramatic but still important, was the restoration of Peter after he had died inside and felt all he had left was to go fishing.

Jesus showed him otherwise. Jesus demonstrated to Peter that his love and willingness to forgive could transcend even denial and rejection. And Jesus made it clear that if Peter loved him in truth and spirit, then he would be able to show that love to others by caring for the flock that Jesus left behind.

It's still the same today. Part of Christian life is knowing we can trust in our Lord's forgiveness if we sincerely seek it. A counterpart is that we are also called to carry on today's version of the instruction that Jesus gave to Peter—feed my sheep, care for my flock, you are my hands and feet, you now stand in my place to do this work. I pray that we always remember that our blessings from God come with these responsibilities to each other. *Amen.*