

C Easter 3 5.1.22

John 21:1-19

Focus statement: Jesus loves us until we know it.

Guys, I freaking love Peter. Like, I just love him, he's such a goof! He kind of makes me tired with his eager beaveriness. You're the Messiah, wash ALL of me, I will literally follow you anywhere, Peter is ALL IN, all the time. But that enthusiasm also got him in trouble, as we know. Calling Jesus the Messiah was followed up with Jesus' calling him Satan for his failing to understand that part of being the Messiah meant dying. Wash ALL of me was the response to, don't wash any of me, and both were too large of responses. And "I will literally follow you anywhere," lasted as long as a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the High Priest, on a cold Friday morning. Peter's eager, he's passionate, an energy that gets him in trouble sometimes, as he tends to leap before he looks. Our Gospel reading for this morning gives us yet another example of what theologian Gail O'Day referred to as "Peter's buffoonish enthusiasm," and gives us some insight into how Peter went from excitable disciple to apostle of the crucified Lord. A role which, we know from reading Acts, he wasn't perfect at either, but God never has been about calling the perfect, God's always been about calling the loved.

Our reading for this morning starts, "after these things." These things being what we read about last week, the empty tomb, the appearance to the disciples in the locked room, and a week later in the same locked room, the appearance to Thomas. After these things, after the disciples were given the Holy Spirit and sent out with the power to forgive and retain sins, they weren't any closer to knowing where and how to do that work. So, they did what

they knew how to do, they went fishing. Why fishing? Scholars love arguing about this question, Dr. O'Day devoted several paragraphs in the commentary on this question. Maybe they were abandoning Jesus as going back to their old lifestyle. Maybe they were aimless, looking for something to do as they waited for a path to open. Maybe they needed a second income. Being an itinerant preacher is not exactly a lucrative career path, but even a prophet has to eat. Whichever you think they went fishing, there's a highly regarded biblical scholar to agree with you, which makes this a fun question to ponder. Why do you think the disciples were fishing? How does the reason for this expedition change how you think about what came next?

But, whatever your reason, the result is the same, this was not the most successful of fishing expeditions. They caught nothing. And as the futility of this fishing expedition was starting to become clear, to add insult to injury, some stranger on the beach yelled to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" It's phrased as a question, but clearly, it's not. The person on the beach knew they have no fish. I don't quite know how to hear their response. The text simply says, "they answered him, 'no.'" But was it a matter of fact "no," an exasperated "no," an annoyed "no"? Again, I invite you to try out some different intonations in the "no," see how it changes the text for you.

Whatever the tone, what happened next was the same. They cast their nets to the right side of the boat, and suddenly they were overwhelmed with fish. So many fish they could barely haul the nets in. And it was in that abundance, that the beloved disciple recognized Jesus and exclaimed, "It is the Lord."

Let's pause for a second here on Jesus' being recognized as a result of a showing of abundance. Think back with me, if you will, to the beginning of John's Gospel, chapter two, to be precise, which we read back in January. Remember Jesus' first miracle, the abundance of water turned to wine at the wedding at Cana. There is something being said here in the bookending of Jesus' ministry with these signs of abundance. Jesus is recognized in the presence of nothing becoming more than enough.

But, back to Peter. When Peter heard the announcement, "It is the Lord," his response was immediate. He put clothes on—because, the text tells us, he was fishing naked. This is not as weird as it sounds. This was the first century, people likely had only one or many two sets of clothing. For hard, dirty work like fishing, you would want to preserve that clothing. But, not unlike today, it was considered poor form to greet an important person while naked, so Peter got dressed to see Jesus. But then, having put clothes on, he jumped into the lake, undoing all efforts of trying to meet Jesus in a dignified manner. Because, friends, I swim a lot, I know, there is nothing less dignified than trying to have a conversation sopping wet and with water running down your face. There's just not. Also, the text goes on to say, even though they were having trouble hauling in the nets, they were only like 100 yards from the shore. This is not a long distance to row a boat, it's like a football field. I googled it, source of all knowledge, and an average time to row 100 yards is like 16 seconds. Add time, because of all the fish, but compare it to swimming. In a pool if you are a decent swimmer, one hundred yards takes about two minutes to swim. In open water, while wearing a long, flowing robe, well, I'm guessing it would have taken Peter quite a bit

longer. The point being, he didn't gain a sizeable time advantage by swimming to Jesus, he just arrived looking silly.

Anyway, they get to the shore, Peter sopping wet, everyone else in a boat, and there to greet them is Jesus, standing beside a charcoal fire, on which he was warming fish and bread. The text doesn't say anything about it, but I wonder if Peter's heart dropped a little in that moment, seeing Jesus beside a charcoal fire. I wonder if he flashed back to a different fire, in a different location, around a different audience, and if that memory had some reason as to why when Jesus asked them to bring some of their fish for the meal, Peter was the first to take off running. Trying to undo what had been done, the words that had been said, around a similar fire, in the similar light of the early morning.

After they had finished the meal, Jesus turned to Peter and asked a question, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" Mic drop, there is a LOT in this question, so let's unpack all that Jesus shoved into these eleven words. Starting with Simon son of John. In the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Peter became Peter when he declared Jesus the Messiah, a turning point in Jesus' ministry. John's Gospel is different. In John's Gospel, he got the name Peter much earlier. Way back in chapter one, John the Baptizer was standing with two of his disciples, when Jesus walked by. John recognized Jesus as the Lamb of God and sent his disciples after Jesus. One of those disciples was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, who went and brought his brother along. When Jesus saw Simon Peter, the very first thing he said to him was this, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)." And that was his name for the next twenty chapters. Calling

Peter Simon son of John again, in this last appearance, reminds Peter that Jesus knows all of him, everything about him. Who he was, where he came from, who he is, and who he will be. Simon son of John offers Peter a do-over, a chance to start fresh and try again. It also echoes Jesus' words in the Good Shepherd discourse in chapter ten, a portion of which we'll read next week, when Jesus said, that the good shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." "More than these" echoes Peter's words on the night Jesus was betrayed, "Lord, why can I not follow you... I will lay down my life for you." To which Jesus responded with the news of Peter's betrayal. You said you loved me more than these, Jesus reminded him in these words, but do you love me. Yes, Peter replied, yes you know I love you. To which Jesus responded, "Feed my lambs."

Two more times Jesus asked this question, "Peter do you love me?" Two more times Peter responded, until he was hurt by the question, "Yes, Lord, you know everything, you know I love you." Jesus responded, "Feed my sheep."

Jesus' threefold questioning of Peter teaches us something central about the nature of forgiveness. You hear the phrase, "forgive and forget," but what Jesus I think shows Peter here is that forgetting is not the same as forgiving. That in fact, to truly forgive, you cannot forget. You have to remember, make amends, and move through. Because the key to forgiveness is the rebuilding of trust, and trust does not come through forgetting, trust comes through the restoration of relationship. Not a rebuilding of what was, depending on the wrong that has been done, such rebuilding may be impossible, but the construction of what will be. The threefold questioning of Simon son of John do you love me, is not Jesus

holding Peter's nose in his mess like a naughty puppy, it is Jesus helping Peter fully comprehend the fullness of Christ's forgiveness, forever and always, so that Peter never has to look back on what had happened and question if it is truly ok. Peter's denial is not forgotten, it's never forgotten. Instead, it is on the rubble of those broken promises that Jesus forged a new way forward for Peter in this simple question of "Do you love me?" And the overwhelmingly powerful answer, "Feed my sheep. Follow me."

Dear people of God, this is the question God asks us again and again, do you love me? Not as a taunt or challenge, but as a reminder of the power of that conviction. Do you love me, Jesus asks us again and again. Until we know. Thanks be to God, who never gives up on the asking. Amen.