



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 5, 2019

“Jesus and Peter”

(John 21:16)

Rev. David K. Groth

“‘Do you love me?’ Peter said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep’” (Jn. 21:16).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: O God, through the humiliation of Your Son You raised up the fallen world. Grant to Your faithful people, rescued from the peril of everlasting death, perpetual gladness and eternal joys; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

I wonder if Peter thought about giving up. His blunders were piling up one on top of another. He was trying so hard to please and impress Jesus, but it must have felt he couldn't do or say anything right. Jesus was always rebuking Peter. When Peter started sinking in the Sea of Galilee, Jesus caught him by the hand and said, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?" When Peter said Jesus would never be crucified, the Lord looked right at Peter and said, "Get behind me Satan!" Sometimes the Lord just ignored Peter, as when Peter suggested he build three tents at the Mount of Transfiguration, one for Jesus, one for Elijah and one for Moses.

Honestly, I admire Peter for his resilience. He is frequently knocked down but keeps getting back up. He hangs in there.

I'm, thinking about the night Jesus was arrested. That night alone Peter got his knuckles rapped numerous times. Remember? Peter said, "Lord you will never wash my feet." And Jesus replied, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." "Then Lord, not just my feet but my hands and head as well!" Wrong again Peter!

Later, Jesus told disciples, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me. Peter, with feathers aplomb says, "Even if they all fall away, I never will!" Jesus answered, "This very night before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

When Jesus was praying in the garden, he keeps coming back to find his disciples sleeping. But for some reason, Jesus singles out Peter, and says specifically to him, "Could you not keep watch with me for one hour?" (Mt. 26:40)

When Jesus was arrested, Peter tried to do the right thing. At risk of his own life, Peter unsheathed his sword and swung at the neck of one of the soldiers, only to lop off a part of

his ear. Again, Jesus scolds Peter. “Put your sword away, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword! I could right now send for twelve legions of angels.”

And of course a little later, warming his hands over the fire, Peter swears up and down he doesn't know Jesus. The rooster crows, and quote, “The Lord turned and looked at Peter.” The look says it all. We don't ever want to see that look.

All that in one night! All that in front of other people, and there is no pain quite so sharp as *public* shame and humiliation. It makes me wonder if Peter ever entertained the idea of quitting, washing his hands of the whole enterprise, and going back to the quiet life of harvesting fish from the Sea of Galilee. Commercial fishing has never been a real safe vocation, but for Peter it would have felt safe by comparison: safe from the persecution of the religious and Roman authorities, safe from the judgmental scorn of the other disciples, safe from the reprimands of Jesus.

In our text, Peter is tired of waiting for the risen Lord to make his next appearance and announces, “I'm going fishing.” Other disciples join him. They find comfort in the familiar – the boat, the oars, the sail, the feel of the net in their hands, the quiet lake. And so by the light of a lone lamp on a pole out in front of the boat (the way the ancients liked to fish the Sea of Galilee) they throw their nets out and drag them back in. They go at it all night, but have nothing to show for it.

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore and through the early morning mist Jesus sees the little boat with Peter and the others in it. The disciples don't recognize him. They're about a hundred yards off shore, so Jesus has to shout in order to be heard. “Friends, do you have any fish?” The disciples answer with a curt “no,” and by tone and tenor probably “now buzz off.”

Now I don't know much about fishing, but I know if a fisherman has been working at it all night, in vain, without so much as a nibble, he's in no mood for advice from a beach comber. But I think Jesus is enjoying the moment,

savoring it, teasing them a little. He calls out, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you’ll find some.”

Perhaps these words trigger “*déjà vu*” in the boat. Months before, the disciples heard the same words from the same voice, with incredible results. In any case, they do as instructed, and right there, at the proper depth: 153 fish.

The disciples are stunned by this dramatic turn in fortune. John says out loud what the others are thinking. “It’s the Lord.” Peter, always impetuous, throws himself overboard and starts swimming toward shore. With all those robes, progress is slow, but eventually his feet touch the bottom and with large, plodding steps he plows ashore.

Jesus is tending to a fire of burning coals. By the way, the only other time those words “burning coals” are used in the New Testament was when Peter was warming himself over a fire of burning coals and denying Jesus left and right. I wonder if the smell of it prompted any subconscious feelings of sadness and guilt in Peter. In any event, Jesus tells them to bring some of the fish they’ve just caught.

There are a lot of ways to show forgiveness and reconciliation. In my book, this is one of the very best, with a few large filets of the freshest fish sizzling in oil. Imagine it from Peter’s perspective. Knowing what he knows about what he’s done, especially his three-fold denial of being in any way associated with Jesus. It surprises me Peter is eager to see Jesus, but Peter must know by now that when Jesus forgives, it’s over. That sin has been removed. It’ll never come up again. And remember, three times the week before Jesus said to the disciples in the locked room, “Peace be with you.”

In any event, there they all are on the beach, Jesus tending to the fish. I don’t picture them talking much. I think they’re mostly quiet, reflective. The fire crackles. Gulls scream. Water laps at the hull of the boat. And with every succulent morsel of fish, they savor the sweet taste of forgiveness.

But there’s something more to be done. Peter has

been forgiven, yes, but he hasn't yet been reinstated as an apostle. Jesus breaks the silence. "Simon, do you love me?" He calls him "Simon" which was Peter's name before he came to know Jesus, when he was not a follower of Jesus. In other words, Jesus means business here. "Simon, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Feed my lambs." Silence.

"Do you love me, Simon?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Tend my sheep." More silence.

Most eyes are fixed on the fire of burning coals and the sparks rising in the dark. The eyes of Jesus are fixed on Peter. A third time, to make up for the three times Peter disowned Jesus while standing around that other fire of burning coals, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved by the third repetition of the question. Yes, Lord" says Peter, tears streaming down. "Feed my sheep." The tears are of remorse and shame, and I think resolve. It'll never happen again, and both of them know that now.

Notice, Jesus does all this in front of the other disciples, which is important. The others now know Jesus has forgiven Peter, so *they* shouldn't be talking about Peter's betrayal any more either. Jesus has plans for Peter, a purpose and direction for Peter's life. He warns of trouble ahead. "You will be carried where you do not want to go." But then Jesus closes out the discourse with the words "follow me." The other disciples now also know Peter has been fully reinstated; no one is to doubt that anymore.

What Jesus does not say to Peter is just as important as what he does. It would seem only natural to at least mention Peter's spectacular failure. "You know, you really blew it back there in the courtyard." But Jesus gets no pleasure out of taking people down a notch or two, embarrassing them, rubbing their noses in it, shaming them. I think Jesus can see the man standing before him is already broken. No reason to add to that. So Jesus does not even ask for a simple apology, an acknowledgement that something is wrong, or some promise that it will never happen again. What Peter experiences instead on the beach

is pure grace, the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

But after grace, there's always work to do: for Peter, and for us. Not to earn acceptance or forgiveness or restoration; all that has already been given. But after grace, there is work to do: sheep to tend. This is not cheap forgiveness. It's given freely, but to know this grace and internalize it means there will be a life that responds to it.

That is, this text is not just about "therapeutic forgiveness" to make you feel good about yourself, to help you reach self-fulfillment, self-understanding, self-actualization. That's the goal of a lot of the "spirituality" talk out there, but it's not what we mean by Christianity. Christianity is the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ, *and the grateful response* to that amazing grace lived out in love and service to others. Peter is given forgiveness and salvation, but he's also given a vocation as an apostle. He's given work to do. "If you love me, feed my sheep." There on the beach, Peter heard it all three times. He will never again forget it.

Peter will become the leader of the early Christian church. He will be strong and inspiring, and in a few years he too will be arrested and crucified, crucified for his faith and his works, right there in Rome under Emperor Nero. Tradition has it that Peter insisted on being crucified upside down so as not to be confused or in any way equated with the suffering that Jesus endured for our sin.

The point is, God not only forgives you, but calls you – not for privilege but for service. You don't have to look far. Sunday School, VBS, Meals on Wheels, tutoring a child, organizing a small group Bible Study in your home, helping out at Bread and Roses, visiting the home bound.

"If you love me, feed my sheep." In other words, love demands a response. Don't just receive grace. Show the grace of Jesus to others. Share it.

Jesus gracefully welcomed Peter back, forgave him and reinstated him. Jesus saved Peter *from* a lifetime of guilt and destructive shame and *for* a lifetime of courageous service.

Similarly Jesus loves you, forgives you and has restored you. But he also has work for you to do in his name. So I invite you, whoever you are, with whatever memories of public failures– I invite you to receive the Lord’s forgiveness. Bring yourself to this altar to receive his body and blood for your forgiveness . . . and work to do, meaningful, rewarding work. “If you love me . . . feed my sheep.” Amen.

