

Sermon (Peter and the Risen Christ) John 21: 1-19 April 10, 2016

After all these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and He showed Himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I'm going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have caught no fish, have you?" They answered Him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. 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 fifty-three 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. This was now the third time that Jesus had appeared to the disciples after He was raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Jesus, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My lambs." A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Jesus, "Yes Lord; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep." Jesus said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because Jesus said to him a third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Jesus, "Lord, You know everything; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.) After this He said to Peter, "Follow Me."

This is the third Sunday of Easter and the excitement and optimism of resurrection day has... paled. On Easter our faith tells us that everything is possible but it's already three weeks in the past... and we can find ourselves, spiritually, fishing on a dark sea all night without catching anything. This is where we meet Jesus' disciples in today's gospel. There wasn't any talk about how wonderful and amazing it had been to see the Risen Christ... as if Easter hadn't happened. This *is* the Christian struggle: to hold onto the joy and hope and believe that Easter has happened, and to be present to the moment, when little around us (or perhaps within us) testifies to God's triumph over sin and death.

The disciples fished on a dark sea all night and nothing happened; they caught nothing. But Easter morning had happened, and the Risen Christ was waiting on the beach, and He called the disciples to come have bread and fish for breakfast. Early Christian iconography of Holy Communion pictured the bread and fish that Jesus served on the beach, rather than bread and cup of the Last Supper. That's how important this Jesus-story was to the early church.

Jesus fed the disciples and then handed over His mission - to love and heal the world - to Simon Peter, and to the early church, and to us. This is my favorite Jesus-story. Jesus entrusted His mission to the disciples: to experience and express the fullness of God's love and mercy to all the world. But before that He fed them. Clearly this story says that we can't carry out Jesus' mission until we've been fed by Him.

I love impulsive, foot-in-mouth Peter who in equal measure loves Jesus and is a fool. I think I love Peter so dearly because I relate to him. When I gave my heart to Jesus as an 18-year-old the expectation in my church was pretty much that women were quiet and submissive, and I didn't think I could fit in with them. Secretly that made me wonder then if I could fit in with Jesus. Later when I moved to a Christian commune in Santa Rosa, the women there had even more prescriptive behavior, and wore their heads covered as a sign of submission to the men....

Of course I relate to Peter because I'm like him. Like Peter, Jesus loves me and has entrusted His mission to me. And like Peter, Jesus has His hands full growing godliness in me.

It could be easy to sentimentalize this gospel story about Jesus giving Peter three opportunities to confess his love for Jesus... just as Peter had earlier denied knowing Jesus, but there's a deeper lesson here for us, and I believe that it's about restoring damaged relationships. Peter had done major relationship damage by abandoning Jesus when he was arrested and tried, and then denying he even knew who Jesus was. Jesus knew Peter in all his broken and fragile humanness and Jesus loved him and had unique work for Peter to build God's kingdom. That same thing is true for you and me: Jesus knows us - and in scripture the word "know" refers to sexual intimacy - which means that we are naked, and vulnerable before God. God knows us, and God loves us. God has unique work for each of us to bring love and healing to all the world. If you look at the front of the bulletin you'll see right below the "Alleluia" circle our congregation's mission, our work: to experience and express Christ's love.

It's hard to take it in, that God fully knows and loves us, and has unique work for the Kingdom of God for us. I don't think Peter had a chance of believing - after his betrayal and denial of Jesus - that he was both fully known and fully loved and entrusted with building God's Kingdom. So Jesus, the great psychologist, helped Peter restore their relationship, helped Peter grow past his mistakes, and helped Peter grow into who he was created to be.

Who among us here hasn't damaged a relationship? We can't help it; we are imperfect creatures, defensive, and distrusting, and we ourselves have been harmed by others. But when we damage a relationship, we can damage our relationship with God, who has commanded us to love as we are loved... and we can damage the relationship we have with ourselves... for we are commanded to love others and we love ourselves.

This gospel story can teach us about hope and healing and reconciliation in damaged relationships. To be a Christian (actually to be alive) is to learn and grow all of

the time. We are always growing in godliness... if we are open to the Holy Spirit working and growing in us. God's desire is that we are always growing.

"G" in the word "grow" is for grace... and grace is always offered to us. Grace is forgiveness, compassion, and pardon when it's offered from one human to another. Grace, offered from God, is all those things and it's also God's favor, God's unmerited (which means we don't have to earn it even if there were a way to, which there's not) loving-kindness towards us. No matter what we have done - and this sticks in our craw, doesn't it, that despite our sense of right and wrong and crime and punishment... no matter what we humans have done, God loves us and offers us grace. We do need to accept it... but it's simply here for us to take. The "G" in "grow" is for grace: God gives us grace no matter the relationship damage we've caused.

There might be damage caused by someone else and you are the innocent person. Grace might be something you offer in return instead of nursing hurt feelings and fantasizing revenge. God gives grace to you. At all times and in all circumstances God loves you and offers you mercy and kindness... grace. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray He said, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." What would it be like to offer grace to someone in response to the relationship damage they've caused... to offer it as God offers it to you? Would this make you a doormat or a wuss or would it help you to grow in godliness? The thing to remember about grace is that first God offers it to you... so before you offer grace to someone else... be sure that you've accepted God's grace. "G" is for Grace. [Say it with me. Grace.]

The "R" in "grow" is restitution. Restitution means to restore, to rebuild, to reinstate, to replace... all good "R" words. Restitution is "the act of giving back something that has been lost or stolen." When we damage a relationship, like Peter who abandoned and denied Jesus, trust is lost and comfort and ease in the relationship are stolen. I'd like to quote from Alcoholics Anonymous, a program we Christians have so much in common with because we are all recovering [from sin.] "We have a list of the persons we have harmed and to whom we are willing to make amends. We subjected ourselves to a drastic self-appraisal. Now we go out to our fellows and repair the damage done in the past. We attempt to sweep away the debris which has accumulated out of our effort to live on self-will and run the show ourselves. [We ask God to help us do this.] Remember it was agreed at the beginning [of our recovery] that we would go to any lengths for victory over [sin.]

Peter harmed his relationship, seemingly beyond repair, with Jesus. Jesus was arrested, tried, and tortured, and Peter was notably absent... Peter who'd said to Jesus earlier that same evening Jesus was arrested, "Though all become deserters because of You, I will never desert You." and "Even though I must die with You, I will not deny You." (Matthew 26:33-34) And then Peter did deny - shouting and cursing - that he knew Jesus... three times.

But here after the disciples had fished all night and caught nothing, Jesus called to them from the beach. None of the disciples dared ask, John tells us, if it was Jesus. But Peter threw himself overboard to get to Jesus. This was his first declaration of love. When he got to the beach though, and was face to face with Jesus... did it all come flooding back to Peter that he'd done such damage to their relationship? Was he able to look at Jesus, and talk with Him, or was he silent and so full of regret and shame?

Jesus invited the disciples to eat breakfast, and to bring their own catch of fish to the grill. Jesus never observed strict Jewish law concerning table fellowship, but had eaten and drunk with sinners and outcasts; everyone was welcome. It's what we remember when we celebrate Communion, that everyone is welcome at the Lord's Table.

After they ate Jesus took Peter aside and asked him a simple question, "Do you love Me?" And for every time Peter had denied Jesus, Jesus gave him the opportunity for restitution. Jesus allowed Peter to rebuild His relationship with Jesus and to regain his own self-esteem. Restitution more than being sorry. Restitution is, as AA states, doing whatever needs to be done (when it's possible) to mend, to repair damage done in our relationships. Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to grow in godliness through restitution. When we offer love, mercy and grace to others, especially those we've harmed or who have harmed us, we grow in godliness through restitution. [Say it with me. Restitution.]

The "O" in "grow" is oasis. An oasis is an unexpected source of water in a dry and isolated place, like the desert... an oasis is also an unexpected source of refreshment and relief in a difficult time. We can find dry and desolate places in relationships, and when we resist God's grace and healing work in us, we can find ourselves in the desert. The ancients knew the desert to be a dangerous and unpredictable place - deathly hot under the sun and freezing cold when the sun went down, and where the wind could reshape the sand into a foreign and unfamiliar landscape - but they also knew the desert as a place of spiritual growth and testing.

An oasis is a source of water springing up unexpectedly but the word "oasis" comes from the Coptic words "dwelling place." Psalm 90 starts out, "Lord, Thou hast been our *dwelling place* throughout all generations," and Psalm 23 ends, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and *I will dwell* in the house of the Lord forever." In God's presence we find our dwelling place, and we are loved, and healed, and refreshed. No matter our sin and brokenness, our desolation... God is an oasis, a dwelling place, a sanctuary... all interchangeable words.

A sanctuary is a physical and spiritual place of relief, of refuge and safety. God offers us sanctuary when we are, as Peter was, ashamed and afraid. I like to think that we are a sanctuary, and that in this place, in this community, we are sheltered, loved, and forgiven. Here we have the opportunity to grow together as bones that have been reset, when we practice mercy, forgiveness, and second chances... when we offer grace... here we find oasis, our dwelling place.

The gospel doesn't tell us if Peter was able to forgive himself for betraying Jesus. But in this story we see Jesus inviting Peter to share a meal, continuing the conversation that was cut short by Jesus' arrest, and giving Peter the opportunity (not just once but three times) to restate and reclaim his love for Jesus. In his restored relationship with Jesus Peter found an oasis. In a growing relationship with Christ, and within the Christian community, we too find an oasis. [Say it with me. Oasis.]

Finally the "W" in "grow" is for "wrestle." The best known story in the bible about wrestling is Jacob who wrestled all night with a stranger. Jacob's saga is about the damage he caused and experienced in relationships, and it's about God's presence with him in all the messiness. You'll remember that Jacob deceived his dying father by putting lamb's wool over his arm to imitate his brother's hairy arm, and Jacob received

the blessing (the inheritance) from their blind father that was meant for his twin brother, Esau. Because of that deception Jacob had to run away. Later his father-in-law tricked Jacob into years of servitude before allowing Jacob to marry his second wife Rachel, the second of the father-in-law's daughters, and the woman Jacob really loved. Jacob ran away again, after stealing from his father-in-law, and he was pursued. Jacob wanted to be reconciled with his twin, and the night before they were to meet, Jacob was filled with fear that Esau would kill him for the relationship-damage Jacob had caused.

I'm getting to the good part. During the night Jacob wrestled in the dark with someone he couldn't see, and Jacob's hip was injured, causing Jacob to limp the rest of his life. Jacob wrestled with the stranger all night and even as day was breaking Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." The stranger... was it an angel? was it God? let go of Jacob, and gave him a new name, Israel (which means "God saves") because Jacob wrestled with God and won.

The story of Jacob is messy and though it all, in all the messes, God is present. Jacob damaged relationships and wrestled with his mother (it was her idea for Jacob to deceive his father;) he wrestled with his wives and his father-in-law, his brother, and finally with God. It seems to me in our gospel story that Jesus was the one wrestling with Peter, as if He were saying, "I will not let you go, Peter, until you admit how much I mean to you, and until you know how much you mean to Me."

What keeps us from passionate, wholehearted relationships with the Risen Christ who offers us the same love and forgiveness and grace that Jesus offered to Peter? What keeps us from wrestling with God until we find a blessing? I think it's much the shame and regret that Peter had. In different ways we've abandoned Christ, denied knowing Him, and hidden behind locked doors for fear that our sins - our mistakes, and the relationship-damage we've caused - would come knocking.

To wrestle is to struggle with something that matters. It is to hold onto it until understanding, or an answer, or a blessing, comes. In both of these stories from scripture, Peter meeting the Risen Christ on the beach, and Jacob's all-night-long struggle with the stranger... we see imperfect people wrestling with God, wrestling for deeper understanding of themselves and God... holding on for a blessing.

It's easier to run away from imperfect relationships with imperfect fellow human beings than to wrestle with grace, restitution, and oasis. It's easier to give up on the hard theological questions about tragedy and suffering, than to wrestle with the God who offers no guarantee of happiness or satisfaction... but only love.

On the beach Jesus and Peter had a verbal wrestling match "Do you love Me?" asked and answered over and over and over. And at the end of the wrestling came the blessing; "Feed My sheep, tend My lambs, care for My people." This gospel story tells us to take the time to wrestle with grace, restitution, and oasis. Wrestling. It's part of growing in godliness. [Say it with me. Wrestling.]

May we as disciples of Jesus Christ grow in godliness so that He is seen in us, so that He is experienced here with us. This week's spiritual practice is to grow through the practices of grace, restitution, oasis, and wrestling. And may we hold on - because growth is hard, and painful - may we hold on until we receive a blessing. Amen.