

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Growth

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Details are important in Scripture, but they can be easy to overlook! For instance, did you notice what type of fire is waiting on the shore for the disciples to cook the fish they have caught? It's a charcoal fire. This is a small detail, but a surprisingly important one!

Why is it important? I'll get to that in a bit, but first I want to examine the start of our Gospel reading for today. The narrative is introduced by explaining that this is a post-resurrection appearance by the Sea of Tiberias (also known as the Sea of Galilee). And in order to explain the location of this appearance we hear Peter say this to the other disciples in verse 3, "I am going fishing." And where else would he fish if not the Sea of Galilee where he spent most of his life. However, this comment does more than help set the stage for the rest of the encounter. It also says something fairly powerful about human nature.

Imagine being Peter post resurrection. He is the *de facto* leader now that Jesus has been raised and seems to come and go from the presence of the disciples. But despite that role, we haven't heard all that much about Peter since he ran to the tomb to confirm Mary's incredible story. After that sprint we hear nothing about or from Peter until this statement, "I am going fishing." And wow is it a human statement!

In the midst of all sorts of confusion and chaos Peter wants to go back to what he knew before his time with Jesus. In one sense we could almost hear his words as an attempt to give up. He doesn't know what to do as leader of the nascent church and so he wants to return to what he knows...fishing. Let's be honest, that can be a strong temptation for us too, can't it? When we're unsure of where to go next, what we're supposed to be doing; we often fall back on old patterns and occupations. The allure of the known and comfortable is one of the greatest temptations that humanity faces.

The problem with the allure of the known is that it often stymies growth. At this point I have to assume that the approximately three years (according to the Gospel of John) that Peter has been following Jesus has affected him greatly...changed him greatly. Peter has done a fair amount of growing! But now Peter finds himself in a crisis. Jesus has died and been raised, but it's all so confusing and chaotic that Peter simply doesn't know what to do any more...so he goes back to what he knows, fishing. Perhaps he's even trying to undo the growth he has experienced walking the Way of Christ.

Peter's crisis is not just from the tension of the known versus the unknown though. His crisis is also a spiritual one. Remember that his major role in the passion of Christ was to deny Jesus not once, but three times. So the tension of the known versus the unknown is further amplified by what is one of the most powerful negative forces in the universe, shame. Were I in Peter's shoes I imagine that I would consider myself to be a complete failure as both a disciple and a leader of the disciples. After all, how can someone be a disciple if they have committed apostasy, denying their faith? Facing this mountain of tension and shame, I am not at all surprised that he wants to undo it all and go back to what he knows, a life he might hope will be free from tension and crisis.

Thankfully growth is not so easily undone! And even more thankfully, we have a God who is not at all interested in shaming us (despite what some Christians seem to think). Shame is not in line with the character of a God who loves the *comos* utterly and completely¹. Shame makes no sense coming from a God of grace and unconditional love.

God may not shame us, but we can certainly feel shame in the presence of God. And we see that operating in Peter here. John 21:17 illustrates this: "Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?'"² What is the basis of this hurt? I believe it is the shame of having a mirror held up before you. The shame of being confronted with one's brokenness. The sort of shame that wells up from within and can feel crushing. Let me be clear, I do not believe that this is what Jesus **wants** Peter to feel, but it is the way humans **often** feel when taking a good hard look in the mirror.

What is Peter seeing in the mirror Jesus places before him? I'm guessing it's a charcoal fire. Not the one that Jesus must have started there on the beach.

¹ John 3:16-17

² John 21:17b

No, a different charcoal fire. The one he stood beside in the court of the high priest. The only other time in all of Scripture that a charcoal fire is mentioned.³ The charcoal fire that he was likely staring into in order to avoid looking in the eyes of those around him as he lied about knowing Jesus for a third and final time. The charcoal fire he was huddle near as he heard the cock crow and the realization of what he had done began to dawn on him.

I wonder if he stared at the charcoal fire again as Jesus asked him three times if he loved him. Three times in order to mirror his three denials. Three times in order to confront Peter with the mirror of God's gaze. A gaze which shows us exactly who we are. A gaze which can pierce our souls and lay bare all of the muck and grime we try to hide from others, ourselves, and especially God. A gaze which sees all of us, and loves us anyway.

I imagine Peter staring hard at that charcoal fire as he answers Jesus' repeated questions. And I think it's too bad that he likely couldn't look at Jesus. It would have been far better, and I suspect his answers would have been very different, if Peter had dared to look into Christ's eyes in the midst of his shame. If he had, I believe, he would have seen what is always at the heart of God's gaze, loving acceptance and loving challenge.

Jesus sees and knows exactly who Peter is. But Peter, in his shame, cannot meet the loving and accepting gaze leveled at him. Which is too bad because if he could have looked up into the eyes of Christ he would have known the profound Truth of God's love for him and for all of humanity. And perhaps in the face of that loving gaze his shame would have evaporated away. Perhaps he would have been able to hear Jesus better too, but Peter wasn't ready yet. The growth will come for Peter, we'll see it in the book of Acts, but he's not ready yet. He's still holding too tightly to his shame. He cannot hear the Truth just yet. The Truth that he is still loved and claimed. The Truth that God is still active in him. The Truth that Jesus has **not** given up on him. "Feed my sheep" Jesus tells him. Jesus seems to say to Peter, "You're no longer a fisherman! You're a shepherd now and it's time for you to get to work."

I have been confronted with mirrors at various times in my life. It's never an easy or pleasant experience. To see yourself laid bare is scary and makes us feel vulnerable. To truly see your self can often lead us to shame. We hone in on all of the dirt and muck and grime of our selves and we despair. Or we

³ John 18:18

ignore our own brokenness completely and pretend to be perfect; which is utter delusion, merely a way of avoiding the mirror altogether.

Neither of these responses are what God wants. God holds up mirrors for us so that we can grow. Growth, spiritual growth in particular, primarily arises out of crisis and tension. The sort of tension that Peter is undergoing in our Gospel today. We cannot grow and change without confronting the parts of ourselves that hinder that growth. And such confrontation can be very painful. Which is why we need that loving gaze of God. That gaze which says to us, “I see you...truly. And I love you...truly. And I want you to be who I made you to truly be.”

I think, in the end, Peter gets it wrong in this interaction with Jesus. That is illustrated in the Greek more than anything. Jesus asks, the first two times, if Peter loves him with *agape* love. And both of those first two times Peter responds by saying he loves Jesus with *phileo* love. To clarify, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him in the same way that Jesus loves Peter and Peter just can't go that far. The best he can muster up, sitting in the midst of his shame-caused crisis, staring at the charcoal fire in his memory, is that he loves Jesus like a brother.

But here's the thing about Jesus, and therefore about God. God never gives up on us. Peter's growth doesn't not occur here on the shore. But this mirror work will begin it. Jesus' last words to Peter are an encouragement to keep growing: “Follow me!”⁴ He says to Peter. “Follow me!” he says to us too. Keep growing! Keep walking the Way of Christ. Don't sit in your shame and despair. Feel the tension, certainly, but look for the eyes of Christ, the gaze of God. The loving and accepting gaze that sees us completely as who we are and who we are made to be. The gaze that will help us become who we truly are, blessed and beloved children of God.

Amen.

⁴ John 21:22c