

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Jesus] saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?(John 21:17)

In this fallen world, we fall! And there must be some way forward. No can society can stand if its people will not be open to forgiveness and reconciliation. I am not setting aside the legitimate claims of law and justice. I am simply talking about the heart, about one person saying to another, "I forgive you. Be at peace." Friend looks at friend, and there is trouble between them. Husband looks at wife, and wife at husband, and there is sadness between them. Parents look at children, and children at their parents, and there is an ocean of frustration needing to be traversed. And so it is that Jesus looks at Peter and asks him, Do you love me?

This morning's Gospel Reading from St. John tells the story of the reconciliation between Jesus and Peter. It provides for us, I believe, a picture of the penitential life. Peter has done wrong and he knows it. Back in the moment of crisis, he had cursed, he had sworn, that he did not know Jesus, did not want to be associated with the man. Then the cock had crowed, breaking the trance of his panic and thirst to protect himself, and Peter had commenced the penitential life with tears:

Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.(Matthew 26:74-75)

So, he went out and wept his bitter tears. Then, somewhere along the line, he has returned to the apostolic band. He is there with the Eleven when Mary Magdalene rushes to them with the good news of our Lord's resurrection. (I speak of the Eleven because, alas, Judas has died by now.) Let us give credit to Peter for gathering there with the other disciples. He had gone out and wept bitterly, the text says. In reality he could have gone out and kept on going, putting the whole Jesus affair out of mind

and launching off on a new path in life. But, he does not do this. Rather, his penitential life takes the wholesome beginning of heartfelt sorrow and tears for his disloyalty to Jesus and of return to the sacred community. He does not abandon his fellows, but gathers with them.

But so far, he has gathered with them in a rather quiet and unobtrusive way. He is there for the story of Doubting Thomas, but not as the star of that scene. He is there for both episodes of the story, when Jesus comes into the midst of his disciples one day and then again eight days later. But so far, Peter has been in the presence of our resurrected Lord in a background kind of way.

Now, in this morning's reading, the other shoe drops. Now, Jesus turns to Peter. This is the story of their reconciliation. It is like that moment, I imagine, when Don Imus stands before the Rutgers's women's basketball team and awaits their judgment. The rest of the world might forgive him or not. That does not matter to him, I imagine. What does matter is what these young women will say when he has sought their forgiveness. Likewise, what matters to Peter now is not what James and John or Andrew or Matthew think, but what does his Lord think?

This conversation between Jesus and Peter corresponds to that moment in Private Confession when the penitent has given his confession, given her confession, and now it is time for the pastor to reflect upon the sin from the point of view of the faith of the Church and to speak in the name of the True Pastor of the Church, Jesus Christ. Many times in this quiet church, when it was just the penitent and me, this scene has been replayed. Peter has done what he can to repent: he has wept his bitter tears, he has surely resolved to do better in the future, he has returned to the apostolic community. Now, he waits to hear what Jesus will say to him.

The pastoral conversation between Jesus and the penitent Peter starts off in a worrisome way because Jesus addresses Peter not by the name Jesus had given him, but by his original name, Simon:

¹⁵So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?

It's a worrisome beginning, I say, because with the use of his original name, Simon, it is as if our Lord is reminding Peter that he had failed to show the stability of one named Cephas.¹ This all harkens back to the beginning when Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus. Jesus had renamed the man:

⁴⁰One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. ⁴²And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.(John 1:40-42, KJV)

“Stone.” It is a name that befits the high dignity that Jesus later gives to Peter upon the occasion of Peter's great confession:

¹⁸And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.(Matt 16:18-19, KJV)

But none of that now. He is not Cephas, a rock. He is not Peter upon whose solid foundation Jesus will build his church. Now, at this point, he is simply Simon, as in the beginning.

Three times our Lord questions Peter, as if unrolling and undoing the three times Peter had denied our Lord. It is a process that leaves Peter forgiven, with his sins lost in the sea of God's forgetfulness.

And notice the question under examination. It is a question about Peter, his heart, and his future. It is not a question about Peter's tears. Jesus does not ask him, Peter, have you wept enough? It is not even a question about obedience. Jesus does not ask, “Peter, will you obey me henceforth?” No, it is question that goes to the heart of the matter for Peter and for you and me: Peter, do you love me?

You see our dear statue of St. John the Evangelist before you, there on your right, with the quill pen of a writer in his hand. This John is the Evangelist of love. For all his abstractions, his high-flying perspective, and sublime formulations, John is the Evangelist who especially presses the question of love upon anyone who would be a disciple of Jesus: Peter, do you love me?

So it had been earlier, back when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, also a story we find only in the Gospel according to St. John. There too Jesus focuses upon the question of love:

¹²So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? ¹³Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you... ³⁴A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. ³⁵By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.(John 13:12-15, 34-35, KJV)

This, my friends, is always the goal of confession, sorrow for sin, amendment of life, and absolution: It is that the one who bears the name of Jesus will turn again to the life of love.

I conclude this meditation on the reconciliation scene between Jesus and Peter with two thoughts – two final comments on our text. The first concerns lambs and sheep. The other concerns discipleship in face of sorrow and mystery.

First, the lambs and the sheep: This is an observation about the generations in the church. Each time Peter affirms his love for Jesus, Jesus asks him to exercise that love on behalf of the

¹ A point made by Matthew Henry, if I recall rightly.

Church. But Jesus phrases the matter differently between the first exchange and the other two. The first time when Peter vows his love for Jesus, our Lord asks him to “Feed my lambs.”(John 21:15) This is natural, given the special affection that Jesus seems to have for children. You recall the way he protected the children, insisting that his disciples suffer the little ones to come onto him, and he blessed them.(Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 18). It only seems right, then, that Jesus would ask Peter to exercise his ministry on behalf of the lambs.

But then notice the other two exchanges. They are phrased in terms of the sheep. “Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.”(John 21:16, 17) I mention this to encourage any of you who might be feelin’ a bit on the sheep-side of things these days, and no longer the lamb-side. Let us remember that the Lord of the flock loves both the lambs and the sheep, no matter how elderly those sheep might become.

And my final observation concerns that poetry-like conclusion to our Gospel lesson: “... what is that to thee? follow thou me.”

The occasion for this saying is our Lord’s passion prediction concerning Peter. Jesus forewarns Peter that there will come a day when Peter will stretch for his arm and another one will dress him and lead him where he does not want to go. The Church has understood this to be our Lord’s prophecy concerning Peter’s martyrdom, which also was by way of Roman crucifixion.

And, naturally enough, Peter seems distressed by this passion prediction. In his anxiety, Peter points to the Beloved Disciple, John, and asks about him, to which Jesus gives the unrelenting answer:

²²Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.

This verse has always meant a lot to me, and especially so as I drew near to seminary and to the holy office of pastor. I knew in advance that there would be times when I would not know what to say. This is one of those times. I imagine the horrors of Virginia Tech, along with the rest of you, and I hardly know what to say. The murder of those thirty-two students and faculty stuns us and threatens to leave us speechless. It seems a true case of what the Apostle Paul called the “mystery of iniquity.”(2 Thess. 2:7)

So, I knew in advance that there would come times of deep perplexity and mystery when I would hardly know what to say. But also I knew that I could at least follow the wisdom of this rhythm: “what is that to thee? follow thou me.” That is, I knew that at least I would be able to point us to the Risen One – to the One who is triumphant and determined to bring life from death, victory from tragedy. Indeed, I knew that I could point us to the one who had himself, in his own body and blood, suffered the mystery of iniquity, who triumphed over it, and who lives again to be our Good Shepherd of body and soul.

We must go forward in *some* manner or other. I encourage us to go forward into whatever life holds for us with Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.