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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/14/2013, The Third Sunday of Easter  
John 21:1-19

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

<sup>17</sup>He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:17, RSV)

I picture the disciples in this morning’s Gospel story as being in middle-age, in the prime of life. I picture them as strong and weathered, but not yet old men. Jesus, they say, was thirty-three when he died. So, let’s picture his disciples in this story as being about that age. They are no longer young men, yet they are just starting out on their apostolic careers. Many miles lie ahead of them, I hope. In particular, Peter lives to old age, judging by what Jesus says to him in this morning’s reading. So, let me organize this sermon according to the ages. In the first part, I deal with Peter and the other disciples in their middle age, when they are strong, but at the start of their careers. In the second part, I want to linger a bit with the idea that Peter had important work to do when he was an old man, as all old men and old women still have some good work to do.

As for you young people in the congregation— you young ones in your teens and twenties—well, I hope to address a sermon to you too someday. For your youth gives you special abilities and strengths in serving the Lord, along with special temptations. That sermon will be later, God willing.

## **THE DISCIPLES AT THE TIME OF OUR STORY**

So, let’s look at Peter and the other disciples in this Easter story. They are not old and creaking along. No, they are still vigorous enough to man a fishing boat and fish all night, and not think twice about it.

I cannot help but detect a rather downhearted feeling at the start of this story. By the time of our story, the disciples have already met with the resurrected Jesus twice—once without Thomas and once with him. The Bible says that they were “glad when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20). But their joy seems short-lived. Perhaps it is all too much for them to take in. Perhaps they are bewildered by the idea of resurrection, by Jesus entering through locked doors, and by Thomas’s stunning cry that their Master Jesus is not only alive but is also their God! So, as if wanting to leave shaky and dizzying heights, the

disciples return to more familiar ground. Or rather, more familiar waters. They go fishing:

<sup>3</sup>Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. (John 21:3, KJV)

But if the disciples seem downhearted at the start of this morning's story, there could well be an additional cause besides their bewilderment at the strange events of Easter. That additional cause was their guilty consciences. You remember how the brothers of Joseph of old harbored a silent fear for years that once their father, Jacob, died, Joseph would reveal his true colors and punish them for their treachery toward him back when they were all young. So, it might have been with the disciples. True, the resurrected Jesus had appeared to them and had spoken words of peace to them. Yet, Holy Scripture records no explicit discussion so far of that awkward matter—of their denying, fleeing, and abandoning their Lord during his holy passion. Is the other shoe about to drop? If so, there is not much they can do about it. They will have to face the music. But till then, they return to their fishing. They might cast their nets with heavy and worried hearts over letting their Lord down during Holy Week, but they cast their nets anyway.

A commentator on this story has a nice illustration about the kinship in guilt shared by the holy apostles at this point:

Earnest Hemingway once related an anecdote through which he wanted to show the extreme popularity of the Spanish name "Paco." One day, Hemingway claimed, an ad appeared in the classifieds of a Spanish newspaper. "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon Wednesday. All is forgiven. Love, Papa." That Wednesday the authorities had to muster a whole squad of police to contain the crowd of eight hundred Pacos who had shown up at Hotel Montana!<sup>1</sup>

As there is a massive yearning for forgiveness at play in this story, so that eight hundred Pacos show up, hoping for forgiveness, likewise there could well have been a deep longing among all the disciples to have things right again with Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Hoezee, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 600

## NOT DOUBTING PETER'S LOVE

Especially, that blazing one, Peter, might have longed to be reconciled with Jesus.

I think that it is a mark of our Lord's kindheartedness in this story that he does not seem to really doubt Peter's love for him. Beforehand, back when Peter was feeling good about himself, Peter had boasted that his love for Jesus was greater than that of his fellow disciples:

<sup>33</sup>Peter declared to him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." <sup>34</sup>Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." <sup>35</sup>Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples. (Matthew 26:33-35, RSV)

In this morning's story, three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him—three times, as if slowly unwinding Peter's threefold denial. Each time, Peter affirms that he loves the Lord. He does so with a spirit of humility, chastened, we suspect, by his earlier failure. Still he does affirm his love for Jesus.

The great thing is that Jesus does not deny that Peter loves him, but rather teaches him the content of such love:

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." (John 21:16, RSV)

If Jesus were another man, you could show love for him by giving him things, say, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. But Jesus teaches Peter, and he teaches us that there is not a thing we can give him *except* that we should take good care of one another. If Peter truly and honestly loves the Lord, then he can show his love by loving the world.

Likewise with you and me. If our resurrected Jesus were to walk to and fro in our congregation, take a seat beside us one by one, and ask us whether we love him, I think we would answer, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you." And Jesus would say to us, in all the individual details of our lives, "Then take care of my lambs. Tend the flock. Take good care of my sheep."

That is what *his* kind of love is like. It has always been this way: His love is selfless. His kind of love is the sort that sets aside his own advantage and pours out his life for others. That is why this world is better than it looks! It is better because it is in the hands of the resurrected One who loves in this selfless way.

## PETER IN OLD AGE

Let me close with a word or two about Peter in old age. Jesus has a word for Peter for when Peter becomes an old man:

<sup>18</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but *when you are old*, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go. (John 21:18, RSV)

The Evangelist goes ahead to explain that Jesus is referring to the martyrdom of St. Peter:

This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God. (John 21:19, RSV)

And then, to get from here to there, from Peter's breakfast conversation with Jesus about love and about feeding the sheep to his martyrdom as an old man, Jesus renews the simple call with which he had summoned Peter in the first place:

And after this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21:19, RSV)

When St. John Chrysostom meditated on this exchange, he was led to this observation:

In the eyes of the world the young man is useful, the old useless. In life with me, Jesus says, this is not the case. Rather, when old age has come on, then nobility shines brighter and courage becomes more illustrious, being unimpeded by youthful passion. This he said not to terrify but to rouse Peter, for he knew about his love...<sup>2</sup>

Growing older isn't simply something that happens to us, as if the various stages of life are without meaning. Rather, each of our ages has its own calling and its own adventures before God.

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<sup>2</sup> *John 11-21*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, IVb (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 2007), page 390.

Karl Barth warns us that old age carries a terrible temptation with it: the temptation to think that we have been excused from the call of Jesus to “Follow me.” He says that it is wrong for the elderly to coast on their past, to automatically repeat earlier answers, and to lay claim to an “undisturbed tranquility.”<sup>3</sup>

Along these lines, consider our Lord’s parable about the workers in the vineyard. Some worked all day long. They started early in the morning and worked faithfully till the end of the day. Think of them as those blessed disciples who started to follow Jesus as young people, and were true to him throughout their lives.

Others come to Christ later in life. Still others become serious about Jesus and his call even later.

And then we come to the elderly—those in the eleventh hour. What does Jesus say to them? Does he consider them of little value and bypass them in favor of those who can work the whole day? No, he summons them too, though they have little time left:

<sup>6</sup>And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, “Why do you stand here idle all day?” <sup>7</sup>They said to him, “Because no one has hired us.” He said to them, “You go into the vineyard too.”

This is the divine call that always reaches out to us, whether we are young or old: *You* go into the vineyard too.

Barth points out that Abraham, for example, was already an old man when his great story begins:

Abraham was not doing anything out of the ordinary when at the age of 75 he moved out of Haran from his homeland and the home of his father and relatives to go to the land which the Lord would show him (Gen. 12:1). Indeed, it was by this departure at the end of his days that he became the father of believers as depicted in both the Old and the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “As if there were no future for the old man... As if there were only the calm of a holiday evening! As if he were no longer alive, but already dead! As if someone had authorised him...to write *finis* to his own existence... As if the possibility of fulfilling the command of God by mere repetition, by the mere following of an established track, were enhanced rather than reduced [by the approach of death]! As if it were legitimate at the last hour to allow custom or habit to take the place of decision!” (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III, 4, page 615)

<sup>4</sup> III, 4,616.

So, Peter: you are young now, and you must follow your Lord. And someday, you will be old, but even then, you must follow your Lord. Aye, your love for Jesus must lead you all the way to the cross, where, tradition has it, you will request to be crucified upside down, as if unworthy even to die in the upright manner of your Master, the One you do indeed love, and the One who makes us young in our following of him, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever Amen.