

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/10/2016, The Third Sunday of Easter
Acts 9:1-20, John 21:1-19

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

My opening text is our Lord's soul-searching question to Peter:

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:16, RSV)

It is a question asked three times, as if unrolling the threefold denial of Jesus by his old friend Peter. At the fireside in the courtyard of the high priest, before the maid and others, Peter had denied knowing Jesus. “I do not know the man!” (Mark 14:71) Indeed, the third time Peter was questioned, he cursed, as if offended that he should be thought to know Jesus:

But he began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not this man of whom ye speak. (Mark 14:71, KJV)

Now, this same Jesus, questions him three times: “Peter, do you love me?” Only a few days earlier, in the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus had taught his disciples his new commandment of love:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34, RSV)

Now, this same Jesus, who taught love and who loved his disciples to the very end, looks Peter in the eye, I like to imagine, and asks him three times, “Peter, do you love me?”

So Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you” (John 21:15). What else can Peter do? What else can he say? He does indeed love Jesus, though his love had failed him in the moment of crisis. But who among us could escape such a confession? About which of us could it never be said that our love had failed Jesus in some key moment? We love Jesus and yet our love has failed him too often in our lives. Temptation, fear, distraction, conformity to the crowd – whatever the cause, we have followed the path of Peter and denied our Lord. Perhaps more than three times. Yes, maybe more than three times.

What are we to do with a burden of guilt? Well, Peter wept. St. Matthew puts it this way:

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 26:75, KJV)

The rooster crowed, and the man wept, bitterly. I bet he did. And I am glad that Peter had a tender enough conscience that he could weep those tears. And yet, his tears seem not to suffice. That's what this morning's story is about: Even after shedding his tears, there was still some work to be done in order to get Peter back on track. There was still some work of reconciliation that needed to take place between Jesus and the man who had denied him.

It is a human kind of thing for Peter to have returned to fishing. Jesus has risen from the grave, the disciples have seen him twice, Jesus has shown his wounds to Thomas and that disciple had confessed his faith. But somehow the disciples seem a bit befuddled by it all. Mary Magdalene had not recognized Jesus at the tomb, mistaking him for a gardener. The resurrected Jesus comes and goes. He suddenly appears in a room, passing through locked doors, and then he goes away again. The whole phenomenon of resurrection is new and unheard of. We human beings know about death. The disciples had seen the brutal death of Jesus. We human beings know about burial. The body of Jesus had been buried. But we human beings have little experience with resurrection. So, by the time of this morning's story, the disciples have seen the resurrected Jesus twice, but still seem in shock, as if overpowered and helpless to know what to make of it all. So Peter says, "I go a fishing":

Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. (John 21:3, KJV)

That's one thing he knows how to do in this world. He knows how to fish. Peter is a fisherman. Probably his father and grandfather before him were fishermen. He knows the tides, he knows the shorelines, he knows the habits of fish. Jesus had called him to be a fisher of humanity, but a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then, and Peter has gone back to fishing fish. Forget fishing humanity for a while. Peter says that he's a going fishin'.

So, he fishes. The other disciples fish too. They fish all night. In the morning, they find Jesus standing on the shore, but, as Mary Magdalene had failed to recognize the risen Jesus, so do these disciples. They do not recognize him until he instructs them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, which they do and which results in a large catch of fish. Then they know it is the Lord. Peter throws himself into the sea and swims ashore, where he finds that Jesus has prepared breakfast for them – a charcoal fire, with "fish laid thereon and bread."

Peter has wept his bitter tears, and he has returned to fishing. Now is the time for some more hard work. He must deal with Jesus. Each of us is going to have to do the same someday!

All things considered, it does not seem fun for Peter to be reconciled with Jesus. It looks rather painful – painful in the heart, painful in the soul. Three times

Jesus asks Peter about his love. Three times Peter answers as best he can. And three times, Jesus calls him back into his ministry of catching, not fish, but humanity:

Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." (John 21:15, NRSV)

And Peter, bless him, goes on to do that. Peter the fisherman becomes Peter the apostle and Peter the saint.

Ahh, what to do with a burden of guilt? Think of the Prodigal Son. By the end of the story, the wondering son has been restored to his father. His father has rejoiced over the return of his son, he has called for the best robe to be put upon his son, called for a feast, called for everyone in sight to rejoice with him:

And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. (Luke 15:23-24, KJV)

The two aggrieved parties, then, the father and the son have each done what they can. The son comes home, he readies himself to confess that he has sinned:

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. (Luke 15:21, KJV)

In his love and in his grace, the father has rushed pass his son's confession, embraced him, and restored him to the family. Father and son have done what they can.

But I cannot help but think of the damage the boy might have done back there in that foreign land. There he had wasted his substance with riotous living. And such riotous living sometimes brings down other people too. The older son speaks of harlots:

But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf! (Luke 15:30 RSV)

This might be the stone, cold truth about the younger son. He might in fact have spent time with prostitutes, which is good neither for himself nor for them. He might have misled other young people too in that far-off country into vice and mischief. For all we know, the young man left a trail of damage in his wake during his wandering years.

Is there some way forward for people with a guilty conscience? Is there some way forward for King David, who murders Uriah and marries his wife? For the

Prodigal Son who comes home, but has reduced himself along the way? For Peter, who swore that he would not deny Jesus, but who did so nonetheless?

Is there some way forward for those of us who have disappointed others and disappointed our Lord? I think that we cannot simply pretend. But there *are* ways forward for Christians. There are liturgical ways, via “Individual Confession and Forgiveness” (pages 196ff in the front of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*) or “Corporate Confession and Forgiveness” (LBW, page 193ff). But judging by Matthew 18, Jesus asks that we begin in quiet, personal ways:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. (Matthew 18:15, NRSV)

Starbucks might be a good place for this, or your office or living room.

I like to think of King David, the Prodigal Son, and Saint Peter happy again, with clean hearts. Judging by their stories in the Bible, reconciliation looks possible for them. Perhaps it is not easy, but it is good. Our God seems to entrust to us the authority to grant to one another good words of forgiveness. Indeed, in any particular case lying before us, our own lips might well be the ones through which God speaks:

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD:
though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isaiah 1:18, KJV)

Jesus had his personal conversation with Peter. They sorted things out, Jesus taking the lead. And Peter seems henceforth to have lived a life worthy of his gracious Lord.

Peter cannot go back and undo his denials. David cannot go back and restore life to Uriah. And maybe it is not practical for the Prodigal Son to return to that distant land and try to put right the damage he has done there. But what Peter and Jesus can do, they do! The great ingredients of reconciliation are here in this morning’s story: personal, heartfelt conversation; forgiveness; and going on in life meaning to do better.

We human beings are capable of falling into sin. But we also capable of getting back up, seeking reconciliation, and living a better life henceforth. Such things are real. Such things are appropriate for disciples like us – disciples who sometimes deny our Lord, but disciples with whom Jesus is not done, but calls on toward renewed life in his name, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.