

The disciples have gone fishin. Jesus has died, has risen from the dead, and made three appearances as the resurrected Christ – one to Mary and two to the rest of the disciples. The last couple of weeks have been like a roller coaster for the disciples. I think going fishing for Peter was a way of bringing some normalcy back into what must have been a surreal and overwhelming time. But the fishing was terrible. Out all night, the sun was now coming up and they had caught nothing. Jesus appears on the beach though the disciples don't recognize him. When his direction to throw their nets on the right side of the boat results in a huge catch, John recognizes Jesus which leads Peter to jump into the water and swim to him.

“Come and have breakfast,” Jesus says. Reminiscent of the last supper Jesus breaks bread and shares it and the fish with the disciples. Then Jesus turns his attention to Peter. “Do you love me?” he asks Peter, not once, not twice, but three times. Each time responding with instruction to take care of the metaphorical flock. By the third time the text says that Peter feels hurt by the question. Did Jesus not believe him? Did Jesus think he didn't understand the instruction Jesus was giving? So in response to the third question Peter replies "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

I think perhaps that Peter was starting to get a little nervous recalling that it was not that long ago that he denied even knowing Jesus. You might recall that after Jesus was arrested, Peter is asked three different times by people if he was one of the disciples and each time, Peter says no. Jesus had predicted this would happen and in Matthew and Mark's version of the story, Peter argues that even if he must die with Jesus, he would never deny him... But he does. I wonder if some of Peter's frustration

with the repetition of the question “Do you love me?” doesn’t stem from the guilt he felt as a result of these denials. Not only that, but none of the gospel accounts include Peter as one of the people who were present at the crucifixion. Peter likely felt that he had abandoned Jesus for the sake of his own safety and reputation.

Now, Saul was never a disciple of Jesus. Born in Turkey and a Roman citizen, Paul was a Pharisee, a sect of devout Jews. Saul was actively persecuting the followers of Jesus or as they had become known, the followers of the Way. Saul was played a leading role in the stoning of a faithful disciple names Stephen, and Acts 8:3 reads that “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” Our text this morning opens with “Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...” Saul is not exactly an obvious choice as someone to become a great leader and apostle in the new Christian movement.

But we know that Jesus doesn’t usually choose to follow an obvious path. And so this persecutor and murderer of people following the Way of Jesus, is struck by a light from heaven, hears the voice of Christ tell him to go to the city of Damascus and await instruction. When Saul gets up from the ground, he is blind which I think is an important element of this story. Aside from the metaphor of not being able to see meaning understand the Way of Jesus, as well as demonstrating to Saul divinity of Jesus, Saul’s inability to see, forces him to take a break from his persecution of followers of Jesus. During those three days, Saul’s old life dies away and when Ananias shows up Saul is given new life. Like the stone being rolled away from the empty tomb, the blindness falls away from Saul’s eyes and he is called into a new life.

Now, let's go back to Peter. Peter who three times denied even knowing Jesus is now professing his love for Jesus three times. Jesus has given him an opportunity for redemption, for restoration. Peter is given the chance to undo his denials by affirming his love and his commitment to Jesus and the Way. Peter goes on to be a courageous and prophetic leader of the Jesus movement. He never again refuses to admit to his connection to Jesus or his people. Instead he follows the command of Jesus to take care of the people – to feed his sheep.

While the word forgiveness does not appear in either of these stories, forgiveness may be the word that we would use if we had to put a label on what is happening between Jesus and Peter and between Jesus and Saul. But there is another word that comes to mind – grace. The grace of God and of Christ that is the abundant and unconditional love that cannot be earned because it is already and always present. Whether we think we deserve it or not, the grace of God is poured upon us with abandon, calling us beloved.

The Rev. Kay Sylvester calls our attention to some important questions about these stories. She writes, "So what does this mean for you? Are you held back from the abundant life Jesus promises by guilt, shame and fear? If you understood yourself to be completely forgiven, completely loved, and completely free, how would that change the choices you make about your work? Your money? Your relationships?"¹

We all make mistakes and some of us do some really horrible things to each other and to ourselves. Maybe we treat our family poorly or put others at risk in some

¹ The work of Easter, 3 Easter (C) by The Rev. Kay Sylvester Posted on <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2013/03/29/3-eater-c-2013/>
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First Congregational UCC in Brainerd, Minnesota
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way. Maybe we get so caught up in wanting to be right, that we don't see the damage that our zeal is causing other people. But the good news is that we are never beyond God's grace. We always have the opportunity to re-attune ourselves to God's desires for us. That doesn't mean that repairing human relationships will be easy or even always possible. This also doesn't mean that if we are victims of abuse or violence or other types of brokenness that people who have caused us pain should be immediately invited back into our lives. Both Saul and Peter, went through transformations. Saul's was especially profound. I don't believe that Ananias would have been sent to Saul and told to welcome him to the Way had Saul not been ready to change his ways.

If we are the ones causing pain, it is up to us to say yes to God's call for us to change. It is up to us to say, "Yes Lord, I love you" and to seek restoration. And there may be times when we are called to forgive someone who has lost their way but has made a transformation to a new life.

We are invited to set aside our fear, to embrace God's abundant grace and love, and to then take that love and act on it. Rev. Sylvester reminds us that these two stories offers some of the most profound meanings of Resurrection for us. She writes "we are forgiven. We are invited to start over. We are completely loved. And we have a job to do. This isn't only Peter's story or Saul's; it's our story, too. When fear holds us back, love calls us forward. When we feel trapped by the way things have always been, Jesus invites us to cast our nets on the other side of the boat – change our perspective, in light of the Resurrection."²

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God needs us in the world and God needs us to be wholehearted and fully alive if we are to be the hands and feet of Christ. We cannot let fear or guilt hold us back from living into our best selves. Let us embrace the unfettered love of God because we are called into bigger lives for the sake of sharing God's love with the world. For in God's eyes, we are not defined by our worst moments. Instead we are loved completely. Let us allow that love to fill us so full that we have no choice but to act on it. Let's go feed some sheep.