

Third Sunday of Easter – 2022

Acts 9:1-22

Revelation 5:1-14

John 21:1-19

There was a word I taught my children not to say. Alise and I both, actually; she despises this word as much as I do. In due time I'm going to tell you what it is. In fact, I'm going to use this word over and over. I can't tell you what great pain this will cause me and some of you might well think that I've lost my mind, Alise especially. In the catalogue of vulgarities, it is not near the top, so don't go running toward the exits just yet. It is a part of the middle school and high school vernacular, an "every-day, no big deal" vocable for a large swath of Americana. We simply didn't allow it in the Smith household – can't stand hearing it and it is certainly unnatural, unpleasant saying it.

Of course, I am going to use it (this word) to make a point. I intend to help you see Peter anew, see Peter afresh. Some of what I'm going to say is conjecture. I was not, I am not inside Peter's head and so I don't know exactly what he was thinking, but I'm pretty confident that I can cobble together a reasonable facsimile. That because this text, this amazing episode from John's Gospel, is saturated with things that are common to us, common to a life of faith; and rich in forgiveness – sweet, sweet forgiveness.

It's after Easter; can't tell you when exactly. It is after the Thomas encounter, which was eight days after Easter and it's before our Lord ascends into heaven, forty days after Easter – somewhere in between those two events. It occurs on the Sea of Galilee (Lake Gennesaret, Sea of Tiberias, Sea of Galilee – it's all the same fresh-water lake). Simon Peter is there with a good number of the other disciples. Peter says with blunt force: "I am going fishing" (John 21:3). Okay, so he's not announcing a leisurely trip over to the local stream for some sunshine and some sport. He's made a decision. I suck. There it is! That's the word. The notion twirled and swirled around his head, his heart, his soul – I suck. I'm going fishing.

Remember, as far as we know, Peter hadn't touched a net since the miraculous catch of fish. He left it; he left it all; nets, boats, the sea, the market – Jesus told him, I will make you a fisher of men; you will be catching men. That miracle set Peter on different path. That day, Peter had been working with Andrew, James and John and their other partners – they labored all night long and didn't catch a single fish. Morning comes and there's Jesus preaching to the multitudes, proclaiming the Kingdom of God and as the soon-to-be-disciples are grumpily cleaning their nets, about to head home with empty pockets and eyes full of sleep, and the Lord announces that He's in the mood to go fishing. Say Simon, I know that you've got nothing better to do so humor me and let's go out into the deep water and let down the nets there. Peter thinks: "Oh, what a brilliant idea, Carpenter man." But as exasperated as Peter is, he is also polite. It comes out gently: "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing" (Luke 5:5). Then he assents: "But at your word, I will let down the nets."

An epiphany! The glory of God in a miraculous catch of fish. Peter is amazed; then alarmed; then profoundly contrite. Peter knows! He knows who this Carpenter Man is; and he is ashamed. I suck. And out stream the words: "Lord, go away from me, for I am a sinful man"

(Luke 5:8). Absolution is swift. Jesus calls Peter to a new vocation. Peter may have thought: “You can’t possibly want me.” Jesus assured him that He did. “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men” (Luke 5:10).

He left it. A prosperous business, a steady income, a craft that he knew well – he left it all. At Jesus’ word, Peter left his nets, left everything and followed Christ. Until that day sometime after Easter by the Sea of Tiberias. “Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing” (John 21:3 KJV). I suck. Peter had denied Christ... three times (three brutal times, three heart-wrenching and unforgettable times)! At a critical moment, after strenuously pledging his unwavering fidelity, Peter cratered. With religious bravado, Peter declared that he was ready to die with Christ. That’s when Jesus told him: “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times” (Matthew 26:34). I suspect that Peter never cried as hard as he did after the cock crowed that night; bitterly; painfully. Harsh was that rooster’s crow. Harsh was the reality in Peter’s mind. Failure; I promised fidelity and I failed. I suck.

I’ve been there. I suspect you have as well. We fail, too often. We fail the Lord who has given us so much. We desert Him, at a critical moment. And He knows. Turning away; that is the saddest thing of all; a Christian who turns away because of their blistered heart, their breaking heart. I suck. It happens... back to an old, faithless life. Back to emptiness, vanity, a twisted attempt to find comfort in places where God is seemingly absent. “I go a fishing” is a much darker statement than it appears. I suck. I can’t do what He wants me to do. I am a failure. Jonah certainly ran from God. Peter is running as well; not in rank defiance, but with a heart broken over his own sin. I can’t be what He wants me to be. I’m not good enough. I suck.

Did God keep the fish out of the net all that night? Perhaps. I don’t know. I *do* know that the Lord Christ, the supreme Fisher of Men, had every intention of restoring broken Peter. He starts out a bit cheeky: “Hey lads, have you any fish?” Pretty sure that He knew the answer to that one. Try the right side of the boat. Exactly how big is this boat that the side is going to make any difference? Next thing you know, gobs of fish. No doubt who *that* is on the shore. John knows: “It is the Lord!” That’s all Peter needed to hear. Faith, breathed into Peter’s heart by the Holy Spirit, faith flees to the risen Christ. Faith must be at Christ’s feet. God was at work in Peter to will and to act in faith, to will and to act according to God’s good purpose. Faith pitched itself into the sea and made its way to the Lord. In the water, swimming toward the shore, faith was singing a hymn: “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me.”

Jesus knows precisely what this man needs. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Faith, the gift of God, has only one answer. Faith, which sees self and Christ aright, must speak what it has been given. “Yes, Lord; You know that I love you.” There’s no bravado in that answer, just humility and transparency. Jesus replies with words that put Peter back in his proper vocation. “Feed my lambs.” You will be a pastor, Peter. I have called you and you must not doubt that. I will be with you, in your vocation, as pastor, to serve the flock and feed them My Word, to feed them with My life. Twice, three times, the scenario plays itself out as a mirror reflection (three times to address and overwhelm Peter’s denial). Do you love me? You know all things; you know that I love you. Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. You are a pastor, Peter, and your failings do not define you or what you do.

You have failed. As have I. And you have a vocation; a beautiful vocation. God has placed you where you are and you are a blessing, by your love, by the love Christ has breathed into you. As you engage the world, your community, your workplace, your family, you are a blessing. You have a vocation – mother, father, nurse, teacher, shop worker, mechanic, neighbor, husband, wife – you fail, and the Master restores you. Beautifully, completely, unreservedly the crucified King restores you. Forgiven and free, you are the chief of sinners and Christ has shed His blood for you. Died for you that you might live on high, lives that you might never die. As the branch is to the vine, you are His and He is thine. He is a restoring God, full of grace and love and He is with you in your vocation. Believe it! Something like scales fell from Peter’s eyes when he was restored. “I suck” was banished from his heart. Jesus knows precisely what you need. You need His body and blood. As a Christian, that is your vocation, to receive the bounty of Christ Himself. In this place His love has its way with us so that out there, in our vocation, we embody John’s words to Peter so that others may see what we see: “It is the Lord!” (John 21:7).