

4th Sunday of Easter

John 21

A while back, a student at McFarland High School wore a t-shirt that I thought would be perfect for Simon Peter. It said: **"Everybody believes in something. I believe I'll go fishing."**

And fishing is just what Peter did. So did the rest of the disciples.

In a boat, out on the water, fishing is where we find them this morning.

Peter was back doing what he knew to do in life, fish. And why not? Jesus was dead. Life moves on.

Of course, we could say, and with good reason, that yes, Jesus had died, but he had risen too, and made his appearances to Mary Magdalene, Peter, Thomas and the others.

John now offers us one final appearance. Some Bible Scholars suggest that John's gospel originally ended with Chapter 20. So why would the writer or a later editor add this resurrection appearance as an addendum?

Well, because there is still unfinished business between Peter and Jesus.

Judas may have been the "traitor" who betrayed Jesus, handing him over to the religious authorities for 30 pieces of silver, and so was Peter. Remember?

Peter sure did, though he was probably trying hard to forget the incident in the courtyard with Jesus looking on.

"You are one of them?" someone said to Peter. His response: **"No, I do not know him!"** And then the cock crowed. And Jesus turned and looked at him in silence as Peter remembered what Jesus had said about his own betrayal.

I can only imagine what Peter felt in that moment. Luke's Gospel exposes us to Peter's emotions, saying: **"And he went out (from the courtyard) and wept bitterly."** (Luke 22:62)

Conflicted is the word I would use to describe Peter's feeling in this passage this morning. He may have been filled with grief at Jesus' death. He may have been filled with great joy and relief over Jesus' resurrection. And yet, he had to feel conflicted inside because there had been no words of mercy, grace, or forgiveness from his friend.

So Peter went fishing. But not even fishing provided him much in emotional comfort. After a night on the lake, their nets were still empty and here it was daybreak.

A new day was indeed dawning on Peter, though he did not fully recognize it at that time.

A stranger on the shore questioned their catch. Nothing! Try the other side. They did and, wow what a haul of fish, more than they could drag into the

boat! Who was this stranger? The unnamed disciple who Jesus loved said, **"It is the Lord!"**

Peter was naked as a jaybird. *(Now I could preach a whole sermon on the metaphorical meaning of "nakedness" in the bible. Perhaps another time I will. But for now, let me just say to those of you who want to literally model your lives after Peter, especially you disciples who like to fish. Fishing naked is not recommended these days).*

Naked, Peter had to dress, and then he jumped in and swam to shore, leaving the others to haul in the catch.

Jesus is there to greet them. And like in other resurrection accounts, Jesus makes himself known in the sharing of a meal.

What was Peter feeling in the presence of the risen Lord as they shared breakfast on the shore? Anxious? Shameful? Guilty? Relieved? Hopeful?

When the meal was finished, John says, **"Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?'"**

We can only imagine what Peter was actually feeling inside himself as Jesus spoke these questioning words.

I can't help but wonder if Peter was not beating himself up inside emotionally; the guilt and the mental torment, all because he, like Judas, had betrayed his friend by denying him.

The late Henri Nouwen says: **"People who live close together can be sources of great sorrow for one another...A traitor, according to the literal meaning of the Greek word for 'betraying,' is someone who hands the other over to suffering."**

I wonder if we don't all at some level, relate to what Peter is going through. Haven't we all, at one time or another, betrayed the trust of a friend, a colleague, a family member, a spouse?

Nouwen adds: **"The truth is that we all have something of the traitor in us because each of us hands our fellow human beings over to suffering somehow, somewhere, mostly without intending or even knowing it..."**

Of course we have and the memory of it eats at us, like a cancer.

Yet, in this moment of deep emotional and spiritual pain is an opportunity for transformation. Grace abounds. Forgiveness is offered and with it an invitation to learn, grow, and serve.

Elsa Tamez offers us this thought: **"The difficulty of conversion is a difficulty of choosing...inasmuch as conversion is a matter of choice, it entails conflict...."**

Jesus is not simply forgiving Peter, he is inviting him to follow in his footsteps at a much deeper spiritual level – one that is not going to be easy.

His words, according to John, even indicate that Peter's death is tied to his service.

In holding Peter in his mental pain and suffering, Jesus helps Peter see his life as much larger than himself. And to do so, is to invite Peter into an inner conflict.

Conversion is an internal conflict. It is in many ways, an internal death and a resurrection.

It is the path Jesus walked literally and figuratively in his own life, death, and resurrection. It is one Peter is being invited to walk.

And so it is a path we too must walk. Yet, God's grace abounds through the risen Christ's. He uses our anguish and suffering as a path for transformation and growth.

Fr. Richard Rohr says, **"When we finally allow life to take us through the Paschal Mystery of passion, death, and resurrection, we will be transformed."**

It is not an easy path to walk. Just ask Peter. Still, I wonder if Peter went away from this experience a much more compassionate, merciful, humble disciple, because he found out, the hard way, that he was a flawed, broken human being – capable of causing great pain to others, even Jesus.

Perhaps this is the message we are all invited to take away from John's lesson this morning.

Perhaps, the Risen Lord is inviting us to check our self-righteous, human, if not Christian, tendency, to boast about being better than that person over there who looks and acts a lot like a "Judas" in our eyes. Remembering we, like "them", are just as human. Reminding ourselves, we have our own failings, and can just as easily betray Jesus even as we cause others to suffer, sometimes without meaning to do so.

Yet, in Christ, we are already forgiven.

Nouwen says: **"When we are willing to confess that we often hand those we love over to suffering, even against our best intentions, we will be more ready to forgive those who, mostly against their will, are the causes of our pain."** (Bread For The Journey, April 9)

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks. **"Do you love me, more than these?"** he asks again, and once more, the same question is put forth.

How could we not be conflicted in trying to figure out what answer to give?

Yet, in learning not to fear the conflict, rather in embracing it, we are freed to be more fully the compassionate, empathetic, merciful, humble, and loving servants of the Risen Christ.

Amen.