

Last week at the NCCM concert someone shared the story about when Jesus gave St. Peter a break at the reception desk of the Pearly Gates of Heaven... Just as he took over an older man walked right past him into heaven. Jesus said, "Uh, excuse me sir, but the line starts back there, and you need to come through me." To which the man replied confidently, "I'm only visiting my son." To which Jesus replied, "well, how do you know your son is in heaven?" The man said, "He has to be. His story is known by millions of people and because of him millions of people know and tell the truth!" Jesus asked him longingly, "Are you a carpenter?" And the man said, "Yes!" Overcome with emotion, Jesus exclaimed, "Dad?" The man replied, "*Pinocchio?*"

It's funny ... but of course, you have to know the story of Pinocchio to get the joke... Like any good joke, it catches you off guard by leading you one way but then taking a sharp and unexpected turn. Just like the gospel. That's part of why we have these 50 days of celebrating the Easter joy as opposed to the 40 days of solemn Lent! Today's gospel lesson is part of the rest of the story of Easter. And there are some amusing twists and turns!

Textual scholars argue this scene was a later add on, and not the original ending to the gospel according to John.<sup>1</sup> Apparently there were questions yet unresolved about Peter, the so-called *Rock!* Was he a kind of ecclesiastical loose end that needed rehabilitation? As you remember from the Easter story, all of the apostles had their doubts, but Peter denied Christ *three times*. I could imagine there were serious doubts about Peter and his ability to lead the fledgling church. How could this *apostate* be the first bishop of Rome? The *Prince of the apostles*?

That being said, I'm not sure if I were going to try and rehab Peter that I would have concocted *this* story. Come on... Fishing naked? He doesn't recognize Jesus? And who puts on their clothes before jumping in the lake? I don't know, I'm thinking John probably did write this and that it wasn't the early church, but really Jesus who rehabs Peter!

If we truly understand the gospel, Peter is as qualified as anyone for leadership in the church of Jesus Christ. Isn't one summary of the gospel simply *Jesus came to rescue Sinners*? Misfits? Saints and sinners? Strangers and stragglers? Outsiders and oddballs alike? The church could easily be named "*Sinners Anonymous*." It's admitting we are *broken* that qualifies us to be members. Wasn't it the Apostle Paul who would call himself "*Chief of Sinners*"<sup>2</sup>?

In a book on the life of Billy Graham, William Martin says the primary reason for Dr. Graham's lifelong, phenomenal success and worldwide affection is that Graham consistently preached "the transforming power of *another chance*."<sup>3</sup>

Getting another chance in life is no small thing, as the disciple Peter learned well. He had been so sure of himself, so confident in his own strength and courage. Peter had been proud to be

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard S. Sloyan, "John" in *Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 227-230.

<sup>2</sup> I Timothy 1:15

<sup>3</sup> William Martin, *A Prophet With Honor: The Billy Graham Story* (Zondervan, 2010).

the first disciple to openly acknowledge that Jesus was the Christ. And as Jesus was facing his final hour, Peter was bold to proclaim his loyalty even unto death.

But Peter denied Jesus three times as the cock crowed. He watched as they arrested, mocked, and tortured Jesus, then hid as they took him to the cross. Peter once thought he knew all the right answers about God, and big, important ideas, and people, but was eventually brought face to face with his own weakness, insufficiency, and blindness of heart.

The good news is Jesus kept coming after Peter to forgive, heal, transform and call him to serve as a leader. Sometimes conversion happens in a moment, but *full conversion always takes a lifetime*. We often progress by regression. We go forward by falling backward. There is often confusion, hunger, questioning, and yearning for more light.

I am fascinated with dullness of the first disciples. In today's lesson, the disciples don't recognize Jesus at first, even though this is the third time he appeared to them... They've gone back to fishing, and Jesus calls to them from the shore. John has to tell Peter, "It is the Lord!" at which point Peter puts some clothes on and jumps in to swim to shore to be with Jesus... That's so Peter!... Put on some clothes and jump in the lake. And there is the detail of Jesus telling them to put the nets on the right side of the boat... Nowhere in the gospels is there record of the disciples catching any fish without the help of Jesus... But as they do what Jesus commands, they have a huge catch of fish.

Jesus must have smiled knowingly, because like during the feeding of the five thousand, he shares bread and fish with them. They enjoy breakfast together... But this is a sacred and highly symbolic meal. The sign of the fish in both Jewish and Christian literature points to the eschatological banquet when the kingdom promises are fulfilled... It points to the importance of community. We need others to see and experience the Resurrected Lord! The Gospel writer John is in this Easter breakfast story signaling that when we dine with Christ, we are at table in the Kingdom of God... The fish became a code symbol for a Christian household. The word in Greek is an acronym, ΙΧΘΥΣ = "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior of the World." And that meant that if you saw the sign of the fish, you knew you would be welcome in that home.

Just as a great variety of fish were caught, so we need a variety of people in the community, and that begins with welcoming one another, a variety of people and the variety of gifts that each person offers.

I'm thankful to Chris Tate for coming and facilitating our discussion today around what it means to live spiritually... I hope that you'll join us, as I'm sure you have some inspiring ideas to share. If nothing else, I hope you'll help listen for how God speaks to us through that conversation. We'll share a meal and hopefully experience sacred conversation, and maybe even recognize God is with us...

But even fellowship with the Lord can be *disorienting* before it is *reorienting*. After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter to reaffirm that which he had denied, reversing the betrayal in full measure, "Do you love me; do you love me; do you love me?" And after being given another chance, Peter (tempted to go back to his nets) is given a new mission in life: "Feed my sheep." Share

the message that God is a God of grace, of forgiveness and steadfast love. Ours is a God of another chance!

What you don't see in the English is the subtle linguistic game going on in the Greek text. When Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" the first two times, he is using the verb "*αγαπας*." That's the verb Jesus uses to describe God's self-giving love, the kind of love Paul defines in I Cor. 13. But Peter answers using the word "*φιλω*," which is more at brotherly love. The point is, Jesus changes his question the third time, to use the verb "*φιλεις*." Jesus adapts his invitation so that Peter can respond in a way that has integrity with his understanding and ability! Here is another example how God takes us *as we are*, transforming us by accepting us *where we are* then leading us where God wants us to be...

However, you take this passage, Jesus calls us forward to follow, to care for the larger community. This requires a break from the old certainties and securities, which often precipitates disorientation, reorientation and reordering of our lives. Peter made his way back to the nets again, apparently questioning whether or not he should stick with fishing, but Jesus called him forth to risk *new life*.

This is the part of the faith experience we don't like. We want to be big, in control, calling the shots. We want to take sure steps toward the world, taking the right steps on the right road. But life, being what it is, may take us on some circuitous routes, some of them leading in a way which we do not want to go. All of a sudden that job which seemed so secure is gone. The spouse that was so perfect leaves you. The health you enjoyed for so long is shattered by illness. Your loved one is taken...

Sometimes our loyalty to Christ is tested, and life's suffering brings questions. Sometimes the bottom falls out in life, leading you into dark and desperate situations. The question is, what will it take before you sit down with Jesus and receive the healing and new life he offers?

The rest of the story is disclosed in surprising ways, sometimes, often in ways we could never have imagined. But the good news is, God's ending will always be a good surprise, a surprise of joy and blessing, even laughter. Remember, "in the end, it's all going to be OK, and if it's not all OK, it's not the end yet!"

So today, friends, on this third Sunday of Easter, I invite you to consider: What Easter new life is offered to you? How are you called to show God's love, to receive God's truth, to forgive, serve, encourage, make peace, heal and reconcile...to give thanks to the living God?

Here at this table, God invites you to believe the surprising, good news that *God's power of life* has conquered the death of this world. Here Jesus invites you to come and have breakfast, and experience healing and new life, to discover that God is the God of another chance, over and over again! Today and always, that's the rest of the story....

*In the name of One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*