

“Three Times”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 8, 2022

4th Sunday of Easter / Mother’s Day

Psalm 67

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

John 21:15-25

When I was young, it was never a good sign when my mother addressed me by my full name: *John Andrew Wahl*; that usually meant she knew you had done something wrong. Possibly, the only thing worse was when she would mix up my name with my brother’s names: *Robby... Dave...John, whatever your name is*; because that meant she knew you had done something wrong...and she was mad.

When he pulls Peter aside on the beach, after sharing breakfast with the other disciples, for this one-on-one conversation, the risen Jesus uses his full name: *Simon Peter*. Although he may not even have directly heard when Peter – at that other charcoal fire, on the night when Jesus was arrested – denied being one of his disciples three times; still, Jesus knew – like all mothers seem to know – that Peter had done something wrong.

It would be easy to reduce this conversation between Jesus and Peter in this final chapter to a reinstatement of Peter’s place as a disciple; or an attempt at reconciliation for a relationship gone bad. And so, it makes sense that this has to be the moment when Jesus forgives Peter for the foolish decision to deny Jesus when Jesus needed him most.

Except, nowhere in the story does Jesus utter the words, *I forgive you* because that is not what Peter needs. The person who needs to forgive Peter is Peter himself. What Peter needs is to accept who Jesus needs him to be.¹

Diana Butler Bass – in a sermon on this passage titled “Breakfast with Jesus” – reminds us of the importance of context. Chapter 21 is the second ending of John’s Gospel, written about twenty years after the original gospel; or, approximately, eighty years after the death of Jesus. For the bulk of this time, the Romans had been at war with the Jewish people, destroying the Temple in Jerusalem and persecuting anyone who would not pledge ultimate allegiance to the

¹ Karoline Lewis from *WorkingPreacher.com*

emperor. Rome did not distinguish between Christians and Jews; all were subject to the same violence. The Christians – who hoped for a speedy and glorious second coming of Jesus to establish an earthy kingdom – were growing disillusioned.

Thus, chapter 21 opens as Peter, with a handful of other disciples, returns to a familiar place, the Sea of Galilee, to do something he knows how to do, fish. Only, the place he knew so well has a new name and the thing he knows to do, he does poorly.

The Sea of Galilee – where Jesus and his followers had grown up in towns like Nazareth, Magdala, and Capernaum – is now the Sea of Tiberius; dedicated by Herod and renamed to curry the favor of the emperor of that name. The once thriving, local fishing industry that had existed there was now regulated by the Romans; over-fished and heavily taxed. All the biggest and best fish would be sent back to Rome for royal feasts; only the smallest fish might remain a part of the local economy. Thus, in addition to Roman violence and persecution suffered by many Jewish Christians, they also found themselves in debt and unable to feed their families.

This is the beach where Jesus shows up to his disciples: alongside the sea that had been renamed for the very person who had him killed, the one who had bankrupted and persecuted many of his family and friends. Jesus comes and they have a catch of fish unlike anyone had likely seen in decades, with scores of large fish. He offers them not just breakfast, but a feast like they had probably never seen; one usually reserved for the emperor in Rome. They are literally taking food from the mouths of their oppressors.²

And this – Jesus is showing his disciples; and the author of John, chapter 21, is telling his long-suffering readers now eighty years later – this is what the future kingdom will be like. Jesus feeds the poor, oppressed, and hopeless of the world as if they were Caesar himself, at an imperial feast where they are asked to pledge not their loyalty or obedience, only their love.

When he finally pulls Peter aside, Jesus is not looking for an apology; he does not ask Peter to pledge his loyalty or obedience; instead, Jesus asks, *Do you love me?* Notice that Jesus does not say, *Do you love my sheep?* Because, we all know that sometimes the people who are around us, especially those who rely on

² Diana Butler Bass, “Breakfast with Jesus” delivered at *Wild Goose Festival*, 2019

violence or oppression, may not be particularly loveable.³ Any ministry that is going to be sustainable will be based on Jesus' love for us and our gratitude in response; not on who seems to deserve our love most.

Feed my sheep. Three times, Jesus instructs Peter to live out his love for Jesus by caring for others. Despite the backdrop of violence and fear, Jesus calls Peter to live boldly by serving others; to help usher in the coming kingdom by showing the same abundant love revealed to them by Jesus that morning on the beach.

When I think about my mother, on this Mothers' Day, I remember not the times hearing my full name called out, or being called by the wrong name, but the meals shared, gathered around tables with family, food and friends, filled with tears and trials, laughter and love. I think of how I was taught to understand that the table is the center of the home; and that the meals shared there represented both abundance and gratitude.

When Jesus pulls Peter aside, it is not to forgive, but to focus his energies. As a disciple, Peter does not belong on a boat in the middle of the sea (at least not exclusively); he has been called to something more. Getting away and doing what is comfortable is okay for some of the time, but – in the kingdom Jesus imagines – we have mutual responsibilities to feed and tend, to welcome and accept, to love and care for one another. We are meant to gather at tables to be reminded that loving Jesus comes to life in a meal, in fellowship, in communion with each other.

Thus, in our own context, Jesus also says to us, *Follow me*. In the midst of our polarized and fragmented society, where such uncertainty and misinformation about Covid and public health policy persists, as those in power increasingly seem to want to speak and decide for us, when so many people are still not welcomed or accepted; in this context, Jesus teaches us to set a table, bring the best food, and feed all who come. We do this not because others have proven themselves worthy of our love, but because – in gratitude for God's love revealed in Jesus – we offer and share from our own abundance for others. And, because it happened on a beach, long ago, it can happen again and again. Amen.

³ Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*