

3rd Sunday of Easter
Sermon 5.1.22

John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me." (544)

When we had to euthanize one of our dogs, I left the room before he died.

I've never forgiven myself for that.

Obie had always been a nervous dog. There didn't seem to be much we could do to ease him of that, though maybe there was. Maybe we did it all wrong.

Jesse and I acquired him as a puppy when we were newly married and moved to Lenox. A Soft-Coated Wheaten Terrier, he was a purebred. Born in Ireland, he was transported to Long Island where we picked him up.

He was trembling in the corner of the playpen when we first met him. We took him home, hopeful that puppy classes and plenty of exercise would acclimate him well enough.

But as he grew, his nerves got the better of him more and more. He became aggressive, going after other dogs. Fear-based aggression, a few trainers told us.

We could have worked with him, meeting with a trainer several times a week and drilling with him a fair amount of time each day. But by this point we had two kids and two jobs between the two of us. Tobias was four, Jack was nearly two, and I couldn't imagine where I'd find time to prioritize this troubled dog.

One day, when Tobias was leaving through the porch door to the backyard, Obie got out too, like a shot, and attacked the neighbor's dog.

We insisted on paying the \$300 veterinary bill. We also realized we couldn't do this anymore.

I began to call around—Wheaten rescue leagues, foster situations. No one I could find would take on the responsibility of an aggressive dog. The only places that would take him would likely end up euthanizing him. (Remember, the internet wasn't the robust place for such specialized searching that it is now. Or maybe I just gave up too soon.)

Finally, it seemed that, if he was going to be euthanized, it was ours to do it. It would otherwise add cruelty to it. He got so nervous when away from home.

We made an appointment at Valley Vet.

That little room off the waiting room: I stayed while he died, from trembling to relaxed, softened and slumped on the floor where I kneeled. But then it became too much, and I left the room.

I've never forgiven myself for that.

Peter told Jesus three times that he loved him. Three times Jesus asked him, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter answered, "You know that I love you." And three times Jesus told him what to do about that: "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." Three times.

This is what you're to do if you love Jesus: take care of other people.

It's thought this is to echo the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus, denied being one of his disciples. This, as you might know, happened just prior to the crucifixion, while Jesus had been arrested and was undergoing his trial. Pontius Pilate the Roman governor, Herod the Hebrew king, and the High Priests of the Temple all questioning Jesus while Jesus' friends each dealt with the shock of it—that this itinerant ministry had come to a sudden terrible turn, an all-but-certain

halt. He would be crucified. And that would be it. And everyone else had to figure out how to cope. Whether to run, to hide, to stand by as if to undergo a sort of test themselves—which is what Peter would do.

Standing by.

Seeing of what sort of mettle he was made.

Or not. (“Three times before the cock crows you will have denied me,” Jesus said...)

It’s thought this is Jesus giving Peter the chance to make right the three-times wrong against Jesus that Peter committed. That’s what’s thought. That’s what *I’ve* thought.

All four gospel narratives imagine poor Peter’s weakest moment—all four, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This means it likely happened. It’s factually true. What’s more, it’s important—akin to the other things all four swear to, Jesus tempted in the wilderness, Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop, Jesus angry at the Temple, Jesus crucified. This, Peter denying Jesus, is one of those important moments.

That said, all four gospels remember it a little differently. Every account with its different details, its different emphases. John remembers it as something Jesus seems to have had little feeling about. He wasn’t disappointed in Peter. Jesus wasn’t disappointed, neither in advance when he foretold it nor in retrospect as he likely remembered it. It would simply happen—because that’s how people are, full of fear, full of self-doubt. And it’s this that John seems to think had Peter denying Jesus, less fear perhaps than self-doubt.

Jesus would introduce the whole likely incident at the last supper, which John remembers as occasion of Jesus to speak at length, in the so-called Farewell Discourse and High Priestly Prayer. Here he spoke of where he was going, which was to a place where the disciples couldn’t now follow.

That was quite a change from everything that had come before. Up until now, Jesus’ common refrain had been that people, “Follow me,” had been that people “Come and see.” But now, suddenly it was this: “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said [to others] so I say now to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another...”

Where he was going was the cross, the cross of sacrificial love, which would also be his exaltation, his ascension. John’s gospel has it that when Jesus was raised on the cross he was also raised to the Father in the kingdom of heaven. This means the cross was the ultimate revelation of

the way of God in the world, of the way of salvation in the world. Salvation will come in self-giving love, which Jesus would enact in this most visceral way, and which his disciples should enact in much subtler ways. They weren't called to die, or at least not before they gave their lives for life, lived their lives for the sake of the other, in service of the other, friend and neighbor and stranger alike. They were called simply to love one another. This was their discipleship. This was their witness, not martyrdom to death but martyrdom as a *living* way.

But Simon Peter couldn't hear this simplicity, mundanity. It's as if he meant to be heroic in his discipleship. He said to Jesus, "Lord, where are you going?" which had Jesus assure him, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards."

But Peter pressed it: "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

"Will you?" Jesus asked at this. "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times."

And so it happened.

While Jesus was with the High Priest, who was questioning him, Peter was standing outside at the gate. A woman was there guarding the gate and she said to Peter, "You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?" Peter answered, "I am not."

A few moments later, near now the warming fire that the police and some slaves had built, Peter was there to stave off the cold, and they asked him, "You are not also one of his disciples, are you?" Peter denied it again, saying again, "I am not."

Which is an important phrase in the Gospel of John, and an important assertion to make about yourself: "I am not." It's to be heard in contrast to what Jesus is remembered in John to have said of himself: "I am." This is the gospel of the so-called "I Am" statements: "I am the true vine," "I am the living water," "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Seven times, seven different equations, seven different metaphors or images for understanding Jesus' being, and always with this construction: "*Ego eimi*," "I Am..."

And it sounds like something ordinary, a phrase anyone of us might use about ourselves. "I am going to grocery store." "I am late for my dentist appointment." But what it should call to mind when it appears in scripture is that original "I Am." The voice from the burning bush; the voice from the bush that, though burning, is never consumed; the very picture of being; the very image of being sustained by being: "I Am." This voice that named itself in the call to Moses, "YHWH," the sound of breath, to be translated or (better) interpreted I Am that I Am, or I Am that which is, or simply I Am. God. Being. The beingness of all beings.

Jesus according to the Gospel of John related in a deep and essential way to this one, “I Am,” claiming of himself in various ways and forms and images, “I Am,” and inviting all who would follow him to find in themselves such essential being in God: “I Am.” In each of us, this God who is the breath of life and who is beingness, each of us: “I am.” So intimate. So close.

So, when Peter says this: “I am not.” He’s not denying Jesus. He’s denying himself as essential to Jesus.

But he’d come all this way. And he’d been such a close disciple, such a close friend. And he thought he’d been trusted. He thought he’d been good. He thought Jesus had taken him as nearly an equal. Jesus would lay his life down for him, so he would lay his life down for Jesus, though Jesus didn’t seem to need that from him. And how discomfiting it is to realize you’re not as important to your friend as your friend is to you. I hate it when such a fact comes home to me. “I thought I was important here.”

And now Jesus had been arrested, which he seemed to know would happen. And Jesus was withstanding trial, as if he’d been readying himself for this since the word “Go.” So apparently Jesus wasn’t quite the Messiah everyone had thought him to be. And maybe this wasn’t quite the friendship Peter had thought it to be. Maybe Peter wasn’t quite the confidant Peter had imagined himself to be, not to Jesus. Jesus kept his own confidence.

Yes, I’ve always understood this story to be about Peter denying Jesus. But John has it otherwise. John has it that here Peter is denying himself. John has it *not* that Peter, in fear, denied Jesus, but that Peter, in self-doubt, denied himself—his own importance, his own essential presence in this whole story, his own being in love with God. “I am not.”

For my being mixed up on this question, I’ve often heard Jesus’ three times giving Peter a chance to proclaim his love for Jesus as Jesus giving Peter a chance to make up for his thrice denial of him. As if, “Three times you denied me. I’ll give you three times to make it up to me.” But I wonder if instead Jesus was giving Peter a chance to make it up to himself.

You are not the worst thing you’ve ever done. And no good would have come if Peter had been crucified along with Jesus. Jesus knew this: this last part of the journey was Jesus’ alone to take. Peter would then need to build up the church. It was Peter’s job to live out the gospel, to live it out and spread it all around, building up in the world a reign that was to resemble the reign of God, of light and love and service for the sake of life. Peter’s was not to be the hero. Peter was to be the deacon, the server, the one who showed the world how to live this thing that Jesus died to birth.

When our old dog Gus died last winter, he did so having spent his last two days in my arms, breathing his last breath on our living room floor while we four Goodmans were all nearby, eating our dinner and living our lives.

I feel a little better about myself for that.

A little.

It's not so easy to shed your shame.

You are not the worst thing you've ever done. You are not the coward your weakest moment suggests you are.

So come and have something to eat. You look hungry.

Thanks be to God.