

Easter 3, Year C

Thankful Memorial

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This story reminds me of Nina.

Several years ago, when Nina was 4, this story came up in the lectionary and one of the adults asked what we would do if we were in a boat and had fished and fished and fished and nothing came up, then all of a sudden, this stranger showed up and from the shore shouted to them to cast the net on the other side of the boat.

Surely there will be fish if we just try again.

The other kids were unsure what they would do, feeling fatigued from the process of fishing—of casting the net and hauling it back in empty—they were certain they wanted a break or a snack. But Nina, Nina yelled out that she would, without a doubt, cast the net.

Hurray for Nina, who enthusiastically threw the net back into the water, and pulled up bountiful fish.

The amazing thing about this story is that the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Did not know that it was him until the moment the net came back bursting with fish, and then the disciple who Jesus loved, proclaimed “it is the Lord!”

And, Peter, who was so beside himself, jumped into the water and swam to shore, eager to be in the presence of his Lord once more.

You see, fresh in Peter’s mind was denying Jesus.

Back before the trial, in the darkness of the garden, Peter had denied Jesus. “No, I am not with them,” he said. And then he remembered when the rooster crowed—and wept bitterly.

His weeping has been turned to joy in seeing the Risen Lord—his Lord risen—on the beach, in the flesh, in front of him.

Jumping into the sea is akin to the “my Lord and my God” statement from Thomas. All doubt suddenly melts in the face of such certainty: Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Risen, Jesus is here, with us.

I imagine the dripping Peter falling at the feet of Jesus in utter relief, the emotions pouring out of him.

And then when the other apostles reach the shore—Jesus feeds them. Becoming known to them in the breaking of the bread, in the shared meal of fellowship and grace, all of them know it is Jesus who is with them without even having to ask.

A knowing so deep that it can be felt and shared without words. A knowing that we—us here right now—share with the disciples on the beach every time we share bread at the Table of the Lord.

The breaking of the bread is an essential part of our faith as Christians—as Easter people—as followers of the Risen Lord. In fact, the first question we are asked to affirm in our baptismal covenant is if we will continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

To which we answer, *I will with God’s help.*

It is an answer that echoes through time, an answer we see here displayed for us in the text of today’s Gospel reading. It is with God’s help that the apostles find the strength to try one more time and it is through God that they are fed.

It is like this with us to, it is with God’s help that we find the courage to try again, the strength to rest when we need to, and through God that are fed. Fed with the bread of life, the core of our being, that which reminds us that through the simple—and yet sacred—act of coming to the Table, we are becoming more like God, just as God became like us.

This Easter season, we walk through what it means to be a follower of Jesus. A follower of the Risen Lord by seeing how it is we live as people of Easter.

We see here on the beach that an essential part of living as Easter people is being fed. Not only feeding, but being fed. Being fed by Jesus.

After eating, Jesus asks Peter:

“Do you love me?”

Eager to profess his love, the love he once denied, Peter says “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Then again, Jesus asks “do you love me.”

Yes, yes Lord, I love you, Peter responds.

“Tend my sheep.”

And then, for a third time, Jesus asks if Peter loves him.

And now Peter is hurt, fearing that the Lord is denying his proclamation of love, out of exasperation, perhaps desperation, Peter says “you know everything Lord—you know me—yes, of course, I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Peter who has been seeking forgiveness from his Lord is met with a twist—not only has he already been forgiven, but he has been given the opportunity to forgive himself.

You see, this kind of forgiveness stems from the love of God—a love that knows us for who we are, authentically and fully. Such a love has the power to change us, to shape us, to give us new life.

Self-forgiveness has been part of Peter’s journey, the part that has been missing up to this point. So lost in seeking forgiveness from God, Peter misses the part where he has already been forgiven, and now it is up to him to put that forgiveness into action.

Up to Peter, to receive that forgiveness into his being—to believe that he is forgiven. It is one thing to hear that we are forgiven, and an entirely different one to believe it.

Part of Peter’s journey—part of our journey—in faith is to receive forgiveness, is to believe that we are forgiven, and to let that knowledge be at work in us.

Self-forgiveness is one of the hardest things we can do, and yet it is one of the most important things we can do.

This is why I think Jesus asks Peter not once, but three times if he loves him. Jesus already knows that Peter loves him, Peter has already shown that he loves Jesus, and yet Jesus asks anyway.

The point is not for Peter to admit that he loves Jesus, but rather the point is for Peter to internalize that love, is to turn that love back on himself, and to love himself as Jesus loves him.

You see, there is nothing that Peter can do to make up for denying Jesus, there is nothing he needs to do, without first believing that he is forgiven.

Forgiveness is freely given by God—always and already present—out pouring from the source of love and life that raised Jesus from the dead.

Forgiveness gives us new life, and we are meant to break that forgiveness open and let it feed us. Let it seep into our thoughts and help us to believe that we are forgiven. Let it seep into our pores and guide our actions.

It is up to Peter, and up to us, to put the love of God given to us into action.

Jesus could be asking us, “do you love me?”

To which we would respond, “yes, of course, we love you.”

Feed my sheep, we would hear.

And we would be satisfied with that answer, but then Jesus would ask us again, and then again, and perhaps we would feel hurt like Peter and uncertain like the apostles in the boat—do we answer yes, of course, again? Do we try once more to throw the net into the sea?

Nina would say yes, throw the net!

And, then sometimes we throw the net, and we do not get the response we think we might get, because real life is not always like fishing—more often than not we cast a net and get no response or when we get a response, sometimes it’s not the one we think it might—or should—be.

That, too, is part of faith because often fishing in real life means being open to casting a net in a direction we didn’t initially think of and means being receptive to pulling in ‘fish’ that look, or taste, or feel different than what we might have first expected.

This is all part of God’s transformational work in the world.

The work of feeding the world from the love that fed us changes the world around us, even in small ways. Being Easter people means being resurrection people, means seeing Jesus and expecting not his pre-cross self, but his Risen self.

The Risen self that appeared as a stranger on the beach, who then, through the breaking of the bread and fellowship, became known as the Risen Jesus.

This Risen Lord still appears to us, greets us and feeds us, and we—who have been broken open by this love and forgiveness—are to greet and feed others. We who are fed at the Table are invited to throw the net one more time and be open to what it might bring.