

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 21:1–19. In this passage, we first read about the Risen Lord directing the work of the disciples as they fish. Then we read the challenging dialogue between Jesus and Peter in which our Lord commissions him to be the chief shepherd of Christ’s flock. The image of fishing was traditionally used in scripture to describe the missionary activity of the Church while the image of shepherding was equally used to describe the pastoral activity of the Church. This passage is rich in meaning, therefore, and offers some important details for our consideration as disciples who are responsible for both the missionary and pastoral ministries of the Church today.

One of the important clues in understanding this passage is found in the symbol of the charcoal fire which is at the heart of this reading (see Jn 21:9). This is an important detail because the last time the disciples were around a charcoal fire was in John 18:18 when Peter denied Jesus three times. Now, Peter will have a chance to affirm his love for Jesus three times around a similar charcoal fire. Jesus did not want Peter to be defined by his failure or to allow his denial to be the only thing Peter thought of every time he saw such a fire. Rather, the Lord wanted to give Peter another opportunity to be a faithful friend and disciple. In providing this new opportunity, Jesus allowed Peter to redeem his failure by once again renewing his love and commitment to the Lord.

This symbol of the charcoal fire helps us to interpret what takes place throughout this chapter of John’s Gospel and to understand both the actions of fishing and shepherding as expressions of God’s redeeming work in us and through us to the world. Certainly Peter was grateful for the opportunity to be redeemed by Christ’s love and in his obedient gratitude he could be both a great missionary and a great pastor. When we fail the Lord, and others, we are oftentimes given opportunities to redeem our failure and demonstrate our love and fidelity just as Peter did.

In God’s great mercy, the Lord not only leaves the door open for our conversion but even sets us up with opportunities and invitations to pursue it. When we understand that ministry opportunities are really invitations to live out our redemption in Christ then we will eagerly and generously demonstrate our obedient friendship with Jesus as well and become His co-workers for the salvation of the world.

In what ways have you been given opportunities to redeem situations of weakness or failure in your own life? How did you respond to those invitations?

What do you think was Peter’s first thought when he saw Jesus standing around a charcoal fire?

What situation or person are you avoiding because of a previous failure and how does this passage give you encouragement to actively seek redemption?

The first half of this passage focuses on the work of redemption that will take place through the

ministry of Peter as the Chief Fisherman of the Church. The role of Peter as leader in this effort is demonstrated by the fact that he is the one who initiates the effort (see Jn 21:3). As previously stated, fishing was commonly understood in scripture as a metaphor for missionary activity. It should be remembered that just prior to this passage Jesus had just sent the disciples on mission (see Jn 20:21). Also, the image of a boat has been a symbol of the Church since the First Century (see Jn 21:3). Thus, this passage teaches us an important message about how the missionary activity of the Church will take place. There are several elements in this passage that need to be considered.

- The disciples must follow the Lord's direction in order for their work to be successful (see Jn 21:5–6). When they act on their own, without seeking the Lord's direction and obediently following it, then their nets remain empty and their efforts fruitless.
- The number of the catch (one hundred fifty-three fish) has a variety of possible meanings and there is no clear indication of what John intended, if anything, by including this detail. It is possible that this number represents the Hebrew phrase *Beni ha Elohim* which means "Sons of God" (in Hebrew, each letter has a particular numerical value and the value of this phrase totals to one hundred fifty-three). If this interpretation is correct, then the fish represent new Believers who have become Sons of God through the missionary efforts of the Church and the Sacrament of Baptism.
- Something interesting happens to these fish at various stages in this story and their status seems to change as they move from one stage to another. This change in status is indicated by the use of three different words in Greek to refer to fish at each point in the story. In verse 5, Jesus uses the Greek word *prospagion* to refer to fish who randomly roam the waters and are not yet in the nets. In verse 6, when the fish are in the nets, they are then referred to as *ixthuon*. Finally, in verses 9 and 13 when Jesus offers a meal of bread and fish to the disciples, our Lord uses the word *opsarion*. (Note: the same word for fish and bread is used in Jn 6:9 and Jn 6:11 in the context of the Eucharistic scene of the multiplication of the loaves and fish). The use of various terms is telling us that the missionary activity of the Church has a transforming effect on people which leads them to become new realities through the Sacraments of Baptism (Sons of God) and Eucharist.
- When the disciples are invited to the meal with Jesus we are told that they knew it was the Lord (see Jn 21:12) because Jesus was revealed to them (see Jn 21:14). This revelation of Jesus in the context of a Eucharistic setting is similar to what the disciples experienced on the journey to Emmaus in Luke 24:30–31 when they, too, recognized Jesus in the Breaking of the Bread. The revelatory nature of this passage is central to its meaning. We were previously told in Jn 21:1 that Jesus would reveal Himself to His disciples. Then in Jn 21:7 we are told that the Beloved Disciple recognized Jesus as the one who spoke to them and directed their fishing efforts. It is important to note that the Beloved Disciple could only recognize Jesus through His Word when they had faithfully and obediently followed the Lord's direction and command (this sequence reinforces a larger theme in John's Gospel by which believing precedes revelation). Thus, the two

revelatory moments of Jesus in this passage occur when our Lord speaks His Word and when He offers the Eucharistic meal. This passage is teaching us how we, as disciples today, must learn to recognize Jesus revealing Himself to us in the scriptures we read (His Word) and in the Breaking of Bread (Eucharist). The proper response to this revelation is to enter into dialogue with Jesus which will be the subsequent topic of reflection.

- Of interesting note is the fact that Jesus wants the disciples to bring some of the fish they caught to Him despite the fact that our Lord already has a meal provided for them. This element reminds us that there is a sacrificial offering requested of us when we participate in the Eucharist. It is not that Jesus needs the additional fish. Rather, Jesus offers the meal as a sharing of lives – a joining of our sacrifice with the sacrifice of Jesus to be given as one eternal acceptable offering to the Father through, with, and in the Son. This moment when the disciples bring some of their fish is a symbol of the Offertory Rite at each Mass when we are invited to make a sacrificial offering of our lives to God so that we can be transformed with the bread and wine to become the Body of Christ on earth and witnesses of Jesus in the world.

The above elements teach us much about the work of the Church today as we strive to carry on the redeeming ministry of Jesus through missionary activity. It speaks to ministry leaders to remind them of the need to seek the Lord's guidance at all times and to follow it with the obedience of faith. It reminds us that the Sacraments and ministries of the Church are meant to have a transforming impact in people's lives effectively making them "Children of God" in word and deed (see Jn 1:12, 21:5) and equal participants in the Eucharistic sharing of life. Finally, it reminds us that we have much work to do because none of it will happen unless we, like the disciples, become the Lord's instruments and allow Jesus to work in us and through us. It is that continuous prayerful cooperation with the Lord that makes us His disciples and Children of God as promised at the beginning of John's Gospel (see Jn 1:12-13 where we are told, "...to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.").

Which of these aspects of the redeeming missionary work of the Church speaks most challengingly and profoundly to you and why?

Given this passage as a model for evangelization, in which effort does the Church need to put more attention and effort at this time?

The disciples had to work together in the boat in order to realize this great and important work. What is your role in the boat of the Church when it comes to carrying out missionary activity or evangelization efforts?

What can a faith community do to help its members recognize and respond to Jesus' self-revelation in Word and Sacrament?

This is one of the only passages in John's Gospel where anyone is referred to with the

faithful title “Children”. That title indicates that the promised blessing of Jn 1:12 is finally realized as the disciples carry on Jesus’ redeeming work in the world. What would it mean for you to be a Child of God in word and deed?

The second half of this Sunday’s Gospel passage focuses on Peter’s response to the revelation of Jesus. It also shows how the work of Christ’s redemption will take place through Peter’s pastoral ministry as the Chief Shepherd of Christ’s Church. Three times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” and three times Peter affirms his love for the Lord. Through this exchange, Jesus is challenging Peter to grow in his ability to love. We need to understand the subtlety of this dialogue in order to grasp its deeper meaning.

When Jesus asks Peter “Do you love me?”, our Lord uses the word *agape* which is the very love of God. Thus, Jesus is saying to Peter, “Do you love me with the same love that I have for you?” Peter answers and says “Yes, Lord I love you” but Peter uses the word *philia* meaning that Peter is only capable of loving Jesus with the love that family members and close friends have for one another. *Philia* is a lesser love than *agape*. We lose the significance of this exchange in English, but it is clearly there in the Greek.

After the first question and answer, we see that Jesus does not reject Peter for his inability to love as Jesus loves. Rather, Jesus tells Peter to put his limited love for the Lord into action by caring for those who belong to Christ: “Feed my lambs”. Jesus challenges Peter a second time to love with *agape* but Peter can still only love with *philia*. Again, Jesus commissions Peter to direct his limited love for Jesus to the Body of Christ: “Tend my sheep”. It is in the third question that Jesus asks Peter “Do you love me?” and Jesus uses the word *philia* instead of *agape*. Peter affirms his love in the same way and once again, Jesus commissions Peter to put his love into visible action when he is commanded to “Feed my sheep.” There can be two ways in which to understand and interpret this dialogue and the use of diverse terms for love.

First, by eventually using the term *philia* in His question to Peter, Jesus may be showing that He is willing to work with Peter’s limited ability and by doing so will eventually lead Peter by helping him to love as God loves, but it will take time. This eventual manifestation of Peter’s *agape* love may be indicated by the prophesy in Jn 21:18-19 in which Peter’s martyrdom is foretold and we are informed that Peter will glorify by his death God just as Jesus glorified God on the cross of Calvary. If this interpretation is correct, then it means that God is willing to work with us as well despite our limited love. We’re not perfect or perfectly holy but God can work with our limitations so long as we desire to become what God wants and we are willing to serve the Lord present in His Body, the Church, which is the Flock of Christ the Good Shepherd. God can work with anyone who’s willing to work with God. That was true of Peter and it is true of us.

Second, an alternate interpretation suggests that this conversation between Jesus and Peter may be intended to teach us that we will never be able to love as God loves. God knows that but sometimes we don’t admit it. In our presumptive ignorance we can delude ourselves into thinking that our love is the definition of God’s love. That’s simply not true. God’s love is divine while our love is human. We will never love as God loves. However, when we love God in the

best way we can then we become a Friend of Jesus (the word for friend in Greek is *philos* and is derived from the verb *philia*) which is the definition of discipleship in John's Gospel. Friendship with Jesus was first introduced by John the Baptist in Jn 3:29 to describe his own relationship with the Lord as the Friend of the Bridegroom. The Friend of the Bridegroom had responsibility for preparing the bride for the marriage, leading the bride to meet the groom, and sustaining the marriage celebration— all meaningful images for ministry. At the Last Supper Jesus further challenged His disciples to be His friends when He said, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you" (see Jn 15:13-14). If this second interpretation is correct then Jesus may be challenging Peter to remember our Lord's love for him while inviting Peter to be a faithful friend in return. In doing so, Jesus will actually be able to love others through Peter so that in Peter others will see the Glory of God and be drawn to Jesus. This explanation may further explain the two fold pastoral ministry of feeding and tending the flock.

How have you been challenged to grow in your capacity to love?

When have you had to imitate the Love of God (agape) in a way that exceeded your natural ability (philia)? What was it like? What inspired you?

Which of the two interpretations for the dialogue between Jesus and Peter most inspires and challenges you?

How has Jesus invited you to deep friendship and how have you responded? How does the image of John the Baptist as the ideal Friend of Jesus inspire you (someone who prepares the bride for the groom, leads the bride to the groom, and continues the celebration of the marriage between bride and groom)?

After Peter affirms his love for the Lord, Jesus asks him to express it through visible works of faithful ministry to others. Thus, Christian love is not an emotional experience only between the disciple and the Lord. Rather, a disciple loves the Lord present in others and serves Him in them. Peter is to make his love for Jesus visible in how he loves and cares for those entrusted to him. Peter is challenged to love all those the Lord puts in his life and not to love only those whom he wants to love. Thus, Peter is to care for all who are in need with an unlimited generosity and compassion.

Catherine of Siena lived during the fourteenth century and spent many years expressing her love for the Lord through her solitude and prayer. After a while she began to experience the absence of Jesus in her moments of prayer and so asked the Lord where He had gone. The Lord replied to her that she would find Him in the dying, the condemned, the suffering, and the lowly. So began her remarkable life of heroic charity as she expressed her love for Jesus in her care for others.

The redeeming work of Jesus continues in our lives through the ministry of the Church even after we have become Christian. When we are hungry, we need to be fed. When we are wounded, we need to be cared for. When we are wandering in errant ways, we need to be called

back to the flock. All of these pastoral actions of the Church are ways in which the work of redemption continues for those who are already Christians. Mother Teresa once said, “The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.” However, we need to remember that in John’s Gospel there’s always a deeper level and meaning and so we have to move beyond the surface level to see how Jesus led people more deeply in faith and relationship with Himself through His own ministry of feeding and tending.

For this reason, it is worth briefly considering a more profound reflection on the two fold ministries of feeding and tending. When we study the Gospel of John, Jesus Himself gives us an example of what it means to feed the flock in Chapter 6 when He both gives and explains the Eucharist as the source of our enduring communion with Him. Jesus also told us that His food is to , “...do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (see Jn 4:34). Jesus will clarify that His work will be fulfilled when people come to believe in Him as the one the Father has sent (see Jn 6:29). To be nourished, then, means to be fed with the Eucharist in such a way that it leads us to faithfully encounter and recognize Jesus in an enduring communion of life and love. Jesus Himself gives an example of what it means to tend the flock when He healed the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda (see Jn 5:1-18) and restored sight to the man born blind (see Jn 9:1-41). These were more than just works of physical healing They were spiritual encounters that awakened the gift of faith in these individuals and formed them to become strong and courageous disciples. The works of feeding and tending, then, are much more than just charitable ministries for the injured or disadvantaged; they are really sacramental and pastoral ministries that form and strengthen disciples to become courageous, active and faithful members of the Body of Christ and Jesus’ witnesses in the world.

What are the most common ways people express their love for God?

How does the expression “Service is Love made visible” challenge you to grow in your discipleship and love for Jesus?

Whom has the Lord placed in your life that you find it difficult to love?

What are the cultural forces today that want to erroneously define faith and love as private interior feelings rather than external expressions of committed love for the Lord?

How does the interpretation of tending and feeding inspire you to seek spiritual maturity through the sacraments and Christian formation in discipleship?

After each exchange between Jesus and Peter, our Lord challenges Peter to make his love visible by putting it into action. How is Jesus challenging you to make your love for Him visible in your ministry to others?

Each time Jesus calls Peter to feed or tend, the Lord reminds Peter that they are His sheep (“tend MY sheep”, “feed MY sheep”). How does it change your interaction with people when you realize that they belong to Christ first and foremost but are entrusted to your care for formation and nourishment?

In the end of the dialogue with Peter, Jesus tells him that being a disciple will require ever greater sacrificial commitment of his life. Literally, our Lord tells him that another will “lead you where you do not want to go” (see Jn 21:18). Peter will eventually witness the self-giving love of

Jesus by dying on a cross much like Jesus did. Peter may not be capable of such love now but he will be later if he faithfully follows Jesus.

The journey of great discipleship begins with a single step. We all hear that invitation from the Lord to “Follow Me” in concrete moments and we must decide to do so by putting our love for Christ into action so as to lead others to Him by our practical expressions of ministry. Peter had to feed the sheep when it was easy and when it was difficult. He had to tend the lambs when they were cooperative and when they were resistant. Peter had to love the people Jesus put into his life and not just love the people whom Peter liked. This passage teaches us that being a Christian is not an emotion or sentimental feeling. It is an ongoing life-changing way of discipleship that is active and dynamic yet always rooted in relationship with Jesus.

It is no accident that we are told Peter found himself distracted by others who were following the Lord as well. That is why he asked the question about the Beloved Disciple (see Jn 21:20-22). We can experience the same natural tendency to compare ourselves to other disciples. In doing so, we run the risk of taking our eyes off Jesus and entering into comparison, competition, suspicion, criticism, and so forth. Jesus calls each of us to follow Him uniquely and personally. Peter was not so much concerned for the Beloved Disciple’s spiritual life as he was curious about whether his experience of discipleship would involve the same sacrifice and ministry that was entrusted to Peter. Such a temptation for comparison is a perennial danger for people who become increasingly involved in ministry and Church leadership – they can begin to critically focus on how other people aren’t doing the same thing they are doing. When we find ourselves tempted to focus on others then we need to hear the Lord say to us as He did to Peter, “What is that to you? Follow Me!”

What does this discussion between Peter and Jesus mean to you?

If Jesus said to you “Follow me”, what would be the next step in your life of discipleship?

How can people become distracted in their discipleship by becoming curious about other people’s discipleship instead of keeping their focus on Jesus?

Peter can lead others in the ways of faith only as he himself remains a disciple who follows Jesus. The same is true for us. What does that statement mean to you?

As we celebrate the Easter Time, it is worth reflecting on how the ministries of fishing and shepherding complement each other for the work of the Gospel. When you think about it, Jesus could not have called a more unlikely character to be the key leader of the early Church. Peter was a simple fisherman from the remote regions of Galilee who denied the Lord three times and tried to deter Jesus from enduring the suffering of the Cross. Nonetheless, the Lord called Peter to love Him, serve Him, and give his life in witness of faith for Him. As leader of the early Church, Peter had to direct the ministries necessary to grow, sustain and empower the Christian community for mission. The Church today needs both the ministry of Peter as Shepherd (pastoral

care of those already Christian) and the ministry of Peter as Fisherman (evangelization and mission outreach toward those who are not yet disciples).

What are the Church's primary ministries today of pastoral care and of missionary outreach?

Which dimension of ministry do you think is in greatest need of development?

Who are unlikely people in our time that God has raised up to be disciples?

Pope Francis is the successor of Peter as the Bishop of Rome. How do you see the Holy Father carrying out today the two dimensions of Peter's ministry for the early Church?

In which dimension of ministry (pastoral or missionary) would you like to become more involved?

Lastly, it should be noted that love of Jesus is to be the foundation of discipleship. There can be lots of motivations for following the Lord but Jesus wants us to do so primarily and foundationally out of love for Him. Sometimes we can follow the Lord out of a sense of duty, fear, hope for reward or to fulfill the expectations of others. All of these motivations may help us take the first step of discipleship but these motivations will not allow us to become the disciples Jesus desires us to be. Jesus didn't ask Peter, "Do you believe me?" or "Do you respect me?" or "Do you fear me?" Rather, He asked Peter "Do you love me?" Love of God in Jesus must always be the foundation for every expression of our discipleship as well. The challenge for us is to grow daily in our love for the Lord as our Savior and friend and to love all those whom God puts into our lives. If we are not motivated by love then we do not have a solid foundation for our discipleship.

What do you think are some of the false motivations other than love that people can have for following Jesus or carrying out works of ministry and how can those false motivations manifest themselves in limited discipleship?

What experiences in your life have manifested God's love for you?

How do you nurture your love for the Lord?