

The Third Sunday of Easter
April 10, 2016

About 450 years ago, St. Ignatius of Loyola promoted a form of praying with Sacred Scriptures, very often referred to as Gospel Contemplation. Gospel Contemplation invites us to pray a particular section of Scripture by placing ourselves inside the scene. To imagine ourselves in the middle of the action by seeing in our mind's eye all of the sights and sounds and people present in the narrative.

Today's Gospel reading is a wonderful passage for this kind of Scripture prayer because it's filled with wonderful images that can bear much fruit in prayer, contemplation and meditation.

In today's reading from John, we find ourselves in a scene that 's by the sea with the risen Lord who is cooking a simple breakfast for his friends over a charcoal fire. We can experience in our prayer the sound of Jesus calling out "Children, have you caught anything?"

We can experience in our prayer witnessing the excitement of Peter as he leaps out of the boat and swims and wades through the water to be reunited with his friend and Savior standing on the shore.

There's one word that is easily overlooked but may have great meaning for each one of us as we try to live out our baptismal covenant and life in Christ. The word isn't fish. It's not love. It's not even Jesus. The word we're going to reflect on today is...charcoal! In all of Sacred Scriptures, the word charcoal is used only twice and both times it's found in the Gospel of John.

One of those times, of course, is in today's passage where Jesus is cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire. The other time John uses the word charcoal is during the Good Friday Passion when Peter was warming himself over a charcoal fire as he denies Jesus three times.

Now John uses words and stories for very specific reasons and his use of the word

“charcoal” is filled with implications for our lives and our relationship with Christ and one another.

The first charcoal fire at the scene of Peter’s triple denial of Jesus on the night before He was crucified represents those times in our lives where we may deny Jesus.

Maybe we don’t publicly or vocally deny Jesus as Peter did, but when we sin, through our words, actions or inaction, it’s still a denial that Jesus is Lord of our life.

The second charcoal fire, then, shows us the way back into a life sustaining relationship with the One who allowed Himself to suffer death so that we might have life. Remember the dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter: “Do you love me?” And three times, Peter responds that indeed he does!

By Peter affirming three times that he loves Jesus, Jesus is able to lead Peter from the bitterness and darkness of that first charcoal fire, to the light and forgiveness of the second charcoal fire. And this movement from the first charcoal fire to the second is only possible because of Peter’s great love for Jesus as he professes three times his love in contrast to the three times he denied Jesus on that darkest of nights.

And it’s Jesus’ burning desire to bring us from the fire of our sins to the fire of his infinite love and mercy.

And the only way that can happen is if we are able to love Christ in the same way that Peter was able to demonstrate.

But what about those times when we, like Peter, are confronted with past guilt or the shadows of our loneliness or pain. Or maybe we experience dark hours when Jesus seems very far away and loving Him can actually seem difficult if not impossible?

C.S. Lewis gave us a hint as how we may love Jesus in those times when our faith may falter and life seems to be getting the best of us. In his book, *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis wrote,

“When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”

And that can start happening right here at the Mass in the reception of the Eucharist where we become one with Christ and with each other. From there we can experience loving our Lord in many ways...through the love we share with our families, our spouses and our children and grandchildren.

And there are of course many other ways that we can encounter and respond to God's love.

This can happen when we immerse ourselves into the beauty of Sacred Scripture, through frequent celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, by learning the truth of what the Church teaches, by becoming more involved in the life of our parish and most especially by reaching out to the lonely, the disenfranchised and those in our community that have been forgotten.

We can begin easily enough by simply being truly present to those who God places in our path each day. These are all ways that we can follow Peter's example of demonstrating love for Jesus who in turn reaches in to our hearts to pull us free from our guilt and pain into the life-giving and life-sustaining charcoal fire of His Divine Mercy and peace.