

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."*

The Burden of Shame - May 1, 2022

John 21:1-19

Why do we need Christ? On the one hand, you may be surprised that I am asking such a question, especially coming right after Easter. At the same time, this may be the best time to ask why we need him. We find ourselves in this Easter season. The risen Christ is alive. He is appearing at unexpected times and in unexpected ways to his followers. Scripture tells us that he was not always recognizable at first, but he was very much real. He ate and drank. In today's passage from John, Jesus is even cooking a meal. Who knew that he was also a chef!

These post-resurrection appearances serve many purposes. Of course they are proof to Jesus' followers that he is alive, confirming everything he said about himself. You may wonder why Jesus did not appear to the people who arrested him, tried him, and killed him. Wouldn't that have been something! Or would it? After all, Jesus spent three years in Israel preaching, teaching, and healing. People had plenty of time to make up their minds about him. Some believed. Many did not. We certainly know in our own time that there are millions of people who have false beliefs about our last election. The Russian media is pumping lies about Ukraine to their own people. If you have been conditioned to reject truth of any kind then you will not see it even if it walks in and slaps you in the face. Consider if Jesus really had appeared to his opponents. Would they really believe it was him? Would they suddenly change their minds and become his followers? Would they apologize? Of course not. Instead, they would do their best to deny Jesus was alive. They would try to go after his followers and make them keep quiet. How do we know this? Because that is exactly what happened once the Christian movement started rolling.

No, Jesus was going to waste his time trying to convince his enemies he had conquered death. Instead, what he needed to do was to breath life into the people who were going to build his church. Consider, however, that Christ's task was twofold. Yes, he offered proof to his followers, but more importantly, he had to rebuild relationships with them.

What do I mean by that? How could Jesus have a bad relationship with his disciples? But think about it. Jesus' crucifixion did far more than kill him. Rather, it also nearly killed the movement he started.

We need to put ourselves in the shoes of the disciples. We need to think about their feelings leading up to Jesus arrest and then how they felt after his crucifixion. Yes, when the risen Christ met with his followers in person, I'm sure they were overjoyed to see him. But what if I said they not only felt joy, they also felt shame.

Yes, the disciples must have been ashamed of themselves and with good reason. Jesus was alive, just like he said he would be, yet they had not really believed him. Jesus was alive, but they all ran away from him and he knew it. Jesus knew perfectly well who was present as he suffered and it very definitely wasn't them. Moreover, when they heard the first reports from Mary that the tomb was empty, they did not automatically conclude Jesus was alive. They had no idea what to think.

They were ashamed of themselves. Shame is much stronger than guilt. They knew they were guilty of ignoring Jesus and running away from him when he needed them most. They knew they were guilty of denying his resurrection. However, as today's passage shows us, they were also ashamed because shame is associated with bad internal feelings. When you are ashamed, you think poorly of yourself. When you are ashamed you feel powerless. When you are ashamed, you want to give up and quit.

How would that look? Jesus is alive and his followers are too ashamed to go out and build the church. Well, that is almost what happened.

In today's lesson, Peter and six other disciples decide to go fishing. Mind you, they had all seen the Lord alive again but clearly that was not any kind of motivation for them. Jesus spent three years with them, teaching them, training them, preparing them. His resurrection should have spurred them on to go forth and spread the good news about Jesus. He was alive! His teachings were vindicated! The Good News was real!

But instead, they went fishing. No church, no preaching, no sharing about their Lord. They went fishing because frankly, they were ashamed of themselves.

Shame, friends, is a powerful emotion. It is much greater than feeling guilty. We feel guilt when we have done something wrong, either to ourselves or someone else. Guilt is a natural feeling because we have all hurt ourselves or others at different times in our lives. The Prayer of Confession is our way of admitting our guilt, getting it out in the open, letting God know we are aware of what we have done and we cannot ignore it. We confess, we admit our sin, and then we are forgiven and free to try again. Guilt for Christians is an emotion which should diminish over time. We should be learning from our guilt to not repeat our sins and errors. The less we repeat, the closer we grow to God. No one will be perfect, of course, but we learn and change for the better.

Shame, on the other hand, is guilt directed inward. We not only feel bad about whatever wrong we have done, we make ourselves feel badly about ourselves. We make ourselves feel worthless and unworthy.

Peter went fishing. Isn't that strange? I mean he and the other disciples had all seen the risen Lord not once, but on several occasions. Shouldn't they be excited? Shouldn't they be eager to get out and spread the Good News? Shouldn't they be confident in the truth of their message?

The answer, of course, was no. Apparently the last thing Jesus' disciples wanted to do was talk about Jesus. I imagine in fact that contrary to being excited about Jesus being alive, they may well have felt depressed. Scripture tells us that when Jesus appeared to his followers, they seldom recognized him at first. I wonder whether they didn't recognize him because they couldn't recognize them or, more likely, didn't want to recognize him.

What happens when we deny the truth? We avoid any reminders of it. We become resentful toward the truth-tellers. We pretend and shout "fake news." I imagine that for the disciples, Jesus' resurrection appearances were actually painful for them. After all, the risen Christ was an obvious reminder that they had failed their friend. They abandoned him. They didn't want to believe him. Yet here he is, again and again.

Now we, 2000 years later, might very much want to meet Jesus in person. There are many would love for him to walk into our sanctuary. But the disciples were overcome with shame and they felt unworthy to spread the Good News to anyone. So they went fishing.

Funny thing about their fishing trip, they caught nothing. Perhaps that made them even more ashamed! They failed at following the Lord. Now they were failures at their old occupation. Could they, could Peter, do anything right?

Then to top it all, they head back to shore and see Jesus again. What does Peter do? Well he's further shamed because he's naked and sees Jesus, the man he denied three times. So there's poor Peter, guilty of denying his Lord, guilty of not catching fish, and guilty of being naked in public. What else could he do but jump in the lake? Perhaps a part of him even wished he would drown. The last thing Peter wanted to do was to meet Jesus.

But the time to meet Jesus had come and there was no avoiding it. In his heart, Peter was prepared for the worst. He was prepared to hear Jesus condemn him in front of the others. He was prepared to separate himself from the other disciples and never see them again.

And so they talked.

However, when Jesus spoke to Peter, it was nothing like he expected at all. Far from reminding Peter of his guilt, Jesus instead relived Peter and the others of their burden of shame.

Shame was keeping Peter and the others from spreading the Good News. They were so convinced that they had failed Jesus that they considered themselves terrible, unworthy human beings.

But Jesus himself didn't feel that way. He didn't feel that way about his disciples and he doesn't feel that way about us. Far from shaming us, all Jesus wants to do is love us into following him.

Three times, all Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. Three times, Peter said yes and Jesus gave him a job to do: Feed my sheep.

Now many who have preached on this passage have said that Jesus' asking Peter if he loved him three times was a way of reversing the fact that Peter denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. In other words, they see this exchange between Jesus and Peter as an act of forgiveness. Jesus forgives Peter. Peter is restored to his position of leadership. The church is now free to move forward.

But there is so much more to Jesus and Peter's conversation. Yes, in one way Jesus is forgiving Peter, but he needed more than forgiveness. I mean after all, we pray for God to forgive us every week and we hear the words of assurance that we are forgiven -- yet, do we believe it? I am not sure.

Rather, while Peter certainly needed to be forgiven by Jesus, what he really needed was to be relieved of his burden of shame. In fact, all the disciples with Peter that day needed to be relieved of their burdens of shame.

All of them, especially Peter, were ashamed of how they ran away from Jesus when they should have been supporting him. All of them felt unworthy to go out and preach the gospel to the world. What if they were tested and failed again? No, for the disciples it would have been much easier to run away from Jesus and blame themselves for the rest of their lives about how incompetent they were.

But Jesus knew them better, like Jesus knows us better. Better than we know ourselves. Jesus knew and told Peter that Peter would deny him. Jesus knew and yet Jesus chose Peter for the task of leading the church. In fact Jesus knew all his followers would abandon him and guess what? Jesus was OK with that.

Shame, my friends, shame is an emotion we bring upon ourselves. Yes, we have all failed. Yes, we have all fallen short. But the good news, the best news of all, is that Jesus believes in us even more than we believe in him. He is on our side, yesterday, today, and forever. That is what his love for us is all about. Hear the good news and believe it is true. God loves you more than you can imagine.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.