

It is still the season of Easter. So before the message of this year’s Easter morning quickly fades away into memory, it’s good to reflect on this simple wonder. It’s a point seldom made in Biblical commentaries or Easter sermons, for that matter, but it’s a point I always stress about the Easter story that is meant to live on in all of us. Nowhere is it mentioned in Scripture that when Jesus rose from the dead he had revenge in his heart. Jesus did not bring violence, anger or retribution upon those who plotted to kill him (as he could have), but rather he brought the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. It’s something we take for granted, (don’t we?) without ever really thinking about it. But it is really something worth thinking and talking about.

By embracing Jesus’ resurrection we are granted forgiveness and new life. It’s a sheer gift of God. Importantly, it’s a gift that applies to how it is we forgive ourselves as much as we forgive others and how we live our lives as Jesus’ disciples. Here’s a concrete example for you.

I’m the new Chairperson of the Credentials committee of Baltimore Presbytery- a small group that interviews candidates for the ministry on their way to serving within our bounds. This always leads to interesting conversations, (some more interesting than others.) Recently one very good candidate, a practicing nurse, in her conversation with us shared the ‘sentence prayer’ that she uses in times of stress and difficulty. She repeats these words, slowly, three times over, breathing deep and steady between each line: “I am a child of God,” “I am a child of God,” “I am a child of God - and so are you.”

As she talked about it, she explained that in order to accept and forgive others, you first need to accept and forgive yourself - and even before doing that- you need to know who it is you really are. Thus, “I am a child of God” is a much more profound statement than it sounds.

It is a way to recognize that we are not self-made, that we belong to someone else, greater than ourselves- and in that way we are like everyone else in the world; and all equally loved.

It’s a very simple & extremely powerful statement, both personally affirming and challenging; that to accept myself fully, I need to accept you, too, because you - just like me, are a child of God.

This is a prayer we can all say and share as those loved and embraced by Jesus. “I am a child of God,” “I am a child of God,” “I am a child of God - and so are you.”

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Our scripture reading this morning contributes to the conversation about how it is we are loved and brought together to live in Christ- perhaps in a way you haven’t considered before.

This is the last story of Jesus’ post-Easter appearances in John’s gospel. The only thing left for Jesus to do in the gospel account is to ascend bodily into heaven- sort of the ultimate out-of-body-experience. The story for us this morning is a bit easier to take in.

It’s the disciples back fishing again, returning to the tried and true, for necessary food and fellowship. While out on the lake at daybreak, before any fish are caught, they catch a glimpse of a stranger standing on the shore. He calls to them, “Have you caught any fish?” - Their answer, in unison, is ‘no.’



The stranger yells out to them to toss the net on the other side of the boat, when- seemingly immediately, the net is filled with fish eager to be caught. Simon Peter, sharp and impulsive as ever- gets what’s going on. It’s Jesus there on the shore! Then John comments that Simon Peter puts on a garment, because he had not been clothed while fishing, and then jumps in the water to swim to shore to be the first to see Jesus.

When ashore with Jesus, while sitting at a charcoal fire, with fish on it and bread on the side, the following conversation ensues, which is our New Testament lesson for this morning that I invite you to join me in reading.... (from John 21:)

One: 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.”

**All: 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.”**

One: 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?”

**All: And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”**

One: This is the Word of the Lord.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

There are two things that happen in this story I need to point out, before this conversation takes place, both which bring drama and detail to its telling.

First, including the detail of Simon Peter's initial nakedness is a thought provoking notion, to say the least. The writer of this Gospel knew what he was doing with this reference. John was no stranger to going back and reimagining the beginning of Genesis, in alluding to the nakedness that Adam experienced in the Garden of Eden in his hiding from God. Perhaps John is somehow reimagining the significance of the resurrection as the undoing of the shame of Adam. That is, Simon Peter doesn't allow the shame of his being unclothed to stop him from moving toward Christ- the fulfillment of all creation. Peter doesn't hide, (as Adam is said to have done) but instead leaps forward- just as he is, to the one he already knows loves and accepts him. There is no sign of shame, but instead total acceptance. Peter is being called to fully acknowledge Jesus as the one who accepts and sends him to further adventures, and Jesus is ready both to welcome and challenge him.

The second footnote here is about the charcoal fire around which Jesus, Simon Peter and the other disciples sat, ate at and talked. This was no accident. It's in fact a much bigger thing than it first sounds.

The last charcoal fire that was referred to in John's Gospel is the one at which Peter made his threefold denial of Jesus, after the Lord's arrest in the courtyard of the high priest.

At that time Peter denied Jesus, three times answering a direct question about his being a follower of Jesus with the words, "I am not."

Peter was in total denial of knowing the one who claimed to be the great "I am," turning away from Jesus, cold and clear.

And now, just a week or so later, the charcoal fire is no longer warmth against the cold of the night but is where Jesus cooks his breakfast at the dawn of a new day.

The fire cooks the bread and fish on the shore of the sea where Jesus gives instructions and encouragement. Peter might have thought that his earlier denials excluded him from God's love, and so when he finally reaches shore and sees this charcoal fire and remembers the last time he was near one; suddenly his heart drops, and he braces himself for Jesus to deny him. It would be fitting- one denial in exchange for another- right? But that's not what happens.

Instead, it appears that the food and future of Peter's new life is being cooked on the fire of his old failures. The charcoal fire no longer represents his failure but is now a sign of a new beginning. Morning only arrives after night; forgiveness only comes with the admission of a need to be forgiven.



As Peter stares down into the fire, remembering his past deeds over against the wonder of seeing Jesus again, alive, and hearing his invitation to a meal, its hard to imagine what could have been going through his mind (doubt? hope? did they cross their fingers back then?)

Fortunately, we're not left to our imaginations with this one.

Peter isn't (in a manner of speaking) the only fish caught by Jesus, and not the only one drawn in to this expression of God's love.

Jesus transforms Peter's lingering discouragement and forgives his past denials. Peter is accepted and loved- but it's not quite a 'no questions asked' situation. Jesus indeed has a few questions for Peter.

It will be some time before we see the effects of this conversation take hold in Peter's life (and that's in large part what our Summer Sermon Series will be about, journeying with Peter & the other disciples through the Book of Acts.) For now, the best we can do is put ourselves in Peter's shoes. Peter is accepted, but in order to be sent, there will be questions.

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks three times, each with a slight variation for emphasis. At these questions Peter is as positively affirming as he was absolutely denying after Jesus' arrest. Jesus needs positive confirmation this time around, because the next phase of Jesus' work hangs in the balance; with Peter holding the keys to the kingdom to continue to follow in Jesus' name.

Jesus phrases his words to Peter as new commands... "feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." It's as if Jesus is saying to Peter, "Inasmuch as you care for others, I will care for you." "Inasmuch as you care for others, I will care for you."

That's the bottom line of the Gospel message from Jesus. We are loved, but we are never alone. "You are loved- but you need to love others, too." "You are given mercy- that is to be shared." "You are forgiven- in the same way that you forgive others."

“I will save you”- says Jesus- “and I’ll save others too; even sheep who are not of your fold.”  
“Inasmuch as you care for others, I will care for you.”

So, as a church family as we conclude this month of April, our ‘Congregational Care month’, together we can say... “I am a child of God,” “I am a child of God,” “I am a child of God - and so are you.”  
Amen.

