

## ***“Right: BE the Rock”***

*Isaiah 51:1-3; John 21:9-19*

May 5, 2019

The reference to this charcoal fire creates a parallel from the previous scene of Peter’s denial. Mark, Luke, and John all have Peter’s denial occurring around a charcoal fire that the servants and officers had built in the inner courtyard to provide some heat on that cold evening. First, we have a fire for warmth, now we have the aroma of a fresh cooked breakfast wafting out from the shore. We go from fear and anxiety to feeding and compassion.

What has it just been like for the fumbling disciples? Confusion set in as they realize they can’t go back, and they don’t know the way forward. The story they have been living was their response to an invitation to join with Jesus in God’s mission - a mission that was not about going to heaven when we die or making converts to a set of rules. Jesus needed his disciples need to be doers..., then and now.

But the disciples are still a bit baffled, on a blind journey of discovery without the aid of their fearless leader. Jesus commissioned Peter as The Rock, knowing they would need someone to guide them after his physical departure. Peter’s first response after Jesus’ death though, was to revert back to what he knew how to do: FISH. It sounded like a good idea, and six of the other disciples offered to join him. They had spent the entire night with their nets cast, and had not caught a single fish, not one! They don’t know it yet, but they will need to recover the habits of discipleship they practiced for three years: regular experiences of God intruding on the ordinary and seeing the difference God’s grace makes in the lives of people who encounter acts of love and kindness. They had learned how to do up close and personal ministry with Jesus. Without him, they feel lost, so decide to go fishing in the dark.

I like the way Rev. Dr. Joy J. Moore, Pastor at Bethel United Methodist Church in Flint, Mich. interprets this passage.

The challenge for the disciples was to be the bridge for someone else to experience justice. The disciples have to grasp who they now are in light of the resurrection. Their old occupations have been transformed into a sacred mission. A mission as unpredictable as fishing all night and catching nothing, then switches to an intimate breakfast on the beach with a friend who loves them more than anything. If they are going to pick up the mantle of the Resurrected Christ, they are going to have to get out of the boat.

The Gospel according to John also puts a different spin on this encounter. The Synoptic Gospels all tell how Peter denied Jesus. But only John has this resurrection scene with Jesus confronting Peter about his love for Jesus. Up until this week, I have followed the interpretation that Jesus asks this question: “Peter, do love me?” three times - to allow Peter to reaffirm that allegiance, and thus to feel forgiven for having denied knowing him. But Karoline Lewis, Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary, offers a new perspective. She says: It seems to make sense that this has to be the moment when Jesus forgives Peter for his ultimate foolishness and recklessness -- denying Jesus when he needed Peter most.

Except nowhere in the story does Jesus utter the words, “I forgive you” because Peter hasn’t done anything requiring Jesus’ forgiveness. No, the person who needs to forgive Peter, well, is Peter himself. SO, forgiveness is perhaps not the issue at all. We like to fall back on it, frequently, assuming it’s that which is needed to fix a relationship, especially to mend this specific relationship. But in this case, a little more digging and some careful study reveals that what Peter really needs is to accept who Jesus needs him to be.

A rereading of Peter's denial in John exposes his true rejection -- that of his **own identity**. The question asked of Peter is not, as it is in the Synoptic Gospels, "do you know the man?" To which Peter responds, "I don't know the man." Rather, in the Fourth Gospel, the inquiry posed to Peter is, "Who are *you*? Aren't you one of his disciples?" Peter's response? "I AM not."

As a result, the conversation between Jesus and Peter should take on a completely different meaning. Jesus does not blame or shame Peter. Jesus does not ask for Peter's repentance. Jesus does not ask three times, "Peter, do you love me?" to remind Peter of his three-fold denial, to test him or to trap him. If any of that is true, that's not the Jesus I know, I love, or in whom I believe. Instead, Jesus reaffirms who Peter needs to be; the disciple Jesus needs him to be. And the disciple Jesus needs Peter to be is the shepherd now. "If you love me, feed my sheep." Denying our identity is an all too often reality. We deny who we are because we worry that we won't meet expectations. We deny who we are because we are afraid to disappoint. We deny who we are because we could be judged, even rejected, for that truth. We deny who we are because we do not believe that we will be liked - or loved -for who we truly are.

Mike and I had been married about 10 years when I grew more than just vocal about wanting some more depth to our relationship. I felt we were having trouble communicating, and I wanted to seek outside help - Yep, from a Marriage Counselor. We had a good reference from a friend, and soon had an appointment. We talked about some of our (MY) frustration, and I was immediately impressed with the therapist's ability to say some things to my husband and see a light of awareness in his eyes. I was slightly perturbed though, because I thought I had been saying pretty much the same thing to my husband that the therapist said. Oh well - whatever it takes to register - right? But then the counselor turned to me. He wanted to talk about my Real Self, and my Ideal Self. I thought to myself, "What is this nonsense about my Ideal Self? I know who I am, and I am pretty clear about that!" Mike was smiling - it was my turn to hear some things from the counselor that my husband had been trying to communicate to me!

We play it safe around a lot of people in our lives, pretending, and rightly so. Not everyone deserves our truth. Not everyone can be trusted with our truth.

And, if this is the way we feel with people in our lives, even those closest to us, I suspect the same would be true of our relationship with Jesus.

Our first thought about Peter when it comes to the decision he had to make around that charcoal fire is that he was terrified that what Jesus had predicted would happen to him, might happen to Peter, too... Maybe Peter was reluctant to admit his identity because he wasn't ready yet -- not that you ever can be, really. Maybe Peter couldn't affirm his identity because the garden was too fresh in his mind, too painful, too personal. Maybe Peter was not able to say, "I AM" because he just couldn't believe it himself.

I wonder if we have felt the same. We just can't imagine that Jesus would commission us with being the good shepherd when he can no longer be present. We cannot believe that Jesus would trust us, could believe *in us*. O ye of little faith, of conflated, confused, or conflicted identity, Wake Up! Shed your protective shields and trust that my love for your brokenness is so that you be honest about yourself, and pursue a deeper healing than a score-keeping tally of who won this round or who got away with another slide just under the wire.

Jesus shows up on that shore and hosts a meal one more time. He tells Peter, the disciples, and he tells us, "I believe in you. I know who you are and I love you. And yes, you are exactly the disciple I need, the disciple the world needs, for God to redeem this church, this community, and this city, as we live and give witness to the body of Christ.