

28 February 2021

Giving Up for Lent . . . Guilt

John 21:9-22

I was working on my fishing nets with Andrew, on the seashore, when the rabbi Jesus came by. He watched for a while, then said to both of us, "Follow me. We'll catch bigger fish than that."

I'd heard of this rabbi before, that he was different, that he didn't just quote the Law and Prophets but he taught what they were thinking, as if he knew their hearts. Andrew had seen him a few times, back when Andrew was following the Baptizer, but I'd never actually talked with him. I said, "You mean now?" He said, "I always mean now. Now is the kingdom of God. You coming?" So I did. We both did. Along with James and John. We followed him, listened to him, and sometimes even had time to go fishing, too.

There was this one time we did that . . . went out fishing but we'd caught nothing. All night, and not a minnow. We came back to the shore in the morning, and there was Jesus. He said, "Throw the nets on the other side of the boat." I thought he meant, "Try something different," and maybe he did, but it turns out he also meant "Throw the nets on the other side of the boat." We caught more fish than our boats could hold. I just stared at Jesus, amazed at such a man, and said, "Lord, I'm not worthy to follow you." And I'm not. I'm not. At that time, I didn't even know how unworthy I am. Not even close.

I saw him do other things, even more amazing. He healed people who had never been whole before. He healed my mother-in-law, which was actually all right. I like her. I saw him feed thousands with a few loaves of bread. I saw him stop a storm at sea by speaking to it. I saw him walk on water. Really. In fact, I . . . I did, too. When I saw him walking across the sea, I called out, "Can I do that?" and he said, "Of course you can, come on out." So I did. And for a few seconds, I was standing on the surface of the sea. Then I sank, and he had to help me, but for a second there I was with him. I began to think I was something special.

A couple of times he singled me out. Once he told me he would build his church on me. Once he took just me and James and John with him to raise a girl from the dead. Just the three of us. Then, most exciting of all, he took the three of us up a mountain, where he appeared in all the glory of God. I saw something that no one else on earth – well, nearly – had ever seen. I began to think I was *pretty* special. So it hurt me at dinner that night, when he said I would deny him. No, I wouldn't! I was in the inner circle, remember? I was on the mountain with him that day! I was the rock he would build his church on! Those others might deny him, but not me!

And then I did. At first I was brave. When he was arrested, I tried to fight. When they dragged him away, I followed, looking for a chance for a rescue. While they were trying him before the council, I was just outside, watching and waiting. I remember I was standing by a charcoal fire, acting like I was one of the servants. Then someone said, "Hey, weren't you with Jesus?"

"Who me? I ain't never met the man."

Someone else. "Yeah, you were. You were the guy who tried to fight the whole temple guard by yourself."

"I tell you it warn't me!"

A third person. "Listen to that Galilean accent! It had to be you!"

"I don't know Jesus, all right!"

[Pause] Then I realized what I had done. I wasn't special. I wasn't anything, and nobody was going to build anything on me. I knew that I had had a chance to stand for the greatest thing in the world, and I had lost it. My life would never be the same, and my shame would never go away. I would never see Jesus again, and if I did, I wouldn't be able to look him in the face.

The story in our reading today takes place after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus has already appeared to the disciples, but then he left them again, so eventually they went back home. Peter went back to fishing, for instance. We read John 21, verses 4-22:

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' ⁶He 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. ⁷That 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 lake. ⁸But 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.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus 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. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵When 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.' ¹⁶A 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.' ¹⁷He 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.' ¹⁸Very 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.' ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

²⁰Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' ²¹When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' ²²Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!'

What happened here? A fascinating story. There was the miraculous catch of fish again. There was even a charcoal fire, just like the one in the courtyard when Peter denied Jesus three times. There are only two places in the New Testament that use the specific word for “charcoal fire”: Peter’s denial of Christ, and here. There was Jesus, taking Peter aside, just like he used to, and he asks Peter a question, three times: “Do you love me?” “Yes, Lord.” “Do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, I do.” “Do you love me?” “You know I do.” Jesus gives him three chances, canceling his three denials, and after each one says, “Fine. Then feed my sheep. I still love you. I still trust you. I still plan to build my church on you.” Jesus removes Peter’s guilt and restores his purpose.

For Lent this year, I’m talking about giving things up. How about guilt? I don’t mean to say that you can give up incurring guilt. Unless you’re an awful lot farther along in your spiritual life than your spouse thinks you are, you’re still going to sin. And I don’t mean to stop feeling bad when you sin; I hope you do. I do mean to stop stewing over your guilt, give up letting it infect your life, and crush you under its weight. Have you done wrong? Yes. Have you denied Christ in some way? Sure you have. Do you love Jesus? Good. Because there’s work to do. Feed his sheep.

The church has not always communicated this message. Far too often, we’ve played the guilt card as a way of manipulating the sheep to do our will, to keep coming to church, to tithe, to serve on a committee. Sometimes, in fact, we’ve worked to increase the load the guilt: making the sheep feel inadequate is like job security for clergy. When we have done this, we have sinned, and we have twisted the true message of Christ. And that message, again, is this: Do you love me? Good. Then get busy. I have things for you to do, things that require you to be whole and healthy. So I need you to stop agonizing over what’s past, put aside what’s done, and feed my sheep.

We’re going to do something now that will make many of you uncomfortable. If you are watching this with one or more people, I want you to join hands. If you are watching alone, clasp your two hands together. Everyone should be holding at least one hand. Now close your eyes. Without saying a word, I want each of you to think of something you have done that you still feel guilty about. Picture that moment. Think of those people who were hurt by your action. Think of the pain it caused others, and think of the pain you have borne yourself as you have carried this memory with you.

Now, feel the hand that is in your hand. Imagine that it is the hand of God, who has never given up on you, who has never left you, and who will never let you go. That hand is this morning a representative of the hand of God. Now, it is time for you to speak for God. Say aloud: “I have already forgiven you.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You may let go now. You may not be completely done. You may have a card to write or a call to make to someone you hurt, saying, “I’m sorry.” But even so, know this. You have today heard the voice of God. In God’s eyes, you are forgiven, and to be perfectly honest, God’s tired of hearing about it. There are people who are lonely, frightened, sick, in prison. There are hungry sheep out there. It’s time to move on.

Final word: Scripture tells us to repent of our sins, but what does “repent” mean? In the Old Testament, at least, the word usually translated repent is just the common word “turn.” It’s an action word. You did wrong. Turn around. Do something else. It does *not* mean “feel bad.” This Wednesday evening at 6:30, join us on the Lake Street Facebook for a brief reflection service on repentance, followed by a discussion time for those who want to stay.