

Can you imagine what it was like that first Easter? Jesus had appeared to them after the resurrection. They were thrilled – they were believers. They had faith. Even Thomas had faith. But Jesus left them again. He said he would be back. We don't know how many days it had been. The days are dragging by, uneventfully. Peter the impetuous spontaneous one said, *"I'm going fishing. I'm going back to what I know how to do best. I don't know what Jesus wants of me now, I don't know what he expects of me now, but I know how to fish."* And with a sigh of relief or resignation, the others say, *"We'll go too."* They did what so many of us do in times of indecision. They found comfort in familiar tasks. They went back to fishing, at the sea of Tiberius, some 80 miles north. Not the sea of Galilee. They had traveled a journey. And Peter cannot succeed at the one thing he thought he was good at. Can't you see him flinging his net out over the waters, hauling them in empty. *"What's the point? Even the one thing I thought I was good at I can't do anymore,"* he mutters. All night long they're out there, not catching a thing.

As daylight begins to creep in, they start pulling their oars in to shore, when they notice a stranger standing on the shore cooking fish on a charcoal fire. He shouts that familiar question all fisherman hear: *"Catch anything?"* Frustrated, hungry and hopeless, the weary disciples shake their heads. Then he shouts, *"Cast your nets on the right side of the boat."* *"What do you know about it."* But they could also see the fire on the beach with a few fish already cooking. To their amazement, they haul in a load of fish. It's John who recognizes Jesus first, but it's Peter who goes into the water. He's naked in the story, but he throws on his clothes to go swimming – I never have gotten that. But remember of Garden of Eden – when Adam & Eve eat from the tree of knowledge and all of a sudden they were ashamed of their nakedness. Think about Peter in his nakedness, not physical nakedness, but shame from denying Jesus. Impulsive as ever, Peter throws on his clothes, jumps in, and starts swimming toward shore leaving the others to drag the full net behind the boat. As soon as he gets to shore, he scrambles up the bank, and starts running toward Jesus. But then his overjoyed face pales with dismay when he notices the charcoal fire. He begins to slow his steps.

Jesus says, *"Come, have breakfast."* And then the other disciples surround Jesus. The group settles around the fire, glad to be reunited, eating fish and bread for breakfast just like old times. Everyone, that is, except Peter. He can't relax with the others. He stands close to the fire to dry off and warm himself, staring down at the glowing embers. He remembers another charcoal fire. It was the night Jesus was taken into custody. Do you remember? And Peter was in the courtyard of Caiaphas, the high priest. *"Now the slaves and police had made charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves in the courtyard of the high priest. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself."* (Jn 18:18) The maid servant says to him, *"You were with him."* *"No, you've got the wrong man, it wasn't me."* *"Surely you were with him. You are a follower."* *"No, I'm not the one."* It was beside that fire that Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. For the rest of his life, a charcoal fire would be, for Peter, a symbol of shame.

Carrying the weight of shame, denial, how can you approach Jesus now. Maybe Peter fell quiet then, as the others continued to eat and talk. Maybe only Jesus notices it. Maybe Peter was thinking he didn't really belong there, didn't really deserve to be there. Finally Jesus looks through the blue smoke at Peter and speaks, *"Peter, do you love me?"* Peter looks at the sand between his feet, pained by the question, and answers, *"Ah, Jesus, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."* *"Feed my sheep."* And then Jesus asks it again. *"Peter, do you love me."* *"Yes, Jesus, Yes Lord, you know I love you."* And then again. Each time Peter answers with all the sincerity he can muster, his anguish evident in

his voice. You can only imagine what might be going on in Peter's mind right now. *"Yes, you know I love you."* Peter had already told him once, what more did he want. And each time Jesus follows his response with a simple command: *"Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."* Three times Peter has denied Jesus around a charcoal fire. Three times Jesus forgives him, around a charcoal fire. Jesus uses the concepts of nurture and hospitality, *"Feed...tend...feed."* The most basic form of care – the most basic necessity of life. Through these actions Peter would be following Jesus' example. *"Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...feed my sheep...follow me."*

I think about relationships between people. Jesus is wanting a commitment from Jesus. Jesus knows already that Peter loves him, but Peter needed to say it, he needed to voice it. Ever experience that in your relationship. Ever need to hear people say it. You might know it, but you need to hear them say it. Walk back with me 25 years ago to Fiddler on the Roof with Golde & Tevye. And what happened in that one scene.... (cue to Jeff & Marsha)

It's still nice to know. So if someone ever asks you, Do you love me, what are you going to say. It will decrease the need for marriage counseling. In all relationships we need to know. And maybe with Peter it was a little different. I think Peter needed to be reminded that Jesus loved him. That he was ok, that he could be redeemed, that he could still be loved in spite of all that had happened.

In our lives don't we need that too.? When we've failed – not realized what we've done. We need that forgiveness. We need to know that people can still trust you. This is a story about forgiveness. Jesus makes a conscious choice to release the person who has wronged him. But then comes these words from Jesus *"Feed my sheep. Pick up your life now, and begin again."* Jesus wanted him to know all was forgiven. And he wanted Peter to follow him. Jesus is not only trying to bring Peter back but to move him beyond that. I believe Jesus spoke these words to heal and liberate him.

Do you ever long for the kind of forgiveness that Jesus gave to Peter. All of us at one time or another will betray our best intentions. What we need is to have our futures handed back to us – to be released from the mistakes of the past, and reinvested with responsibility for the future – to stand before the healing presence of God, to experience tremendous power of forgiveness.

What I love about this story is the embodiment of Jesus. Before addressing Peter's spiritual need of forgiveness, he addresses his physical needs. He cooks breakfast for the disciples. He cares for them before attending to their spiritual needs. They're hungry. They're tired. The fire is going, the bread & fish cooking. Jesus tends to the basic needs as if they were his family This story shows us very clearly that before asking anything of us, Jesus sees our needs and comes to feed us. Like family.

Many of our greatest needs have to do with the healing of our souls, with restoring the connection between us and God. Restoring the connection between us and other people; between us and the earth. The word "Religion", in its Latin base, means re-connect. Our deepest needs have to do with being accepted, forgiven, respected, knowing we have an important purpose; removing the barriers that keep us apart: distrust, fear, shame, guilt, greed.

We are complex and fallible. We stand in continual, daily need, of that grace we call forgiveness – from God, from each other, and from ourselves. A good question for each of us this morning, and everyday, is: from whom do I need to seek forgiveness? And then the flip side of the question: who needs forgiveness from me.

Without forgiveness, we are bound to the past – like the disciples in Galilee, trolling aimlessly in a barren sea. With forgiveness, we are empowered, like Peter, to become wiser, more compassionate, and more deeply joyful, than we have ever been before.

Suddenly it is clear. Jesus makes this encore appearance for Peter. In the same way he returned for Thomas, to move him from doubt to faith, he now returns for Peter, to offer forgiveness than moves him from faith to action. Perhaps in these days after the resurrection we need that as much as Peter did. Perhaps, having heard the invitation to follow so long ago, we need to hear it again, and then act.

Tevye: Golde, I have decided to give Perchik permission to become engaged to our daughter, Hodel.

Golde: What? He's poor! He has nothing, absolutely nothing!

Tevye: He's a good man, Golde. I like him. And what's more important, Hodel like him. Hodel loves him. So what can we do? It's a new world. A new world. Love. Golde. .... Do you love me?

Golde: Do I what?

Tevye: Do you love me?

Golde: Do I love you? With our daughters getting married. And this trouble in the town. You're upset, you're worn out. GO inside, go lie down! Maybe it's indigestion.

Tevye: Golde, I'm asking you a question.... Do you love me?

Golde: You're a fool

Tevye: I know, but do you love me?

Golde: Do I love you? For 25 years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. After 25 years, why talk about love right now?

Tevye: Golde, The first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was scared.

Golde: I was shy

Tevye: I was nervous

Golde: So was I

Tevye: But my father and my mother said we'd learn to love each other. And now I'm asking you, Golde, Do you you love me?

Golde: I'm your wife

Tevye: I know, but do you love me?

Golde: Do I love him? For 25 years I've lived with him, fought him, starved with him, 25 years my bed is his. If that's not love, what is?

Tevye: Then you love me?

Golde: I suppose I do

Both: It may not change a thing, but even so after 25 years it's nice to know.