

Sermon: John 21.1-19

Delivered Sunday May 5th, 2019, The Third Sunday of Easter. Lessons: Acts 9.1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5.11-14; Gospel of John 21.1-19

Recently, this last week, I was down in London, Ontario, at St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral, celebrating the ordination of two new deacons in our Church, and after the service completed, everyone goes into this massive hall they have there where we celebrate and gifts are given to the newly ordained. So usually, you know these are all very lovely, pious, religious gifts, usually new shiny white albs and robes and deacon stoles, and bibles and all the other usual holy hardware associated with the trade and one of my colleagues asked me if I remember anything special I got for my ordination, and I said: oh yeah! I got a barbecue, which you all know I quickly dubbed "The Holy Grill..."

Which you know, is not without biblical precedence, because in our gospel lesson for this morning that we just heard, we hear how Jesus institutes, I'd like to think, the very first holy barbecue with his disciples on the shore of the sea of Tiberias, with a charcoal fire going with apparently fish on the grill, and maybe a few loaves of garlic bread, which is very good to do on the barbecue, by the way...

But it's here where Jesus after appearing to his disciples for a third time, asks his disciple Peter, after he decides to put his clothes back on, "Do you love me Peter?" And Jesus asks this question to Peter three times, just to make sure he gets the message, and do you remember what Jesus says to Peter, after every time he asks the question? That if you love me, you will feed my lambs, you will tend my sheep.

Jesus makes very clear to his disciples that if you love me, you will feed others, but this feeding others, isn't always going to be easy or fun. For anyone who has ever tried feeding a fussy two year who doesn't want to eat (for some reason, I'm thinking of my mom), you know what I'm talking about; because we all know, that life, like feeding a two year old, can get messy, it can get difficult, it can get frustrating, and it can get painful.

Jesus tells Peter that you know following me, is kinda like how life works for all of us: because "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."

You think about your own lives: I bet most of you, when you were younger, you couldn't wait to grow up, and get your driver's license or move out of your parent's house and get a decent paying job so that we could be free and we could act and we could accomplish things and hold everything in our own hands, but then, there comes a time for all of us when we grow old or we become more spiritually mature, where life often has a way of humbling us; where either the aches and pains don't seem to go away so easily anymore, or where we just get the feeling that we just can't do whatever we want, whenever we want because it feels like life has thrown a rope around us and is leading us, as Jesus says to Peter, to places we might not be so comfortable to go to.

It's one of the biggest lessons I've learned in my short career as a minister. I remember when I was still in seminary, I was an intern chaplain at St. Joseph's Veteran ward hospital in London, Ontario, and one of the patients I was caring for was

a man only in his later 50's, who was living with a horrible form of muscular dystrophy, that was ravaging his body and weakening him so severely that he could no longer walk or do the things that once gave his life joy, or meaning, or pleasure.

This man had been in fact, a high profile lawyer; he had actually worked with Ed Greenspan in court, and championed human rights and for 32 years he had been an important environmentalist in Canada, and like many of us have wanted to do in our lives, he had lived the dream. He had money and power and a beautiful home in the countryside and he was able to retire early, but only one year into his retirement, he was diagnosed with a crippling disease that was increasingly leaving him disabled and unable to do any of the former things that gave his life meaning, joy, or purpose.

As I visited him many times as he was receiving treatment at St. Joseph's, it occurred to me that naturally, this man was haunted by the question of how much can I still do? Because like for most of us, he had learned to think about himself as a man who was worth only what he was doing. And he was tempted to despair because he had this horrible and incurable disease that was only going to get worse for him. I mean, what could I say to him? I didn't have any words, I couldn't take away his pain, all I had was just my presence with him as we talked.

But over time, as I gradually began to reflect on his life, I was reminded how seriously, each of us, as we grow older, are inevitably faced with being handed over to this same kind of existential reality and/or crisis. I see this clearly in every person I meet at Grey Gables who in their own way, have had to accept or deal with spiritually this reality of being handed over to forces as we grow older that we do not always want

to be handed over too; often to a life of suffering; where we often go from a life of dramatic living and doing and achieving and action; to a life of being acted upon.

If you think about, this life of moving from doing and to being acted upon, is exactly what happened to Jesus, where the drama of being handed over radically divides his life into two parts. The first part of his life as we see in our four gospels is filled with activity and initiative. Jesus speaks, he preaches, he heals, he travels, he teaches, he performs miracles. But there comes a point in his life, in our gospel, where he is handed over to other forces; where for the short remainder of his life, he becomes the one to whom things are done to. He is arrested, he is led to the high priest, he's taken before Pilate, he's crowned with thorns, he's nailed to a cross. I mean you get the picture, things are being done to him over which he has no control.

And yet interestingly, it's from this position of not being in control, that Jesus on the cross exclaims in his last breath: "it is accomplished!" It is interesting to me and I think it speaks volumes that Jesus actually fulfills his vocation as the son of Man; as the messiah, of achieving our salvation, not through primarily a way of action, but he achieves it actually from a place of which we might be tempted to think of as weakness or vulnerability, from a place of suffering in what we commonly refer to as his passion, like when we say the Passion of Christ.

This word passion, by the way comes from the latin word passio - which means to suffer. So when we speak of the passion of Christ, we are often speaking of the suffering of Christ, of the suffering that he endures for our sake because of his great compassion for us.

Which I think is a lesson we all know to be true, because sooner or later, we all know that if you love someone in this world, eventually you will suffer for this love. Suffering, perhaps more than any other force has the capacity to make theologians of us all, whether we are waiting in a hospitable bed being acted upon or whether we are in a waiting room, suffering and praying with anxiety over another loved one or crying out to God why do I have cancer, or why does the one I love, now has cancer.

And yet the challenge or possibly the hope if there is any in the pain or suffering that each of us is likely to encounter in life, or in our ministries with others who are suffering I think is to recognize as Jesus reminds Peter in our gospel this morning is to see how our passion and solidarity for others suffering or in our own suffering, how it can just as much as our action, make the abundant love of God known to others, in such a way that we become bread for others; in ways where we are actually feeding them; we are tending them, for to come alongside someone in their suffering, is to bear witness to God's suffering love for us. The God whose name Emmanuel, literally means the God who is with us.

Which in some circumstances, it might require us to lay down our lives for others, but perhaps in other much smaller ways, it might require us to go to those places in our lives - to those closets full of cobwebs -our sorrows and joys, our despair and hope, our loneliness and experiences of intimacy and our sufferings and to make them available to others.

Because Oddly enough, One of the greatest gifts we can give to others is ourselves and especially in our places of weakness and not strength. It was this in-

sight, that as I continued to visit with my lawyer friend in the hospital, it helped us immensely in realizing what we could do with our suffering, where we could actually begin to go to those dark places that we didn't want to or where we were being led to

Because, the truth be told, what my lawyer friend began to realize was that he was in sharing his suffering; in being open to explore with me the meaning of it in his life, he was offering to me new insights, he was making himself available to me, and in my presence there with him, even in my inaction, in being willing to walk with him and to sit with him in his darkness, and to be able to offer consolation and comfort, I was being able to reveal to him the love of God, the love that says that you do not suffer alone, but I come alongside you and suffer with you.

This ministry that we perform as Christians with each other - it takes courage to be with the sick, the dying, and the poor in their weakness and in our powerlessness because often, we can't fix their problems or even answer their questions, but even though we can not solve all the world's problems, what we can do is be with people in their problems and questions and through our presence and solidarity be witness to the God that we trust is somewhere in that suffering.

I think this is what Jesus was trying to teach Peter and his disciples and how the abundance of their incredible catch of fish that morning represents what happens when we, as Christians cast our nets into the darkness of the water, and what comes out of it, is the abundance of God's generosity, of God's compassion, and God's mercy. This is, after all, what Jesus calls on his disciples, and on us to do, is to feed others, and to make that love of God known.

Jesus tells Peter that though you may be led to a place you sooner would not go, to not be afraid, to not be afraid of the darkness, because as the opening of John's gospel tells us: we have seen a great light shining in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome that light, and that light is the light of all people, the light that Jesus gives us, a light that informs everything we do in our ministry and in our lives. Jesus does not call Peter to be successful, he calls him to be faithful, and he calls him to follow me, trusting and knowing, that I am always with you, in light and darkness, and in life and death. This is our hope, this is our truth, this is our witness, and this is the good news. You are a light to this world; let it shine brightly, and let us show the abundant love of God to all who cross our paths. Amen.