

## Jesus and Peter – May 13

The images in today's reading again take us back into some of the earlier parts of John's gospel. Back in chapter 10 Jesus described himself as the good shepherd. The good shepherd cares for his sheep...feeds them...tends them...protects them from wolves and bandits.

Here, Jesus is turning over the role of Good Shepherd to Peter. Jesus will no longer be present to fulfill that role in the same physical way. He chooses Peter to take on that role. To be the shepherd who will lead the other disciples into the mission of the church.

Perhaps that was always the role Jesus had in mind for Peter. But as Jesus and the disciples are gathered around a charcoal fire on the beach, another image will come to mind...another charcoal fire.

In the courtyard of the high priest, people gathered around a charcoal fire as Jesus was on trial. Peter joined the group.

And around that charcoal fire, three times Peter was accused of being a disciple of Jesus. Three times Peter denied it.

Now, on the beach, that denial stands there between Peter and his calling. In Peter's mind, that denial stands between him and Jesus. The shame and guilt of that denial has not been forgotten by Peter.

Jesus doesn't accuse Peter. He doesn't ask him, Peter why did you deny me? Instead, three times, he asks Peter do you love me.

Each time Peter gets more upset. But those three times give Peter the chance to undo the harm his denial did. Not harm to Jesus...Jesus chose to go the way he did. But the harm that denial did to Peter.

This is Peter's rebirth. And that's what I mostly want to talk about this morning.

Back in chapter 3, in the dark of the night, the Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus, curious. He was drawn to Jesus, but not quite able to understand let alone believe. Jesus told him, Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above...or born again.

Peter is born again, right here by the shore of the Tiberius.

In faith terms, we often call this rebirth transformation. Transformation is what happens when there is a death and resurrection...it's all the deaths and resurrections that happen to us in the life of faith, long before the ultimate death and resurrection.

Transformation happens when something in us that keeps us from being who we were created to be dies and we are raised to be that person.

Transformation doesn't really change us into a completely new person. Transformation calls us back to who we really are. Transformation leads to a crumbling of all the things that make us not who we really are.

On that night of Jesus' arrest and trial, in that cold courtyard around a charcoal fire, Peter denied he was Jesus' disciple. His fear led him to deny who he really was. He'd been with Jesus for three years. He'd learned from Jesus, had his whole life shaped by Jesus.

But then, at the hour he most needed to be who he really was, he couldn't. Fear overwhelmed. Doubt crept in. And Peter denied, not just Jesus, but his own true nature.

Peter needed to be who he truly was to take on that role of good shepherd. Here by the sea, Jesus did that for Peter...three times, Peter could undo the harm his denial had done to him. It was painful. Being born again is almost always painful. It means leaving something behind that we cling to.

In Peter's case, he had to face his failure. He had to face his shame and his guilt. He had to face the fear that kept him from being who he really was.

And then he had to let it go. This is a three-fold forgiveness to counter his threefold denial, but it's much more than that. It's a rebirth. Peter is reborn as the disciple Jesus needs him to be...as the disciple Jesus knew him to be underneath the fear, shame, and guilt.

Our call is not to be someone other than who we are. God created us and Jesus calls us to be the very person God needs us to be to tend Christ's sheep in whatever way is ours to do.

But life has a way of presenting all sorts of challenges to us. Maybe we are traumatized by abuse or neglect. Maybe we've made mistakes we don't believe can be forgiven. Maybe we've been conditioned by our society to believe that we're not good enough. Or maybe we've been conditioned by society to believe that we are better than others. Maybe we have grand visions of what we're called to do, but instead God needs us to do the smaller more behind the scenes tasks of discipleship.

Maybe wealth has corrupted us. Maybe poverty has placed a stranglehold on us.

Over the years, layers of stuff get build up around who we really are...who God really needs us to be.

The role of faith is not to make us feel guilty about that. The role of faith is to breakdown those layers one at a time so that we can be reborn children of God...to be the disciples Jesus needs us to be.

And how does that happen?

Like Peter, it happens when we come face to face with Jesus. In meditation and prayer, in worship. Transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. And honestly, like Peter, it's through our failures that we are most likely to be transformed.

Father Richard Rohr talks about the two halves of life. Early in life, we are busy building that life. We get jobs and start careers...maybe start a family. We develop interests and hobbies...we work at being good at things.

But then the day comes when we run up against something that throws us for a loop. Something we can't control or make turn out the way we want it to. Something that makes us doubt who we thought we were. Something like failure or suffering. Only when we come face to face with that can the second half of life start. The half of life where we are more able to be the disciple Jesus needs us to be.

But it usually involves pain...pain like the pain Peter felt as Jesus repeatedly questioned him about his love. Pain that requires us to be honest with ourselves.

I don't know about other parents, but a little part of me believed if you did things right in the parenting business, your kids would not get into serious trouble. I read all kinds of things to help us Get It Right.

But then I came smack up against the reality that kids have minds and ideas of their own. And I came to the realization that I didn't have as much control as I thought I did. That realization was painful, but it's also what allowed for growth.

It's when we've failed...when we've let ourselves or someone we love down...that's when real growth can start. It's not an automatic. Denial, excuses, blaming someone else...all of those responses keep us stuck.

But when we come face to face with our failures, the part of us that was sure we could control everything...that we could handle everything by ourselves...the part of us that isn't totally sure we need Jesus...that part of us dies. In its place, humility and true self-giving love can grow.

Peter did go on to be the shepherd of this new thing Jesus started. His courage and ability to preach will be seen in the writings of the early church. He was able to overcome his fear.

According to ancient sources, Peter was crucified in Rome during Nero's persecution. When he was faced with danger then, he did not flee or deny. He did indeed become the shepherd Jesus needed him to be. The one who would lay down his own life.

God does not need you to be someone different than who you really are. You do not need to be reborn as someone different. God does need you to be present with the Holy Spirit within you, to be honest about the layers of shame, fear, denial, arrogance...all those things that keep you from being who you were created to be.

What Jesus did for Peter face to face, he will do for you through the Spirit. Jesus offers you that same rebirth, to be reborn a child of God and to be who you were created to be.