

Third Sunday of Easter – 2025

Acts 9:1-22

Revelation 5:1-14

John 21:1-19

Have you ever discovered that your allegiance to Christ isn't what you thought it was? Do you suppose that that is a tough lesson? Have you ever betrayed someone you loved? Oftentimes, people who are guilty of this try to spin it as the other person's fault. When we completely crater in regard to what is true and good and right, we are tempted to spin it as a reasonable decision to make because of extenuating circumstances. Peter couldn't do that. Do you believe that evading responsibility, evading owning up to your mistakes, has made you a better person? Do people tend to take notice when others, especially leaders, evade responsibility for their actions? Peter's conscience wouldn't allow it. It wasn't easy. Pitching himself into the Sea of Tiberias and swimming to the Lord on the shore wasn't easy. It's not the swimming part that I'm talking about. It's looking the Lord Jesus in the eye part, it's the coming clean about his denial of the One who died for him part that I'm talking about – it wasn't easy.

Let's rehearse the sequence of events leading up to this, being especially mindful of Peter's role in all of this, mindful of Peter's heart, his frame of mind, his emotional condition. With great bravado, Peter declares his allegiance to Christ. Bravado is defined as a bold or swaggering display of confidence, often intended to impress others. Jesus told His disciples, "'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.' Peter said to him, "'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you'" (John 13:36-37). Did Peter mean it? I suspect he did. Faced with what appears to be mild confrontations with people who have no power, Peter denies even knowing Jesus. Jesus told Peter beforehand that Peter would do it. The haunting replay of the Lord's words stuck in Peter like a knife. Do you know that pain? There was no way for an honest man to spin what had taken place. It hurt. The guilt that Peter carried hurt. Jesus sacrificed Himself for Peter. Great love was on that cross. And Peter denied Him.

Jesus' first resurrection appearance to the disciples in the Gospel of John doesn't mention any of this. Nor does the second. The first focuses on the institution of the Office of the Holy Ministry and the second focuses on Thomas. Peter was there. Both times, Peter was there. Imagine the wonder, the astonishment and shock and amazement and joy that saturated the disciples' minds on those occasions. Imagine them starting to piece together all the things that the Lord said regarding His sacrifice and His resurrection. And Peter is unresolved. He failed. There's no way to spin this, Peter failed and he's carrying it. "I'm going fishing" (John 21:3). So said Simon Peter. But earlier Peter had left his nets, remember? A great catch of fish; Jesus had orchestrated that initial miracle, and Peter's reaction was priceless. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). There's no bravado in those words. Jesus gave Peter a new vocation. "'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.' And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him" (Luke 5:10-11). Catching men; now Peter goes back to catching fish. "I'm going fishing" sounds defeatist to me. What is in Peter's mind? How do you feel when you sin? Do you hide, spiritually? Do you paper over your sin with distracting talk? Does that really work? Does self-medicating really work?

There's Jesus on the shore. He's always on the shore. For some reason, the disciples can't figure it out. Jesus has a few cheeky words. What's wrong, lads, don't you have any fish? That's a very loose paraphrase. "No" comes the reply (Jeepers, who is this guy?). Why not try the right side of the boat? This is not an aircraft carrier. Do you really think that it matters what side of the boat they toss the nets over? Notae Bene: The disciples never catch any fish in the Gospel narratives apart from Jesus' direction. But they follow directions. Still not knowing who that is on the shore, they follow directions. And bingo, jackpot, whoa Nellie – an enormous haul! John puts it together; John figures it out and specifically tells Peter: "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7). Stop right there. Peter hears it. Pained Peter hears that it is the Lord on the shore. Does he hide? That's certainly an option. It's a dishonest option, a cowardly option, a faithless option, but it is an option. What would your impulse be? It's going to be painful on the shore, but that's where he goes. Peter *threw* himself into the sea (John 21:7). No fish in the nets apart from Jesus putting them there. The fisher of men jumps and swims to see the One he had denied.

Soon this conversation unfolds: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:15ff.). Is there a purer question than that? Is there a more relevant question, a more penetrating question, a more diagnostic and illuminating and restorative question? "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" There's no bravado in the reply. Imagine Peter's posture, his head angle – is he looking at Jesus as he replies? Is his head down? Are his eyes nervous, darting, or are they honest? Peter is totally in Christ's hands and Peter knows it. Do you know that feeling? I have the very strong sense that Peter does *not* squirm. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Humility, self-awareness, faith, contrition, and truthfulness flow from Peter's mouth. "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you" (John 21:15ff.). Three times, the conclusion is the same: "Feed my lambs." The fisher of men is one who will feed Christ's flock. Peter is forgiven, restored, reinstated. But what's different? From the night of Peter's denial to the morning of his reinstatement – what's different? Peter has matured. Experience, pain, failure, restoration, grace, love, honesty – Peter matured. It's not Peter's personal strength; it is Christ who governs His church. It's not Peter's passion that builds Christ's kingdom; it is Christ's sacrifice alone, brought to us through Word and Sacrament, that builds Christ's kingdom.

Did Jesus stick the knife in and twist it by asking a third time: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" It's an obvious allusion to Peter's three-fold denial. Everyone knew it. When God shows you your sin, is He sticking a brutal knife in or is He attempting to heal a self-inflicted wound with which you have wounded yourself? How many of you enjoy having your sin shown to you? How many of you are mature enough to recognize that ultimately it is God who shows us our sin, oftentimes through those who love us? Peter became a leader, a true leader. How did he get there? By failure, by honesty regarding his failure, by boldness and faith and failure and restoration. Feed my sheep. Do you see the fish in the nets in this holy house. We are here because Christ puts fish in the nets. The net of the gospel is thrown out into the world and that Word does not return empty. Christ's love is gloriously revealed in that Word and it draws men to Him. A crucified Savior rules His church through His Word and that net has caught you and brought you into this blessed house. Here the faith of Christians is fed and fed well. His kingdom is enlarged, His people come to know that they have a gracious Lord, a forgiving Master, and we come to know that we are dearly loved sheep.

Each of us fails. No one here is pristine in thought, word, and deed. The mature are honest about that – with everyone. Christian bravado is not on our menu. Confession is on our menu. We don't know what was said when Peter arrived on the shore to see Jesus privately. You can bet that it was substantive. Peter wasn't hiding. We don't hide. We go to the people we have harmed and we look them in the eye and we ask for forgiveness. The mature do this. Christ's church is a place where sinners are forgiven. Christ's blood set us free from sin and death. What is on our menu? The Lord was host once again on the seashore after the disciples dragged in their mammoth catch. "Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them" (John 21:13). That's what's on our menu. The net of the gospel is bringing Christ's people into His church and they feast on the bread of life. It is on full display today. Paul and Morgan join their voices with us and say: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (Revelation 5:12). The sound of it has thundered through the centuries. The sound of it thunders now.