

Feed My Sheep

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Holy Trinity/La Santisima Trinidad/Good Shepherd

Acts 9:1-6(7-20), Rev. 5:11-14, John 21:1-19

4/17/10

In our Gospel reading, we hear that today's story is the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples. But it is actually the fourth time by my count – unless you don't count the appearance to Mary Magdalene. But Jesus did appear to Mary at the tomb, and that of course was the first resurrection appearance, although she did not recognize him at first. The second time was when Jesus appeared to the disciples while they were anxiously gathered together, locking their doors for fear of Jesus' persecutors. He showed them his wounded hands and feet, breathed the Holy Spirit on them and left. Thomas was not among the disciples then. The third time is our story of last week, when Thomas makes his huge leap from doubt to belief.

By the time of our story of today, even with these miraculous appearances, it seems that the disciples have gone back to doing what fisherman do. They fish – and not for people. The desolation of life without their beloved teacher was deepened by their utterly barren night of fishing.

Then, at dawn, the disciples, exhausted, discouraged, notice someone on the shore, apparently begging for food. Perhaps he was an old man, for he called them children. He apparently wanted to be fed. Just as Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener, the disciples mistook Jesus for just some guy on the beach. But they take his advice unquestioningly, and throw out the net, this time on the right side of the boat.

They then have a miraculous catch of fish and it is the beloved disciple who recognizes Jesus. Peter, buffoonish as ever, pulls on his clothes and plunges into the water. Why was he naked on the boat in the first place, and why did he put his clothes ON to jump into the water? This was just what Peter was like – always getting it backwards.

The disciples move in this story from utter emptiness and desolation to abundant fullness – they are fed the bread (and the fish) of life.

The story of Saul of Tarsus is an extreme example of someone moving from doubt to faith. In his case he moved from murder to evangelism. Saul, who was an energetic captor and persecutor of Christians, was literally on his way to Damascus to deliver letters to the synagogues requesting that they turn in the Jews who have begun to follow the Way, so that he might bring them bound to Jerusalem where they would be put to death.

But a brilliant, literally blinding light stops him in his tracks, and he hears a voice. Like Mary and like the disciples in today's story, he does not recognize Jesus. But Jesus tells him what to do and he blindly follows. He remains blind, experiencing physically what he had lived out spiritually, until Ananias lays hands on him, and invokes the name of Jesus. Saul, of course, became Paul, who spent his life helping everyone he encountered to recognize Jesus.

In our Gospel story, after Jesus has given communion to the disciples, he takes Peter aside. Knowing well Peter's short-comings, Jesus asks him not once but three times, do you love me? Perhaps it was a way of undoing Peter's betrayal, when three times, he professed that he did not know Jesus at all. Peter affirms, with growing upset, three times that yes, he does love Jesus.

And each time Peter affirms this love, the message that is given is “Feed my sheep.” We are given to understand that to love Jesus and to feed his sheep are one and the same thing. Jesus’ great commandment is repeated three times, lest we miss it – feed my sheep.

It is a comfort and a blessing to be reminded that it was Peter – Peter the betrayer, Peter the clumsy doubter, Peter the naked buffoon, to whom Jesus gives this command. It is Peter who is called the rock upon which Jesus will build his church. And Jesus finds a way for Peter to transcend his betrayal, gives him an opportunity to affirm his love, and even to feed his sheep. And even more amazingly, it is Saul, captor and murderer of the early struggling Christians, to whom Jesus appears. It is Saul who is gifted with the mission to carry the work to all corners of his world.

What a comfort to those of us who, although we may not be murderers, and although we may have slightly more grace than Peter, still may feel unworthy or unable to love as Jesus has commanded us. There is hope, it seems, even for the most unimaginable unlikely among us.

John’s gospel begins and ends with miracles of vast abundance in Galilee. And in each case the miracle is the occasion for an epiphany. The gospel begins with the miracle at Cana, where the vast abundance of wine is the first sign of the divinity of Jesus. And we end with the miraculous catch of fish, where Jesus reveals that he is the one who will feed us with incredible abundance.

But right in the middle of the gospel is the human miracle of vast generosity – the tremendous abundance of nard that Mary of Bethany pours on the feet of Jesus.

It seems that the only miracle we humans can attempt is to transcend our ever-present fears, and love abundantly, to feed each other abundantly. To transcend our fear of running out of wine, of giving too much away, of catching absolutely no fish, and to listen to Jesus' commandment. However many times we may have betrayed his teachings, however we may have murdered some of his children in our hearts, there is the possibility that even we can in fact love and feed each other abundantly. That we can fulfill this great commandment "Feed my sheep, feed my sheep, feed my sheep."