

Easter 3C - 2022 - First Communion

The breakfast on the beach, and the charcoal fire on which it is cooked, are only found in John's Gospel. And John is very specific. It's not just a fire, it is a charcoal fire. So what?

Well, there's another charcoal fire in the Gospel, just one, and it too is in John's Gospel, only three chapters before this. It's the charcoal fire that was burning in the courtyard of the High Priest where a hastily assembled court was meeting to try Jesus on trumped up charges. It's the fire that Peter was warming himself by when some other bystanders asked him three times "*Aren't you one of his followers? Aren't you from Galilee too?*". It's the fire he was standing by when, three times, he denied even knowing Jesus.

Dawn was breaking then too. The cock crow was the sound that brought Jesus' words back to Peter. "*Before the cock crows you will have denied me three times.*" (John 13.38) This was the moment of Peter's greatest shame, the moment he longed to forget, the moment when he suddenly saw his worst self.

We've all done things we bitterly regret, said things we can't unsay, things we'd like to consign to oblivion. All we want to do is forget them, and surely Peter did too. Maybe he thought he could. After all, Jesus had appeared several times to the disciples by this stage, and he'd had never mentioned it. Did Jesus even know what he'd done? But now here was another charcoal fire, and another dawn breaking. The echoes of that earlier story are unmistakable, and I am sure they are deliberate. Nothing is spelled out, but this is the moment of truth for Peter.

Jesus' question to him seems almost cruel. "*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*" Jesus asks him this, not once or twice but three times, just like that first threefold question he'd been asked by that first charcoal fire. But it was vital that Peter heard the answer coming out of his own mouth, just as he'd heard his earlier denial. "*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*" It was even more vital that he heard Jesus' response to him.

An 8th grade teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, I remarked to my principal, "You know what I have discovered about teaching? 50% of teaching is repeating directions." My principal shot right back, "What did you say?" I said, "50% of teaching is repeating directions." The laughter of other teachers helped me to get the joke, and I laughed with them.

Anyone working or living with children knows that messages, directions, orders, everything has to be repeated multiple times before anything seems to register. Has anyone ever taken out the garbage after being asked only once? How many of you children clean your rooms after one invitation?

How many of you write thank-you notes after only one entry in the "Things to Do" list you make up every day?

But instructions aren't the only things we need to hear more than once in order to take them to heart. In order to survive and thrive we all need to hear someone say to us, "I love you." And it needs to happen more than once a year.

For some of us who have weathered the hurts of broken relationships, saying, "I love you," for the first time again is one of the most frightening things we will ever do. (by David Beckett from *Just Say, 'I Love You'*)

One commentator on this passage, David Lose, said that Jesus' answer gave Peter the two things that he most needed, two things that everyone needs; a **sense of belonging and a sense of purpose.**

First Jesus restores his relationship with Peter. Without this painful conversation, Peter's failure would always have been an elephant in the room; he would never have felt that he fully belonged as a disciple. Perhaps, at best, he'd have felt tolerated, but that's not enough. A grudging welcome can feel worse than no welcome at all. **But Jesus makes it clear, both for Peter and for the rest of the disciples there; Peter belongs in the family of the Church.**

And more than that, Jesus gives him a job to do. "Feed my sheep" he says. Peter isn't just brought back into the fold; he's made its shepherd, a leader of the Christian community. You don't do that if you don't trust someone.