

Love without Limits
John 21:1-19
May 5, 2019 – Third Sunday of Easter

Last Sunday we heard about Jesus appearance to the disciples, and most especially we heard about Jesus establishing an “up close and personal” relationship with Thomas. And you may recall, Jesus final blessing, not just to Thomas but to each of us: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Today’s reading begins some time later.

As Chapter 21 opens, I get the feeling that the disciples are lost. Their leader whom they have been following for the past several months is gone; and they simply don’t know what to do with their lives. So Peter, not knowing what else to do, returns to the only life he knows. He says, “I’m going fishing,” and the others reply, “We’ll go with you.” Indeed, the plan of the disciples is to return to “business as usual,” business as it was before Jesus. So they put out in their boats and they fish all night, but they catch nothing.

Suddenly, just after daybreak, someone calls out from the shore, “Children, you haven’t caught anything, have you?” Do you sense a bit of rub-it-in sarcasm there. First the disciples are called “children,” and then there’s the nagging truth: “You haven’t caught anything.” The Gospel reports a one word answer from the disciples: “No!” Then comes the instruction to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, followed by the miraculous catch of fish, and the recognition that the person standing on the shore is Jesus. This is a revelation: “Jesus is still with us; it’s not like the old days; we’re not all alone in the boat or in the world.”

When they finally get to shore with their huge catch of fish, they find a cooking fire with fish and bread; and Jesus issues the most wonderful invitation: “Come and have breakfast.” You see it’s still about relationship. We all know that, to share a meal with someone is to be in special relationship, and this is even more true in the Jewish culture. When we seek to celebrate, there is food involved. When we seek to comfort, there is food involved. It’s cultural, almost archetypal to share food with those we care about. So Jesus issues the invitation: “Come have some fresh charbroiled fish and fresh baked bread. Come and have breakfast.”

Then, after breakfast, comes the charge. . . Jesus looks at Peter and essentially says, “Peter, this is not ‘business as usual.’” Thus Jesus asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Jesus asks this three times of Peter: and three times Peter responds, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Now there is a lot going on here. Many people have noted that on the night before the crucifixion, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times; and so, the three fold declaration of love is essentially an undoing of that denial. And there may be validity to that. But there’s something else going on; and it’s completely lost in the English translation.

I've told you before that the Greeks have multiple words that we usually translate as "love." All three times, when Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" he uses the word *agape* – the highest form of love - love without limits. And all three times, when Peter responds, he uses the word *philia* – brotherly love. So Jesus asks, "Peter, do you love me without limits?" and Peter responds, "I love you like a brother."

"But Peter, do you love me without limits?"

"Lord, I love you like a brother."

"But Peter, do you love me without limits?"

"Lord, you know I love you like a brother."

Now, brotherly love is strong; but it seems that Peter is not ready to make that total commitment, to put his whole self in, to actually say there is no limit to my love for you. I say, "not ready" because we know that Peter did eventually put all he had into following Christ. Indeed, as it's reported in the book of Acts, there was no limit to Peter's love of Christ. And, as our reading closes today, it seems that Jesus also knew that Peter would follow even unto death, for Peter would also eventually die on a cross.

Finally, this brings me to Peter's call. After each of the declarations of love, Jesus instructs Peter to "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep." And Jesus' final words to Peter: "Follow me." What's Jesus saying, "Peter, it is not business as usual. You're no longer a fisherman. Remember my initial call, 'Follow me and you will fish for people.'" Jesus is telling Peter that there is work to do, and he's not going to do it sitting in a boat out on the Sea of Galilee.

Friends, how often have I stated that the Gospels were not written for the disciples; and the Gospels were not written simply to record history. The Gospels were written for you and for me. And so today, I ask that you and I personally hear the invitation of Jesus, "Come and have breakfast. Come and partake in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. Come and share in the meal I have prepared for you."

But the call doesn't stop as we finish the meal; for Jesus asks each of us just as he asked Peter, "Do you love me, and do you love me without limits?" I doubt anyone here would say "No" to that. You would not be here if you did not love the Lord. But . . . Are you willing to love without limits; or are you, like Peter, responding with "I love you like a brother, but maybe I'm not quite ready to put my whole being into this thing." I confess that the Simon Peter in me is not sure about this limitless love "thing."

Retirement is now less than two months away, and so I question and I wonder how I will continue to serve the Lord after July 1st. How will I feed Christ's sheep? Oh I have ideas. Some of that service will be through the gift of music. Some will be through teaching; and some may be through writing. But

please don't hear that I'm stressing out over this. Those who know me well know that I'm a planner. I was once accused of trying to plan every minute of the rest of my life; and I was accused of that now almost thirty years ago, long before I entered ordained ministry. That being said, I know that God has a plan for me. I don't know where the Holy Spirit might lead me; but I have learned to trust in the Spirit, and to follow where the Spirit leads. I have also learned that there is great joy in the journey with the Spirit.

But enough about me. . . What about you? Jesus is inviting you to this meal. Jesus is asking you to feed his sheep. And Jesus is calling you to follow where he leads? Do you love him? Will you follow him?

Let us pray. . .

Lord, we love you.
So, lead us, Lord. Lead us in your righteousness.
Make your way plain before our faces,
and give us the strength, the courage, and the faith
to follow where you lead.
Amen.

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