

“Practicing Our Faith – Love”
John 21:1-19
May 1, 2022

Have you ever tried to give a big hug and kiss to your teenage son in front of his friends? If you have, your son may have responded with the words, “Mom! Dad! You’re embarrassing me!” Likewise, teenage girls – who are very conscious of their image – may respond in a similar fashion if parents say, “I love you!” in front of their friends. Many times teenagers feel they need to keep their distance from their parents, or they will be mocked and criticized by their peers.

On the night that Jesus was arrested and put on trial, Peter was standing outside of the building where the trial took place trying to warm himself by a fire with a group of servants. Three times Peter was asked by a servant, one of the most unintimidating individuals in the world, if he was a disciple of Jesus; and three times Peter denied it. Keep in mind that it was not a group of soldiers or people with weapons threatening Peter who were asking if he was one of Jesus’ disciples, it was simply some unimportant servants. Peter’s three denials suggested that he was embarrassed of his association with Jesus or feared suffering the mocking, criticisms, rejection, and even punishment by his peers for being one of Jesus’ disciples. In our own way, we, too, at times may have been embarrassed, slow, or afraid to admit before our friends and acquaintances outside of this church family that we are disciples of Jesus.

When teenagers keep their distance from their embarrassing parents, and at times deny them before their friends, a loving mom and caring dad will never turn away or disown their children, but rather they will absorb the hurt they may feel and put it aside, maybe remembering how they once treated their own parents when they were that age. Loving parents do everything they can to show their children how much they’re loved and give their children the opportunity to express their love for them in return.

In our Gospel lesson for today we see some of Jesus' disciples out doing some fishing. Jesus had already risen from the dead and had appeared to His disciples twice. Maybe not knowing exactly what to do now that Jesus was alive again and knowing how they had all abandoned Him when He was arrested, some of the disciples appeared to have gone back to their trades, doing what they knew best – fishing. But knowing that Jesus was alive, they had to be hurting. For 3 years they had been at Jesus' side, following Him wherever He went and doing what Jesus taught them to do. However, when Jesus was arrested they went into hiding for fear that they would be arrested as well. So would Jesus want them as His disciples again? Would He use them to do miraculous things in His name once again? Or would He look for others now that He had risen from the dead?

Peter really had to be hurting at this moment. He had boasted of a love so deep saying that if he were the only disciple left with Jesus, he would never abandon Him and would even die for Him. Then, the night that Jesus was arrested, Peter proceeded to deny Jesus 3 times – each successively more emphatic.

So when Jesus appears on the scene and provides a huge catch of fish for the disciples, after they had spent the entire evening fishing and had caught nothing; and then invites them to join Him for some breakfast, I'm sure Peter was wondering, "How can I face Jesus after failing Him?" How could he ever speak again about his commitment to Jesus and expect anyone to believe him? How could he possibly redeem himself?

Well, the fact is, Peter couldn't redeem himself, but Jesus could. The risen Lord could redeem him, forgive him, encourage him, and give him a new lease on life. The risen Lord comes looking for Peter in our text, knowing full well how Peter failed Him, but also knowing that Peter needs forgiveness, reassurance, and a new chance on life. And this is the good news of

Easter for all of us. For all of the times we have blown it, or failed someone, or made a poor decision, or turned away from Jesus and others who love us, Jesus – the God of second chances, always comes and seeks us out to restore us. In fact, in our Gospel lesson we get a glimpse of 3 powerful ways that Jesus meets us and provides for our deepest needs.

1) When we most need love, the risen Christ comes to love us. There's a story of a man who had a doctor's appointment at 8:00am one day and as he arrived for the appointment, he told the nurse that he had another important appointment at 9:00am and could not be late. When the doctor came in to see the man he said, "So I hear you have an important appointment this morning at 9:00am." The man replied, "Yes, I have the same appointment every day at 9:00am. Every day I go to a nursing home to have breakfast with my wife." The doctor said, "You're a great husband. I bet that's the highlight of her day." The man said, "I don't know, my wife doesn't even know who I am. She has had Alzheimer's disease for quite a while and hasn't recognized me in the last 5 years." The doctor was a little surprised saying, "And you still go every morning to see her, even though she doesn't know who you are?" The man smiled and said, "She doesn't know who I am, but I know who she is."

There's a word for that man's faithfulness – it's called love: unwavering, unshakeable, unconditional love. And that's the kind of love Jesus had for Peter. He knew how Peter must have felt, so He comes to give Peter the encouragement, affirmation, reassurance, and love that he needs. No "I told you so" lectures. No finger pointing – just words of love. Jesus makes it clear that He still loves Peter, trusts him, and believes in him when He tells him to "feed my sheep." Just as Jesus came to Peter that day with words and acts of love he so desperately needed, He also comes to us with the same unwavering, unshakeable, unconditional love. When we most need love, the risen Christ comes to love us.

2) When we most need forgiveness, Jesus comes to forgive us. Peter needed forgiveness and that is precisely what Jesus came to give him. Three times Jesus asks Peter: “Do you love me?” And Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, I love you – you know I love you.” “Then feed my sheep,” Jesus says to him. With this question of love and command to feed, Jesus is forgiving Peter, restoring Peter, and giving him a chance to profess his love to make up for his earlier 3-fold denial. What’s interesting is that once Peter has been forgiven, restored, and strengthened, the story ends exactly the way it started 3 years earlier with Jesus simply saying to Peter, “Follow me.” The first and the last thing Jesus said to Peter was that simple command: “Follow me.”

3) When we most need direction, the risen Christ comes to direct us. Peter and the other disciples had been waiting around after Jesus’ resurrection wondering, “What are we supposed to do now?” Then Jesus came to give them a new direction: “Feed my sheep,” meaning, go and be the Church for this needy world. Our world is starving to death for Jesus and our task is to share Him with others through our words and actions.

When I was in college, every year I would go to a friend’s home to celebrate Thanksgiving since it was too far for me to travel home for that short holiday. One year when we went to his church on Thanksgiving weekend, I met a man named “Brother Bob.” He was a big guy, in his middle 60s, he called everyone “brother” or “sister,” and he had an interesting way of greeting people. When my friend introduced me to him Bob said, “Brother Bill, it’s nice to meet you, let me give you a kiss.” And he gave me a big hug and kissed me on the cheek. Bob was greeting many people this way, which was certainly different from the way we greeted people at my home church, and when I asked my friend, who was smiling, knowing Bob would greet me this way, why Bob was so enthusiastic, greeting people with hugs and kisses, he said, “Bob had a rough life and did not believe in Jesus for most of his life. But when he became a Christian, he

was so thankful for what God had done for him that he wanted to hug and kiss God, but didn't know how. So he decided that the best way to hug and kiss God was to hug and kiss God's children; and the best way to love God was to love His children; and the best way to serve God was to serve His children." And that is precisely what Jesus was saying to Peter that day. "If you love me, then feed my sheep, take care of my flock. That's what I want you to do."

Even though we, like Peter, at times have been embarrassed, slow, or afraid to admit before others that we are disciples of Jesus, the Lord is never embarrassed of us and others whom He calls to follow Him. Rather, Jesus comes to us and restores us. He calls broken disciples to come to Him again and again to be filled with His Word so that we might go out into the world to bring His Word and His love to others so that all will know Jesus as their Savior.