

3rd Sunday of Easter - 2019

For me, one of the most interesting passages in Scripture is the one that ended last Sunday's reading:

St John writes, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name."

That's a good reminder that the Gospels are not chronicles or histories. They are not biographies of Jesus. They are documents that contain the oral tradition of the Gospel handed down from the first generation of disciples to following generations so that they may come to believe.

One thing that means is that the stories in the Gospels are not just records of what happened, but also guides from what was still happening, what is still happening.

The reason I say that is that today's Gospel is not just about Peter going fishing, but carries symbolic meaning for us, too, especially when we are tempted to "go fishing."

"Going fishing" could mean going back to the way things were before we heard the call to take our Christianity seriously, to be witnesses to God's action in the world. That can be tempting, especially in those circumstances when our witness does not impress, or even raises the hackles of those who are its recipients.

It can be pointed out to us that our witness is not very convincing, for example, or that we are being hypocritical, given the messiness our own lives are still mired in.

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“Going fishing” could also mean taking seriously the call to proclaim the Good News to all creation, and attempting to do so, forgetting that, in order to be successful, we have to follow the Lord’s lead and direction. Unless we maintain communion with him, the whole enterprise will come up empty.

Coming up empty is Peter’s experience, regardless of which of the two senses of “going fishing” we use.

Peter couldn’t just go back to his former way of life. Too much had happened, and besides that, Jesus was not going to let him off the hook. He came looking for him.

But even in the sense of trying to take seriously Jesus’ commission to proclaim the Good News, Peter needed further work. The “fishing” would not be successful if he tried to do it on his own.

But if he was going to take on his mission in communion with Jesus, there was that little detail of Peter’s denial that had to be addressed.

Jesus does not go into what happened. The charcoal fire, which paralleled the charcoal fire in the high priest’s courtyard on the night before Jesus died, says all that needs to be said about the context of the conversation.

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Jesus focuses on the relationship he and Peter have. Asking the question about Peter's love for Jesus three times is a way of overcoming the three denials, but they also point out the fundamental characteristic necessary for success in the Gospel mission: it has to be based in the love relationship between Jesus and his follower.

We can't produce results if that relationship has unfinished business that needs to be reconciled, or if we think we can do it on our own, or if we think "marching orders" are enough and there's no need to be "checking in" or maintaining our relationship with Jesus in an ongoing manner.

I think Peter gets it in today's Gospel. "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" can be read as Peter's acknowledgement that he has not always been a follower. He has too often wanted to take the lead, and that has gotten him into trouble and shame.

Jesus invites him back into the communion that has to be the foundation for all we do as Christians, pure and simple. Neither our success nor even our happiness can be found anywhere else.

In this time between Easter and Pentecost, we are reminded of that so that we can open ourselves to the Spirit of the Lord and deepen that communion between God and us.

Even if doing so leads where we would not go on our own, we can rest assured that the Lord remains with us always and that following him leads to life.