

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
May 5, 2019 – Third Sunday of Easter
John 21:1-19

Today's gospel reading has the disciples of Jesus doing what they did before they met Jesus a while back. Peter was a fisherman and although he (and others) has seen and followed Jesus, including all those events that led to his death, they were acting as if nothing significant had changed. Of course, they experienced the change in Jesus with his resurrection, but for them, it was all back to normal. For Peter, that meant getting back into his fishing boat and heading back on the water. Others joined him.

Apparently, Jesus saw a need for reminding them of their new role and responsibilities in continuing his work in establishing God's kingdom on earth. Like us at times, the disciples were perhaps unclear about their role. Or afraid to take it on. So, Jesus appeared to them after they were in the middle of a night of fishing where they experienced a common thing among those who fish - nothing! To capture their attention, Jesus gave them some advice and we know the rest of the story. One-hundred and fifty large fish were caught. Then he prepared breakfast for them using some of the fish they had caught.

After that he gave them a refresher course on the discipleship he wanted of them. Peter was his primary pupil. Jesus wanted them to do a different kind of fishing which included caring for sheep - but also done differently. They were given new marching orders. A new way of life. A new way of serving God's interests in the world.

While reflecting on this gospel, I was reminded on my own life's journey. As a preteen, I wanted to be a sport's announcer. I loved baseball, especially the teams nearby in Chicago. In high school I became interested in chemistry, so I altered my career interests. A little later I felt called to the seminary where I studied for a few years. Then I became quite interested in theology, earned a doctoral degree in that field and became a teacher. I added the role of a published writer after that. In all those changes I felt that God was giving me new direction. God's directions were not always obvious, but eventually I got the message. Not unlike the first disciples of Jesus. It took me a while to figure things out.

I think that's true for most of us. We begin one thing and then something different comes along. We think about possible changes, pray about them, and sometimes change the direction of our lives. Rarely are these moments of transition clear in the beginning. It seems from today's gospel narrative that even the closest followers of Jesus were also unsure of what was being asked of them. As we are at times. Don't worry. God understands and is patient with us. And be open to unexpected surprises.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
May 12, 2019 – Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10:27-30

To his contemporaries, Jesus appeared as an ordinary man. Historians note that people in those days were a bit shorter than we are now. They suggest he might have been just a shade over five feet tall. Being middle-eastern, he would have had dark hair and skin. Beyond that, there is not much else we can say about his looks. But we can say a lot about his identity. And some of what we can say is found in this Sunday's very brief gospel. Especially since it ends with Jesus saying that "the Father and I are one."

When Jesus speaks of his father, he is referring to God. It is important to know that the word he uses to address God is "Abba." It is a word drawn from family life and as many know, it can be roughly translated as "Dad." It is an address of familiarity, closeness and, of course, love. Jesus is the first to address God in this unique way. Using that "name" for God would have been shocking to some. It might seem to lack a certain respect or reverence for the divine. Too much familiarity, even casualness.

As the early church thought about this, it eventually began to think of Jesus being divine. Especially as the meaning of his resurrection penetrated the church's thinking about Jesus. It took the Church hundreds of years to create language that was believed to more adequately capture the full humanity and the full divinity of Jesus. Passages like the one in today's gospel played a major role in this coming to a fuller understanding of Jesus.

As we reflect on God today, a helpful way to derive a fuller understanding of God is to look directly at Jesus as he is described in the gospels. This is because when God wanted to communicate to us the deep identity of God, God became human, just like us except sin. We can know what God is like because we see God in and through the person of Jesus.

While we believe in the trinitarian nature of God, we must also recall that there are not three Gods, but one. This is a deep mystery of our Christian faith, but it is not one without offering to us a limited (and true) understanding of God. The best access to that understanding is to try and understand as much as we can about who Jesus was. How did he relate to those he met each day? How did he deal with those who were sick, weak, poor or wrapped in sorrow? How did he deal with abuse of authority? How did he relate to women and children? These are important matters for serious meditation because they tell us exactly how God relates to us. And how much God loves each of us.

David M Thomas, PhD

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May 19, 2019 – Fifth Sunday of Easter
John 13:31-35

A Commandment Quiz: How many commandments did God give to us though Moses? This is not hard to answer, especially if you are a movie buff because a movie was made many years back about this. Ten commandments, of course. Now to advance to the next level of our quiz, you must answer the following question: How many commandments did Jesus give us? Hint. The answer is found in today's gospel. He called it "a new commandment." And it turns out that it is the hardest commandment of all to follow.

Jesus said that we are to love each other as he loves us. And how much does he love us? To put it in simple (yet very challenging) words, he gave his life for us. He lived in service to us. And not just to some of us, but to all of us. His love was without limit. One way to describe his love was to call it "unconditional." And it is that same kind of love that Jesus invites us to have for each other.

It is interesting that there is no mention of "loving God" in his commandment. That's because the way we show our love for God the most is when we love our neighbor. In formulating this commandment, no one can say that Jesus is soft. Or that his demands are minimal. In fact, if you understand the nature of neighbor love through the actions of Jesus, you get a sense of how difficult this is. When encountering need in anyone, he responded with a full and generous heart.

On one occasion, he was asked to describe "neighbour love" as he understood it. He proceeded to tell the story of the Good Samaritan, perhaps the most challenging story of assisting one's neighbour in all the gospels.

In his time, Samaritans were Jews who have "left the fold" of good Jews. Many had married those outside the Jewish religion, and they refused to worship where good Jews did, namely at the temple in Jerusalem. They had established a kind of rival religion. It was customary for Jews to stay clear of Samaritans.

So, in placing a Samaritan as an ideal when describing "love of neighbor," Jesus would have caused no small reaction from for his listeners. The goodness of this "outsider" takes on almost heroic dimensions when he does all he can do to help the poor fellow who had been beaten and robbed on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. This was an example of exceedingly generous love. Just like Jesus would have done.

David M. Thomas, PhD

The Nazareth Page
A gospel meditation for your home
May 26, 2019 – Sixth Sunday of Easter
John 14:23-29

Parents know that one of the greatest fears of young children is that of being "left alone." But that's not just true of the young. Fear of being all alone haunts everyone at times. To be without help when we need it, to be forgotten by family and friends, to be all alone in a strange place is not only scary, it can be a cause for great concern. Products are now available especially to the elderly which create a call for help when no one is around. That's important.

And Jesus knew about this fear and that's why he assured his followers toward the end of his life that he would never leave them alone. After his resurrection he would return and enter their presence with God's Holy Spirit. And while we may forget about God's continuous presence with us and in us, it's not because God in Christ is gone. Rather, it's because we forget about God. In that sense, we leave God.

One of the biggest dangers in our spiritual lives is that we become overly preoccupied with what's outside us and not attentive nearly enough to what, or better, who is inside us. We are sometimes described as being more interested in the world around us than what's within us. Most religions, especially our own, place great value in meditation and quiet prayer because that helps awaken us to a reality that is with us all the time, God's loving presence within us.

Much is written today about the many distractions that assail us throughout the day. For example, many carry their phones with them wherever they go. They don't want to be "out of touch" with others who might call us or text us. This is not a bad thing in itself, but if the outside world totally captures our attention, we will miss the quiet word that God speaks to us each day.

Suppose God wants to communicate with us or just remind us that God is there immediately in our presence. If we are not aware or attentive to the ways God can communicate with us - like in conscious thought about God, or feelings caused by God - well, we will unlikely connect with the Spirit of God who is ALWAYS with us.

In today's gospel Jesus promises us that God will always be with you and me. Awareness of that presence can bring interior peace, which is so important for a good life. We are told not to be "troubled or afraid." This is a message for both the young and the old, and all those in between.

David M. Thomas, PhD