

Easter 3C 2019, May 5, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Jesus doesn't appear too often after his resurrection. Just a few brief encounters are mentioned in the Bible. Last week we heard Jesus appear to skeptical Thomas. This morning Jesus cooks breakfast for a group of his disciples. They had returned to the only life they really knew before they met Jesus; professional fishermen on the Sea of Galilee, or the Sea of Tiberius as it was also known. Had they forgotten how to fish in those years following Jesus? They weren't very successful on that night fishing, until Jesus showed up.

Besides Jesus the central figure in the story is Peter. Impetuous Peter, always jumping in before thinking. Maybe Peter retreated to fishing because that's what he knew how to do. Maybe that's what you do when you are ashamed. When you've gone against your own principles, when you've offended or hurt someone. You return to what you know. Try to find some semblance of normalcy. Could that have been the burden Peter was carrying around? After all, three times he denied Jesus. I never really caught this before, but John the gospel writer portrays Peter's denial differently than the other gospels. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Peter denies knowing Jesus. But in John's gospel Peter is asked if he is also one of Jesus' disciples. Three times Peter emphatically declares, "I am not." "I am not a follower."

Peter's denial is a denial of himself. Jesus called him to be a follower. And Peter answered that call. He left his nets and his boat behind and he strapped on his sandals and started walking. Walking with the one he believed was God's own Messiah. He sat at his feet and listened, he witnessed the miracles and signs performed by Jesus. But when it came to those final few steps, he would not follow. "Surely you are one of his disciples, aren't you?" "I am not; I don't know what you are talking about." Peter denies who he was becoming; how his life was being transformed. Peter seems to retreat from the world and go back to what he knows. That's what people do when they are ashamed of who they have become and what they have done.

But notice something important here. It's not Jesus who is shaming Peter. It's not God wagging a finger at Peter or accusing him of falling way short as a disciple. If Peter is retreating, it's on him.

We may see this episode as a three-fold forgiveness of Peter after his three-fold denial of being a follower of Jesus. And there is a certain literary symmetry to the story. Peter's denial takes place around a charcoal fire. Peter's restoration takes place around a charcoal fire. The forgiveness that Peter experiences is not one of words. We don't hear Jesus say, "I forgive you Peter." Rather, what we do hear are these three questions, "Peter do you love me?" Combined with the directive, "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." Jesus forgives Peter by restoring him to himself and his identity.

Prior to meeting Jesus Peter was a fisherman. It was his livelihood. His vocation. If someone asked him, "Who are you Peter?" He would most likely answer, "I'm a fisherman." He perceived his identity, who he was, wrapped up in what he did. Then he met Jesus. Jesus called him to become a disciple. And Peter answered that call. Along the way he might have begun to notice a change in himself. Asked now who he was he didn't answer, "I'm a fisherman," but rather "I'm a follower of Jesus." His identity was starting to get wrapped up in his calling. Until that fateful night. When he just couldn't take that final step. When he was fearful for his own life. And he denied himself. He denied his calling. He denied his identity as a follower of Jesus.

What do we perceive as our first identity? Do we see ourselves identified primarily by what we do? How we make a living; what we went to school for? Or is our identity wrapped up in our social or familial relationships; being a husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter? The truth is we might see any or all of these as being the identifiers of our lives. We can be simultaneously a spouse, a sibling, and a professional in our field. So where does your calling as a follower of Jesus fall among the many different identifiers you use when you think of yourself? Is it first? Somewhere in the middle? Last?

When everyone around you identifies themselves as a follower of Jesus it's relatively easy to admit that you're one too. Such was our American culture a generation or two ago. But today, find yourself standing around a charcoal fire surrounded by hostile onlookers eager to ridicule, or do even worse, to a disciple and suddenly you may be just like Peter and say, "Nope. Not me. Never followed him. Hardly know him."

I believe it's the case; I know it is for me, that we deny our identity as a follower of Jesus in lots of different ways in lots of different daily circumstances. It may be out of fear of losing a place in society, or simply following a rule that one doesn't share personal religious belief. We deny our identity because we believe we will not be liked for who we truly are, or loved for who we are. Or simply because we do not want to disappoint someone. So we play it safe. We guard our deepest truth about ourselves.

The truth is Jesus needed Peter. Jesus could not abandon Peter in his retreat from himself, his retreat back to his fishing. So Jesus built his own charcoal fire and invited Peter back to himself, back to his identity as a follower. He says to Peter by this act, "I believe in you. I know who you are and I love you. You are the disciple I need you to be and I trust you."

In the same way Jesus invites us again to this meal, where he feeds us and declares to us, "I love you. I believe in you. You are the disciple I need you to be." Amen.