

BREAKFAST ON THE BEACH

In the summer of 1992, I taught the scriptures at several churches in Bulgaria. After one of the gatherings a woman approached me with a troubled look on her face. She told me she had broken a promise to God. She couldn't bring herself to tell me what it was. She was wondering. "Do you think God could forgive me?" she asked.

I began to respond to her. "Do you remember Peter?" I asked her. At that, before I could say another word, she interrupted me by grabbing my arm. She froze, and looked at me with the astonished joy of someone who had just been reprieved from a death sentence. I didn't say another word, and neither did she. She remembered the story of Peter, and that's all she needed to do.

Such is the power of Peter's story. It is a story for those of us who may have messed things up a bit. In it, we find that Jesus turns our places of failure into places of restoration. The narrative has two parts. The first part, John 21:1-14, addresses the question of whether Jesus loves Peter. The second part, John 21:15-23, addresses the question of whether Peter loves Jesus. Does Jesus love you? Do you love Jesus?

Breaking bread in a broken place

John 21:1-14:

Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you have just caught." Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

The scene of the gospel has shifted from Jerusalem to the Sea of Tiberias, more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee — the place where Jesus first gathered his disciples. Seven disciples are together. Three are named: Peter, the failure; Thomas, the doubter at the end; and Nathanael, the doubter at the beginning. Nathanael and Thomas

each moved through their doubt and arrived at amazing professions of faith. The loose ends have been tied up for them. For Peter, the threads are dangling in his mind. Just as Jesus appeared to all the disciples but came specifically for Thomas, the text leaves the impression that in this appearance, he's coming specifically for Peter. Jesus is going to enter Peter's world and remake it. To do so, he appears to Peter in the place where they first met, the Sea of Galilee. Although they never leave Galilee in this encounter, Jesus takes Peter on a journey through their history together.

Peter announces his intention to fish. The others join Peter. The group fished through the night, the best time for fishing. Although conditions seemed favorable for catching fish, Peter, even with the help of his friends, still caught nothing. He tried, but he failed.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, Peter tried, and he failed. He had told Jesus, "I will lay down my life for you." When Jesus was arrested, Peter disowned him. Failure is starting to become a pattern.

The Lord Jesus inserts himself into this scene. Early in the morning, while the disciples are still on the lake, Jesus stands on the beach. Just like Mary Magdalene, they don't recognize him. It may still be dark, just as it was when Mary came to the tomb in the early morning.

Literally, Jesus calls the disciples "children" — an affectionate term that also conveys the sense of undeveloped understanding. Jesus cares for and instructs Peter and the disciples as a father cares for and instructs his children. He asks them if they've caught any fish, and they answer "no." He then instructs them, literally, to "cast" the net on the right side of the boat in order to find a catch. Jesus used the same word when he invited Thomas to "put" (literally, "cast") his hand into the side of Jesus (John 20:27). That was the moment of enlightenment for Thomas. The moment of enlightenment for Peter awaits. The disciples cast, and they find a huge catch.

John, one of the sons of Zebedee in this scene, calling himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved," recognizes Jesus, perhaps because the amazing catch of fish recalls the time that Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish (John 6:4-14). When John was paired with Peter at the tomb, he was the first to believe in the resurrection. Paired with Peter again, he says to him, "It is the Lord." John seems to be quicker to believe, Peter quicker to act. Peter entered the tomb before John; now Peter enters the lake. Jesus had told the disciples, literally, to "cast" the net in order to "find" a catch. Thomas "cast" his hand into the side of Jesus, and he found Jesus in a new way. Peter, literally, "cast" himself into the sea to find Jesus.

John the author says the disciples see, literally, a "charcoal fire." Why would he be so specific in defining what they see? What does a charcoal fire have to do with this scene? John used this word in one other scene in his gospel. When Peter disowned Jesus, Peter was standing near a "charcoal fire" (John 18:18). For Peter, the charcoal fire marked the scene of his failure. Now Jesus is cooking Peter's breakfast over a charcoal fire. Fish and bread are waiting for him. The scene is evocative of the feeding of the 5,000. This time, the disciples are to bring their own contribution, adding the fish they've caught to the fish Jesus has prepared. The number of the fish, 153, is mentioned to not only authenticate the story but to point out the improbability of a net holding such a number of fish without being torn.

Jesus then extends an invitation to his children: "Come and have breakfast." This is a reminder of past meals they've shared together, which have been partial fulfillments of the predicted messianic feast (Isaiah 25:6), the complete fulfillment of which awaits

the “wedding of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:7). By now, with all these “deja vu” experiences, all the disciples know it’s the Lord who is extending this invitation.

John the author captures more echoes of the feeding of the 5,000 in his description of what takes place next. He says, “Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.” John 6:11 reads, “Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.” The feeding of the 5,000 is replayed for the seven — and for the one: Peter.

John the author says this is the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection. He appeared to the disciples first when Thomas wasn’t there and second when Thomas was present. The number “three” will play a key role as the rest of the story unfolds.

Peter’s failure to catch any fish is reminiscent of his failure to live up to his pledged willingness to lay down his life for Jesus. Then the charcoal fire takes him right back to the scene of his failure. Jesus turns both failures upside down.

He turns a catch of zero fish into a catch of 153. On his own, Peter caught “nothing.” This takes Peter back to Jesus’ farewell discourse, where Jesus told him and the other disciples, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Apart from Jesus, Peter caught nothing. With Jesus calling the shots from the shore, Peter caught a miracle.

Jesus turns the burning agony of failure into the warm glow of fellowship. The place that Peter failed — the charcoal fire — is the place where Jesus nourishes Peter. John the author leaves no doubt that Peter is feeding on more than bread and fish. John has already told us that Jesus, in the wake of the feeding of the 5,000, said, “I am the bread of life” (John 5:48). Peter is feeding on fellowship with Jesus in the same place, metaphorically, that he failed Jesus. The place of Peter’s brokenness is the place where Jesus breaks bread with him. Jesus goes to the place of Peter’s failure and shares a meal with him there.

Jesus picks up these two strands from Peter’s past — the miracle and the failure — and weaves them together into Peter’s present. The miracle is for Peter, too. He too is to feed on the Bread of Life. To assure Peter that his failure doesn’t disqualify him from partaking of the feast, Jesus feeds him from the place of his failure.

Have you ever felt as if Jesus were taking you on a journey through your past? Has the current episode that you’re living caused you to remember similar episodes in the past? Jesus picks up strands from our past and weaves them into the present in order to show us something. Often, it’s to show us something about the failures that haunt us.

Is there a charcoal fire in your life? Are there things you’ve done that you shouldn’t have done? Are there things you haven’t done that you should have done? Is there a troubling habit that you can’t seem to shake? Do you feel that you’ve let Jesus down? Does it seem that you can’t go on for very long without failing again, or without seeing something like a charcoal fire that reminds you of a past failure?

Jesus wants to go to that place of failure with you. In fact, he’s waiting for you there. He’s waiting for you to cast yourself toward him and join him on the beach. He doesn’t want to beat you up with your failure. He doesn’t want to lecture you. He doesn’t want to say “I told you so.” He just wants to share a meal with you. He wants to break bread with you in the place that you’re broken. There, at the place of your failure, Jesus offers you the Bread of Life. He offers you himself. His body was broken for such a

moment as this. In partaking of him, you feast on love and forgiveness and fellowship. The “charcoal fire” no longer burns your conscience with memories of failure but instead warms your heart with the tenderness of Jesus.

Brennan Manning, struggling with his own sense of failure, recalls a Good Friday when he was praying at 2 a.m. and in faith he heard Jesus tell him: “I expect more failure than you expect from yourself.”¹ Jesus expected Peter’s failure. He predicted it. He expects more failure from us than we expect from ourselves.

In this scene, Jesus has tied down one of the dangling loose ends in Peter’s mind. Yes, Jesus loves Peter. For Peter, there is still one more loose end to tie down: Does he love Jesus?

A different kind of hero

John 21:15-23:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!” Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”

Jesus now essentially asks Peter the same question three times. Peter essentially answers it the same way three times. Jesus then follows Peter’s answer with essentially the same exhortation three times. The question concerns whether Peter loves Jesus. The answer is yes. The exhortation is to care for Jesus’ sheep. (Two different Greek words are used for “love.” John is fond of synonyms, so different meanings should not be assigned to the different words. In this passage, he depicts Jesus as using two different words for shepherding, two different words for the flock and two different words for “know.”)

Verse 15 literally begins with the word “therefore.” What follows, then, is based on the statement in verse 14 noting that Jesus had appeared to the disciples for a third time. Jesus, having appeared to his disciples three times, now asks Peter the same question three times.

Jesus calls his disciple “Simon son of John” instead of “Simon Peter.” The name Peter means “rock.” Peter hasn’t been much of a rock lately. Jesus comes to reshape the rock.

The first time Jesus asks the question, he asks Peter if he loves him “more than these” — whether Peter loves Jesus more than the other disciples love Jesus. Peter, thinking that his love excelled that of the other disciples, had boasted that he would lay down his life for Jesus (John 13:37). Now he gets the point. He’s not interested anymore in measuring his devotion against anyone else’s. He simply says, “Lord, you know that I love you.”

Peter is hurt, wondering why Jesus questions his love three times, and finally responds, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Peter doesn’t just say that he loves Jesus. He says that Jesus knows that he loves him and finally bases his assertion on his belief that Jesus knows everything. Jesus, the one who knows everything, never disagrees with Peter’s assertion. In fact, he asks Peter to shepherd his sheep. He wouldn’t ask someone who didn’t love him to shepherd his sheep. By asking the question repeatedly, by never disagreeing with Peter’s answer and by asking him to shepherd his sheep, Jesus is leading Peter, the one who faltered, to the place where *he* knows that he loves his Lord.

The questions prompt Peter to tell Jesus that he loves him three times. When Peter boasted that he would lay down his life for Jesus, Jesus told him, “Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows you will disown me three times” (John 13:38). After Peter denied knowing Jesus for a third time, “at that moment a rooster began to crow” (John 18:27). How many times did Peter disown Jesus? Three. How many times does he tell Jesus that he loves him? Three. In a stroke of touching poetry, Jesus restores Peter. In this heartbreaking and heart-mending scene, Peter is face to face with Jesus, knowing that he has failed Jesus, but knowing just as well that Jesus has forgiven him and loves him still. And by the end of this scene, Peter knows that he loves Jesus.

If you know that Jesus loves you, do you know that you love Jesus? How do you know that you know? In light of our failures, many of us question whether we love Jesus. Then we try to prove to ourselves that we love Jesus by filling our lives with supposedly spiritual activity. Here’s a better way to address the question:

Picture the charcoal fire, the place of your failure. Picture Jesus meeting you there, nourishing you with love and forgiveness. What are you feeling? Now picture him asking you, “Friend, do you love me?” If anything within you responds to this scene, the answer is probably, yes, you love Jesus.

When Jesus confronts Peter, he is not asking the question to someone who doesn’t love Jesus. If it’s important enough for you to ask the question, the answer is probably self-evident. Yes, you love Jesus. Jesus didn’t need to ask Peter three times whether he loved him. Peter needed Jesus to ask him. If the question keeps appearing in your mind, it probably means you know the answer and that Jesus will take you to the place where you know that you love him.

What should Peter, secure in Jesus’ love for him and in his love for Jesus, do now? “Feed my lambs.” “Take care of my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.” The image of a shepherd was applied to the leaders of Israel. Moses and David, the two most prominent leaders in Israel’s history, were both shepherds. God bemoaned the shepherds of Israel, who failed the people (Ezekiel 34). Then Jesus arrived and said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). Now he arrives in Peter’s life and turns him into a shepherd — a good shepherd.

A good shepherd loves Jesus and does his work because he loves Jesus. Peter loves Jesus. Now he knows he loves Jesus, and now he knows what he has to do: lovingly

lead the people of Jesus. Jesus, even now, is shepherding Peter, and showing Peter how to be a shepherd. Jesus is feeding him fellowship, love and forgiveness. Peter has feasted on the Bread of Life around the charcoal fire that has now become the place of restoration. Peter, motivated by Jesus' love for him, will now respond to Jesus' call.

Not only that, he'll also turn others into shepherds. Listen to what he says to elders at churches in Asia: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Peter 5:2-4). Where do you think he learned that? He learned it from one who served him breakfast on the beach.

How is Peter to shepherd the sheep? He is to do it the same way Jesus did it. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Like his Master, Peter will die for the sheep. Jesus uses the illustration of putting on clothes to show Peter how he is to shepherd the sheep. He used to dress himself and go where he wanted, but when he grows old, someone else will stretch out his hands and put them in handcuffs or chains; someone else will dress him and take him where he doesn't want to go. The illustration points out the "kind of death by which Peter would glorify God." (The word "want" is also used to convey what Jesus wants of another disciple in verses 22 and 23.) Someone else will take Peter where he doesn't want to go but where Jesus does want him to go.

When he was younger, Peter was willing to die for Jesus, but not like this. He said he would lay down his life for Jesus, and he meant it. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the authorities came to arrest Jesus, Peter drew a sword and struck the high priest. By all appearances, he was ready to continue his rampage, but Jesus stopped him (John 18:10-11). A death like that in the garden would not be a death that would glorify God.

Jesus has an entirely different kind of death in mind — one that is brought about because Peter loves people so much. Then when they finally come for him, he is to do what the good shepherd did when they came for him: put down the sword, turn the other cheek, take up his cross. He is to do what he eventually would tell others to do: "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:19-23).

Jesus then simply tells Peter, "Follow me." Just before Peter asserted his willingness to die for Jesus, Jesus told him, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later" (John 13:37). Peter couldn't follow then, because he thought following meant taking up the sword. Now he knows that following means putting away the sword, receiving insults without retaliating, suffering without making threats. The kingdom of God will not be ushered in by the power of the sword but by the power of love. Instead of being a soldier who would take lives for the kingdom, Peter will be a shepherd who will lay down his own life for the sheep. Now Peter will follow Jesus, just as Jesus had said he would. For Peter, following Jesus means that he will be a shepherd who loves the Lord's people so much that he will suffer and lay down his life for them.

Jesus and Peter must have gotten up after eating and gone for a walk. Peter then turns and notices John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, following Jesus. In view of the way Jesus answers Peter's question, it seems that Peter is wondering whether John will suffer similarly. Jesus says, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" Jesus says John's fate is not Peter's concern. The text says the other disciple was loving and following Jesus — what Jesus had asked Peter to do. Jesus has his plans for what that will mean in John's life. They may or may not involve similar suffering. If Peter begins comparing his fate to that of other disciples, his focus will be off what Jesus has called him to do. Jesus again tells Peter, "You must follow me."

Reflecting on this passage, N.T. Wright envisions Jesus telling this to Peter: "I want you to be you, because I love you and I have redeemed you; and I want you to work for me, because out there there are people that I love, and I want you to be my word-become-flesh, my love sitting with them, praying with them, crying with them, celebrating with them. And how can you do it? By coming the way I came. You'll have to suffer a lot, because you will have to share the pain of the world if the world is to be healed through you, through me-in-you. You'll have to learn to listen to the pain of the world, to hear its silent crying as well as its strident and angry crying, and it will break your heart day by day as it broke mine. But I have sheep out there, and they need feeding, Peter, and I want you to do it for me. And don't worry about knowing how to go about it. All you have to do is follow me."²

There are people out there whom Jesus loves. Jesus wants us to be shepherds — to love people the way he did, the way Peter did, to sit with them, pray with them, cry with them, celebrate with them and to feel the pain of the world. He is calling the Peters of every generation who may have had the wrong idea about things, who may have botched things up a bit but who still cast themselves toward Jesus to be nourished by his love.

When you were younger, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted. You were going to be a hero, but you ended up like Peter — "Peter, who was going to be the great hero waving his sword around like a blundering idiot in the garden, then lying and swearing because of a question from a servant girl."³ Will you let Jesus into the place of failure, guilt and brokenness? Will you let him love you there? Will you be convinced, though your love for him isn't perfect, that you love him still? Will you be a shepherd? Will you lay down your life for the sheep? Will you follow him? Now that you're older, will you let someone else dress you and take you where you do not want to go? Will you do it for Jesus? Don't worry about what everyone else is doing, whether they're following Jesus, how they're following Jesus. Follow him.

Have some breakfast

John has shown us that in the resurrection of Jesus, a new creation has dawned, with Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples on the first day of the week just as God breathed life into the first man. Peter, though, has been living in the darkness of the old creation, unsure of what everything means.

It is a new day. It is time to forget about broken promises and crowing roosters and the betrayals of the night. Dawn is breaking, and Jesus is standing on the shore. The charcoal fire is burning, and the fish have been laid on it. The bread is ready. The table is set. "Come and have breakfast."

Questions

1. Are there any failures in your life that continue to haunt you? If so, what are they?
2. Envision Jesus sharing a meal with you, along with love and forgiveness, in the place of your failure.
3. Describe your doubts about your love for Jesus and how this story addresses them.
4. How do you think that you could be a shepherd?
5. How does the story of Peter encourage and/or challenge you?

¹ Brennan Manning, "The signature of Jesus," © 1992 by Brennan Manning. Multnomah Press, Portland, Ore. P. 172.

² N.T. Wright, "The crown and the fire," © 1992 by N.T. Wright. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich. P. 66-67.

³ Wright, P. 66.