

Third Sunday of Easter

ATTENDING TO THE GOSPEL'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS

John 21:1-19

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 3Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 6He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. 7That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. 8But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. 9When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the

disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. 13Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. 18Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." 19(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

DIAGNOSIS: Exposing the "Fishlessness" of Business as Usual

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *"I'm Going Fishing"*

In John's ongoing telling of the Gospel, two weeks have now passed since the Sunday of the Resurrection, including two appearances of the living Christ to his disciples (John 20:19, 26). That horrible Friday with all its commotions, its treasons, its denials, is a thing of the past. Or is it? It is true that

Peter and the other disciples have seen the Lord alive. Indeed, even we who read these texts from John see him alive: not with our eyes, of course, but our ears, through witnesses (John 20:28). Still, the disciples have no clear sense of what exactly that means for their everyday lives. Do we? So they do the only thing they can do. "I'm going fishing," says Peter, and "we will go with you," says all the rest. In other words, they continue on in their mundane lives as usual. Moreover, as they/we continue on, they/we continue to experience the world exactly as it had been always been: laden with the commotion of Friday and all that made that commotion in the first place.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Fishing by Night*

As Peter and the disciples go back to business as usual, they are going back also into the night to live and fish. "The night" is a powerful symbol in John's gospel, as it is also in the Synoptics. (Recall how Nicodemus comes to Jesus "by night," clueless, unenlightened about Jesus and the Kingdom he brings; see John 3:2) Stated in existential terms, the "night" means being in the dark, unaware, unenlightened, ignorant about ourselves and the distorted, human condition in which we live and work. Stated in spiritual terms, it means also being in a state of denial of that condition, that is, of sin. Moreover, since that condition was woefully exposed in the night Jesus was betrayed (exposed specifically in Peter and implicitly in all of us), to deny the human condition is to deny Jesus and what he did on that night. It is an expression of faithlessness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *They Caught Nothing*

Every once in a while a voice will pierce the darkness and the denial, and expose the God-awful truth hidden by the night. When this happens, the voice from the shore exposed with unmistakable clarity the futility of the disciples' (and our) business-as-usual existence: "Children, you have no fish, have you?" The words are simple and direct in their honesty. Moreover, the

answer is undeniable. “No,” answered the disciples. Denial, the last refuge of the hopeless, is now illusory. Here, at this moment of judgment, the futility, the fishlessness, the fruitlessness, the faithlessness, of business as usual is exposed. And it “hurts” when it happens (v. 17). They, who have been denying their sin, now (in very concrete terms) must confess that God’s blessing is being denied them. Business as usual, which is business lived in the night, is business under the judgment of God and the sentence of death (cf. John 3:17-21).

PROGNOSIS: Attending to the Unusual, Unfinished Business of Feeding Jesus’ Sheep

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Catch/Blessing Is Already Ready to Eat*

Although the voice from the shore pierced the darkness like a searing light, exposing the futility hidden in the night, nevertheless, this was no ordinary voice of judgment. Significantly, “the disciple who loved the Lord” (let’s call him John) heard something other than judgment in this voice. Thankfully, he told Peter why: “It is the Lord!” (v. 7). This “Lord and God” (cf. John 20:28) does pierce and expose the night with all honesty and clarity. But he does so not to condemn but to save (John 3:17). Indeed, on the shore, quite unknown to the disciples, Jesus was already cooking up a feast of blessing for them (v. 9). That feast of fish and bread, of course, is a sign of the “real blessing” he cooked up for them in his death and resurrection: the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life. In the night of his betrayal, Jesus was not conquered by the “night.” On the contrary, he conquered the “night” and all that is hidden therein, especially, the judgment of God upon the sinful world. His resurrection in the morning is his victory over the “fishless” night. The great catch of fish is the sign that blessing and salvation are under his command (v. 8).

Feeding his disciples that victory—that blessing—is why he now lives and it's how he now reigns. This feeding is the unusual, still-to-be finished, business of the Risen Lord.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Yes, Lord, You Know that I Love You* (vv. 15, 16, 17)

Attending to that unfinished business in Peter—and all of us—is the primary focus of this passage. Jesus wants us not to deny him, but to love him, to believe in him, and until that happens we remain in the dark, in the night, and the business of our salvation is unfinished, at least for us. This is why Jesus addresses Peter's darkness directly—and persistently—with words that sear with light. This is why he asks Peter (and us) in no uncertain terms, "Do you love me?" (vv. 15, 16, 17). In this question Jesus asks us, Will you receive me for who I am, the one who takes away your sin, your judgment, your darkness, your denial, your death. Faith says "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you" (vv. 15, 16, 17). Faith is having Jesus and what he cooked up in his death and resurrection, knowing full well what it cost him. Faith, therefore, is denial conquered; and for that reason faith also "hurts," as Peter well knew. Faith hurts because it knows not only the depth of love Jesus holds for us, but it also knows the extent of pain (the rejection and denial) Jesus endured in order to accomplish our salvation. The "hurt" that Peter feels, that we feel, at Jesus' question, is inescapably bound up with the love we have for Jesus who died for us. By faith his hurt is our hurt, his love is our love.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Feed My Sheep* (vv. 15, 16, 17)

Peter has now become one who loves the Lord. He believes. And as the text makes clear, those who love the Lord do indeed go back into the world. How they go into the world can vary greatly. Some, like Peter may become full time apostles/missionaries. Others may continue to fish. But whatever the nature of their

worldly deployment, disciples do NOT go back to business as usual. No matter where the disciples find themselves, they live in the love of the Lord and participate in Jesus' ongoing business to "feed my sheep" (vv. 15, 16, 17). Whenever and wherever the "night" threatens and denial sets in, those who love the Lord attend to the unfinished business of feeding people with the victory of Christ. But neither Peter nor we should be under any illusions about the painful costs such work will entail. Of Peter, Jesus says, he will be crucified like his Lord. As for you and me, only time will tell how the business of the cross will unfold in our lives. Nevertheless, the invitation is always the same to those who love the Lord: "Follow me" (v. 19).