

Third Sunday of Easter

TWO CHARCOAL FIRES

John 21:1-19

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

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.

15When 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: The Shameful Fire

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Back to Business*

Even though Peter had seen the empty tomb, even though he had been there in that locked room in Jerusalem when Jesus twice showed up to reveal that he had risen from the dead, he had failed to connect the dots. He failed to see how it had changed the world and could change his life. Instead, he went back to his former occupation as a fisherman at the Sea of Tiberius. It was back to business as usual. He announced to his friends, "I

am going fishing.”

Even though we were in church on Easter and sang “Alleluia” robustly, we too fail to see how that good news makes any difference. Every Monday we go back to the world living our lives as if Jesus never rose from the dead. For us too, it is back to business as usual.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Ashamed

But business as usual means failure as usual. The disciples’ unsuccessful night of fishing is a symbol of what happens when we put our trust in the promises of this world. Such misplaced trust also means that we fail to recognize Jesus when he shows up on the beach . . . and in the Word and Sacrament ministry of the church.

When Peter finally does recognize the man on the shore as Jesus, he tries to cover himself up, just as Adam and Eve had tried to hide their nakedness from God after they had sinned in the Garden of Eden. When Peter saw the face of Jesus and heard the sound of his voice calling out in the early dawn light, it must have stuck a knife in his heart. Peter could not forget another night when he had failed Jesus not just once but three times. Three times he valued more the opinions of those gathered around the charcoal fire in the courtyard than the opinion of Jesus.

When Peter got to the shore, he must have felt even worse. He saw a charcoal fire just like the charcoal fire that burned in the courtyard that shameful night when he had denied his Lord. What was Jesus doing to him? Was Jesus determined not to let Peter forget his sin at the other charcoal fire? Had Jesus come to collect and make Peter pay for his failure?

Like Peter, we find that the evidence of our bad faith and misplaced trust litters our lives. We would prefer to ignore the charcoal fires. We do not want to be reminded of all the times

we have denied our Lord because we valued more the approval of others.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Trapped*

The sight of the charcoal fire on the beach surely reminded Peter of the immensity of his failure at the other charcoal fire when he denied Jesus three times. Jesus seems to have the same failure in mind as he questions Peter's commitment to love him three times. Jesus will not let Peter escape the sins of his past. Has Jesus hunted Peter down to make him pay for his failure at the first charcoal fire? Is God holding him accountable, refusing to ignore his cowardice at the first charcoal fire?

When God is hunting you down, you can run but you can't hide!

PROGNOSIS: The Redeeming Fire

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *"Feed My Sheep"*

The sight of that charcoal fire must have hit Peter like a punch in the stomach. He remembered that other charcoal fire that night in the courtyard when he had denied Jesus three times.

However, this charcoal fire is different. Instead of shaming Peter for his historic failure, Jesus forgives Peter. Three times Jesus assures Peter that he no longer needs to be ashamed of what happened at the first charcoal fire. Three times Jesus assures Peter that he wants Peter to "feed/tend my sheep" even though Peter has been a colossal failure. Such is the undeserved mercy and unexpected affirmation that Jesus offers the disciple who denied him. Ironically, it happens at a place that could only have reminded Peter of his failure, a charcoal fire.

It is not the first time that Jesus has treated people like this. There were other "charcoal fires." He forgave the sins of the notorious tax collector, Zaccheus, and transformed his life

with forgiveness. He forgave the woman caught in adultery. He removed the shame of lepers, cripples, thieves and other such outcasts and forgave them. Despite their outsider status, He was determined to assure them that God had not given up on them.

Such a daring reversal did not come cheaply. There is a cost to conducting business like this. Someone must pay. Even God insists that such obligations be met. The amazing good news is that Jesus was willing to step into the breach and meet the obligation with his life. When God raised Jesus from the dead, what had seemed like a pay-back, Jesus' death on the cross, is ironically just the opposite: God's supreme act of love.

The news gets even better. At this charcoal fire the consequences of Jesus' death and resurrection were offered not only to the undeserving Peter but to all, . . . even to us. At the charcoal fire he says, "Remember your Baptism . . . this is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you . . . your sins are forgiven. . . . and feed my sheep!"

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *"You Know That I Love You"*

Stunned by such mercy, Peter cannot but trust Jesus' winsome affirmation. Three times Peter is given the opportunity to do what he failed to do at the first charcoal fire. Three times, without hesitation, freely and boldly, he confesses his faith in Jesus. Having received such love, he gets to "same-say" that love back to the One from whom he has received it: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

We get to do the same. We can face our sins and the shameful reminders of our past. Instead of denying them and fleeing them, we can admit them, confess them and repent of them because we are now at a charcoal fire that does not only remind us of our sins but a charcoal fire where we have been forgiven. We would

not want to be any other place. We are glad to be here. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : "Follow Me"

Therefore, we can follow Jesus just as Peter did even to his death on cross. In so doing we also join all the saints who have walked this way before us. As portrayed in today's Second Reading from the Book of Revelation, we can join them in singing a glorious hymn praising God accompanied by the angels, "the living creatures and elders numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands" all surrounding the throne of Lamb who was slain, the risen and triumphant Christ.

We can do that boldly, confidently and joyfully because we have been to a new charcoal fire where Jesus has forgiven our vacillations, our denials and our resignations to go back to fishing and business as usual. He has given us a fresh start, a new life and an opportunity to follow Him as we "Feed my sheep" and invite others to join us at the charcoal fire where all is forgiven.