

Saying 'Yes' to that which Gives Life Rooted in God's Love

Idlewild Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday of Easter, c ; April 19, 2010
John 21:1-18
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After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon 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.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He 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.

That 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. But 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. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus 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. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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." A 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." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, 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. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you use to fasten your own belt and go to 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." He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God. After this Jesus said to Peter, "Follow me."

Great is the mystery of faith, says the ancient liturgy.

And so it is. It is so great that sometimes I think it's difficult to imagine that we are compelled to say "YES!" to a life lived out with faith in a once crucified and forever risen Lord. It's risky to live with faith in One who transforms our very lives out of places of scarcity and death into places of abundance and life.

Like Cole [*Cole Davis Chauhan, son of Chirag and Mandy Chauhan, who was baptized this morning*], through infant baptism I came to a life of faith through the witness of the church. I came to belief in Jesus and welcome into God's great family, in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, in a church named after her placement in the rolling hills of Western Pennsylvania, Pleasant Hills United Presbyterian Church.

Our family moved to Memphis when I was a child, but we went back regularly, visiting grandmothers and creating memories—squashing pennies on railroad tracks, cooking in steamy, small kitchens, walking to the corner dime store, glitter shaken onto Aqua Net moistened locks at the hairdresser's. But always and consistently on Sundays we'd walk down the hill from my mother's childhood home, greeting others along the way, to arrive at the place where I came through the waters of the font.

This was an idyllic church which became for me the metaphor of "the perfect" community of belief, love and hope where Jesus showed himself every Sunday. It was located in the center of a neighborhood. It was a church home where welcomes were abundant and love unconditional – "*Oh – this is Gladys' only granddaughter, Dolores' youngest – little Annie.*"

The "pleasant" of Pleasant Hills Church became descriptive and influential in shaping my ecclesiology — about how I came to know what the church was – and who she is to be in the world — a pleasant worshiping place where people come to belief, where Jesus is revealed and people are nurtured, fed and sent to live well and whole in the world — making a difference with Christ — saying "Yes!" to that which gives life.

Jesus shows himself in different ways, certainly not only in the one hour of Sunday worship at the "perfect" church — maybe a child hears the voice of God saying "Feed my sheep" or in the middle of a champagne and lobster reception in Paris, God asks the first class traveler, "What are you doing with your life? Do you love me?"

Prior to coming to the story that Anna and Laura read for us: where Peter eagerly jumps ship to come to breakfast with Jesus; the gospel of John gives at least three post-resurrection stories; of Mary in the garden, and of the disciples with and without doubting Thomas. Mary's tears puddle, like those of a motherless child kneeling graveside, but belief leads her to shout, "I have seen the Lord." For the disciples who meet Christ behind a locked door, belief leads them to say to Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." Even skeptical Thomas is led to belief.

These stories equip us to sing like we are Easter people, with voices like the bird's songs that rise up out of the dead of winter, singing an emergent melody of new life. The gospel writer says of these post-resurrection stories, "These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." God intends for us to have life. Not just any life but a life lived with Christ, and in Christ's name.

God intends for us to say "Yes" to those things which are life-giving, those events and relationships rooted in God's merciful love. The gospel writer knows what it means to be human: that fear, doubt, illness, anger, apathy and skepticism can get in the way of saying yes to events and relationships rooted in love. It's hard to balance being fully human and making choices that are life-giving and rooted in Christ's love.

When I lead spiritual formation retreats — I often begin with a seemingly simple exercise. I ask, "What events and which people got you to this place?" I ask folks to remember the details of how they went through an 8–10 hour period of time the day before they arrived. Once they've remembered, I instruct, "Write the details down in list form." Usually there's a sense of silliness when this begins, almost always someone begins, "Hit the snooze button five times ..."

Once the lists are created, I ask, "What have you learned about yourself? How you spend your time?" Very quickly there is an awareness to not only what can happen, but how much — or how little — can happen in a day, the flow of emotions, the tasks to accomplish, the roles to bear, the scope of life. After the list is formed I ask, "Of the way time unfolded for you in this day — which experiences gave you life? Pick the top three." And I ask for them to imagine how God was present in those experiences and be prepared to share with the group.

If Peter had to make a similar list and reflect, I wonder what it would look like and how he'd share his experiences. After several interactions with the Risen Christ, the three time denier, says, "I'm going back to work." And a crowd of friends join him.

Woke up, got dressed, went to the shore. Got into the boat. Friends joined me.

Peter's hopeful for some sardines or tilapia and it's there from the boat, out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberius, where he sees the fullness of the sunset; the bright stars in the night sky, and the shift to dawn's early light washing the day with newness. There's something comforting but equally haunting as he watches the day unfold from evening to morning.

There's comfort in ritual, of doing what you do over the course of time, and learn to do well — for Peter casting the nets, sharing with friends, and waiting for what is to come. When Peter goes back to work at what he thought would be life-giving, it wasn't. The nets are empty, his dignity suffers and he's frustrated. Things weren't working out like he had expected. Fishing is his vocation — he's supposed to be good at this.

Cast the net, waited, laughed a little, took off my clothes, jumped in the water, affixed the net, pulled it back in empty, got frustrated with the sons of Thunder

The text gives us the detail that Peter was naked in the boat. Go on a tour in modern day Israel and at the edge of the Sea — the guides will remind you about this biblical story — and explain away the nakedness as a historically documented form of fishing: with nets, how an individual had to quickly jump into the water to affix the nets after they'd been cast. John Calvin's commentary on this passage suggests that Peter was naked because, "It shows how hard the disciples had been working."

Almost indignantly, I wish I could ask Calvin if he meant that the disciples had been working hard at shaming Peter.

James pushed me, asking "How could I have?" Thomas teased, "What were you thinking?"

I wonder if Peter's nakedness is about bearing a lingering shame from his three time denial of Jesus. I wonder if Peter is thinking Job like thoughts, "Naked I came and naked I shall return." I wonder if the detail of nakedness is about Peter not knowing how to say a full hearted, "Yes!" to the truth of Jesus and the power of the resurrection.

Jesus waits on shore. He's a carpenter's son with fishing advice to offer. "Drop the nets off the right side of the boat." Jesus is like that – he speaks into all of life. His list for this day might have read:

Wait on the shore. Speak across the water. Welcome the people. Prepare the fire. Break the bread. Feed the people. Ask Peter the hard questions, three times — reverse the betrayal — transform his shame through love. Send them all to make a difference.

Peter receives the guidance of one who loves with Divine love; he practices learned obedience by dropping the nets over the right side of the boat and then recognizes God's work. With the assistance of the Beloved Disciple who says, "It is the Lord!" Peter hears and says, "Yes! This is a life giving moment."

Life giving moments — saying "Yes!" to that which gives life are moments that propel us to be fed at the Lord's Table and send us out into the world with God's love. Saying "Yes!" to that which gives life isn't about doing what feels good, that which builds our own storehouses, or that which denies others and asserts self. Saying "Yes!" to life transforms the places of darkness and scarcity into places of light and hope. Saying "Yes" to life makes the world a different place where fear and shame are not the dominant story lines.

Peter recognizes the blessing and after getting dressed, he eagerly makes his way to shore to meet Christ. He eagerly comes to breakfast, to be fed and to be present with the risen Christ. Peter has a better sense of the great mystery of faith when he peels back the crisp grilled skin and receives the bread as it was passed around the table.

Peter has a newfound honesty with Christ after he's been fed and restored. Jesus asks, "Do you love me with a Divine like love?" Peter responds, "I love you with brotherly love, like you are a member of my family." Jesus asks again, "Do you love me with a Divine like love?" Peter responds again, "I love you with brotherly love." And Jesus asks one more time, with a subtle change, meeting Peter where Peter is. "Do you love me with a brotherly love? And Peter responds, "You know everything. I love you with brotherly love." And Jesus responds, "Say Yes! to life. Feed my sheep. Follow me."

This story is for us. We are the Easter people.

Last summer I had to break down my grandmother's home in Pleasant Hills for more simple living. A basement, an attic and bedroom closets were full of treasures; much of which ended up in Memphis, thinking if I held on to family pictures from eons ago; army cots preserved from attic coal dust; the old enamel top kitchen table; and boxes of documents and books — that I would have life.

What I initially thought were treasures turned into a burden of things to trip over and clutter living space. As I moved through the work, I found an old bulletin from Pleasant Hills Church dated 1972. As I studied it I realized that there were two worship services there, one at 10:00 a.m. which was the family service where "children were welcomed prior to going on to Sunday school." The second service was the "Order of Divine Worship for the Lord's Day," where children were not invited. I was stunned. I was ashamed to learn that all I had treasured in one house of worship was an illusion, not a reality.

So, to Cole as you grow in the great mysteries of faith, the church is not a perfect place — it's full of humans who know how to be fully human. Jesus feeds us here and gives us one another to learn how to say, "We have seen the Lord!" Through the Spirit we can say "Yes! to living life in Christ's love."

Let's hold one another accountable, make some lists and choose to say "Yes" to what is life giving; letting go of shame and that which prevents us from eagerly launching ourselves towards a meal with Christ and hearing him ask, "Do you love me?" like God loves you — and responding, "I love you like I love my sisters and brothers."

Amen.

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