

3rd Sunday of Eastertide

John 21:1-19; Psalm 30; Acts 9:1-6 (7-20); Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19 is the second conclusion of the Gospel of John (with only one other story between this passage and the ending of the book itself). For centuries, there has been debate between biblical scholars over whether John 21 is the legitimate ending of the Gospel of John or whether this chapter has been added to the text.¹ No matter how that argument might be answered, it is important that this chapter is included in the resurrection narratives today, because it tells us much about Christ's call to the church and the relationship between our commitment to Jesus and that call.

The passage actually consists of two distinct stories that are dependent upon one another for a full appreciation of John's understanding of the strategic nature of the resurrection. Each story enriches the understanding of the other story.

The first story is found in John 21:1-14. In this story, Peter declares, "I am going fishing" (21:3), and he is joined by the other disciples. They spend the night on the Sea of Galilee, but "catch nothing". Then, just before daybreak, the disciples spy a man standing on the shore. He calls to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you" (vs. 5)? They reply that they do not. He then says to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some" (vs. 6). They do, and they pull in an immense catch of fish. It is at this time that one of the disciples exclaims, "It is the Lord" (vs. 7)! Peter, on hearing this, jumps into the sea and swims to shore. The boat follows.

When they arrive on shore, they find that the resurrected Jesus has built a little charcoal fire for them. They haul their catch ashore and bring some of the fish to be cooked. The disciples and Jesus prepare breakfast together. Then John concludes the story, "Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish" (vs. 13) – the Eucharistic formula used in all the meal stories in all four Gospels. And John then comments, "This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead" (vs. 14)!

This is the final story in the Gospel of John that dealt with Jesus' relationship with his disciple band. The two remaining stories have to do with Peter (who is in particular need of redemptive attention from Jesus) and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (presumably John). So this story is not simply just one more resurrection story. It is meant to be the capstone story, the apex story, the story that tells us the whole place of the resurrection within the life and mission of the church. What does it tell us about our life and mission as the people of God, as Jesus' new countercultural community?

¹ The principal argument for an original conclusion of the Gospel of John at the end of chapter 20 is that this chapter ends with a statement of the purpose of the book (20:30-31) that seems to be a fitting conclusion. The arguments for the inclusion of chapter 21 as part of the original text and the book's rightful conclusion are that the ending of chapter 20 could be as rightfully read as a reflection on Jesus' statement in verse 29 as it could be read as a summary of the entire book; as well, there is no text of John either extant or referred to by early church leaders that excluded chapter 21.

The boat is obviously the church, Jesus' little community of believers, floating on the unstable, bounteous but also threatening depths of the world. In that boat, we of the church seek to fish in the darkness of the night, not knowing what we are doing, but at the same time, in all of our flawed, sinful, doubting, even bumbling ways, seeking to be faithful to the One whom we love, whom we worship and who brings purpose, meaning and focus to our lives and to our community.

Then, as the light dawns, we see the risen Christ on the shore. He calls to us. And in obedience to him, we "cast our nets" on the other side of our little, vulnerable boat. We cast our nets into the chaotic sea of the world, seeking to make a difference, seeking to win people to allegiance to that Lord standing on the beach, seeking to work for the transformation of the world. And when we do that work in obedience to Jesus' command, then – even in our flawed, sinful, doubting condition – God blesses and our nets are filled to the breaking point with a bounteous harvest.

Thus we, as the community of believers, though small and fragile and flawed, are to be at work in the chaos of the world, working for the redemption, liberation and transformation of the masses of its people and its systems. We do his work, following the instructions of and empowered by our Lord and God, Christ Jesus. And we drag our work to shore, our catch of the people, systems, structures of the world liberated from the domination, oppression and exploitation of all the forces that have shown by their performance that they belong to the darkness and not to the light. And we, the fragile, flawed community of believers, lay our catch from the world at the Master's feet as our gift to him.

As Jesus' body, the church performs this mission for Jesus. And as we do, we find the Lord awaiting us, a morning banquet prepared for us. He accepts for that banquet the offerings we add to it. And then, as his community, gathered around our Lord, Jesus takes the bread and breaks it, he takes the cup and shares it, and we commune together as one joyous family that is now reunited forever! And thus Jesus has created his redeemed, liberated and transformed community, and through it, he now transforms the world!

With this story, John presents Jesus' call and compassionate care for his followers, the church, in the dark and stormy depths of the world. But the author has not yet resolved the situation between Jesus and Peter, the betrayal of the Lord of the church by the one who was earlier called to provide the primary leadership to and through the church. Consequently, the next story deals with that resolution.

After all the disciples and Jesus have had breakfast together, Jesus turns to Peter and asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter replies that he does. Jesus then instructs him, "Feed my lambs". To Peter's surprise, however, Jesus asks the same question again, "Do you love me?" Peter gives the same response, and Jesus instructs again, "Feed my sheep." But Jesus asks the question a third time. This time, the text tells us, "Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" Peter responds most transparently to that third question, "Lord you know everything; you know that I love you". And Jesus once again instructs him, "Feed my sheep" (21:15-17).

John then tells us that Jesus continues, “Very 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”. He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God. After this he said to him, “Follow me”” (21:18-19).

There are a number of intriguing ambiguities within this story that cause us to speculate. Those ambiguities add nuance to the story, but do not radically change its primary thrust. The first ambiguity is that the question Jesus actually asks first of Peter is not the question he asks the second and third time. Jesus’ first question was “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these” (21:15)? The second and third questions are the more direct “Do you love me?” What, precisely does Jesus mean when asking Peter “do you love me more than these”?

There are three ways to interpret his question. First, “Do you love me more than you love these signs of your economic power – your nets, boat and fish, all of which testify to your wealth and influence?” Second, “Do you love me more than you love these friends, associates and comrades of yours?” Third, “Do you love me more than these others love me?”

The first interpretation of the question explores whether Peter is more wedded to the maintenance of the systems of the world, his place in those systems and the way that those systems structure life for Peter than he is to Christ and his kingdom. If he is, then he will never be truly committed to the inevitable social change and the living out of economic and political justice that will be required to truly build the kingdom of God.

The second interpretation of the question examines whether Peter is more committed to maintaining the relationships he has built and fostered over the years and is therefore committed to the maintenance of the status quo than he is to Christ. If he is, then he can never surrender those relationships and the security of those relationships to truly build Christ’s new countercultural community in this world.

The third interpretation of the question squarely faces Peter’s personal commitment to Jesus, and whether he is centered on Christ or whether he is centered on people’s opinions of him. Is he so busy comparing himself to others and measuring his worth against them that he can never be single-mindedly focused on Christ and his kingdom? If he is, then he is not made of stern enough stuff to lead the church, for if he is continuously swayed by other people’s convictions or their evaluations of him, he will be an erratic, indecisive and perhaps even capricious leader who will lead the church into chaos.

Which question is Jesus really asking of Peter? Perhaps, he is asking all three! Perhaps it is upon any one of these petards that all of us are hoisted. Because it is true that for some of us, it is the standards of and even loyalty to our society that will most tempt our love and loyalty, rather than following the revolutionary Jesus. For others of us, maintenance of the status quo and our place within it is of such importance that we can be seduced away from following the liberating Jesus. For still others of us, living in continuous comparison of ourselves with others either for our sense of worth or for making judgment causes us to waver in our commitment to the single-minded, radical Jesus (“radical” from the Latin word “radix” or “getting to the heart”).

If Peter's problem was not all of these three, it was certainly one of those three, and so by posing the question this way, Jesus deals with all of us and those forces and temptations that stand between us and our total commitment to Christ and His Kingdom.

The second ambiguity is found in the Greek of this passage itself. There are three Greek words used in the Bible that are all legitimately translated "love". *Eros* is erotic love. *Philia* is companionable or "brotherly" love (such as in *Philadelphia*). *Agape* is God's love for us and our deepest love for God and God's kingdom.

Substituting the Greek word used for the English word "love" in this scripture, the passage actually reads like this:

"Simon, Son of John, do you *agape* me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord: you know that I *philia* you."

"Feed my lambs. Simon, son of John, do you *agape* me?"

"Yes, Lord you know that I *philia* you."

"Feed my sheep. Do you *philia* me?"

"Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you *philia* me"? And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I *philia* you."

"Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

Many biblical scholars do not see any significance in the use of different words for "love" on the part of Jesus and Peter, noting that John interchanges the two words elsewhere in that gospel. So they feel the evidence is too weak to make much of a case for the changes that occur in these verbs.

Others, however, do see a significance in it. The significance is that Jesus asks of Peter if he can love Jesus to the degree that Jesus (and God) loves him. In the light of his recent denial of Jesus, the reply from a sobered and much more candid Peter is that he can love Jesus like a brother (but, unstated, he can not honestly say that he can love Jesus with the unqualified love with which God loves us). Jesus still commands him to "feed my lambs" or "sheep". When Peter answers the question a second time with *philia*, Jesus then substitutes *philia* for *agape* in his third question. Peter's reaction is to feel hurt because Jesus made that substitution. But Peter acknowledges that, at this stage, brotherly love is about all that he can muster. And Jesus accepts Peter anyway, calling him to "feed my sheep" and recognizing, through his ensuing statement (vss. 18-19) that the day will come when Peter will lay down his life for Jesus, and when he does then he will know that he does, indeed, *agape* Jesus! But, at this stage, all that Jesus will truly require of Peter is that the big fisherman "follows him" (19b). And the way he will follow Jesus is to faithfully "feed my sheep"!

As I stated earlier, these are two ambiguities in this chapter. A legitimate case can be made on either side of both ambiguities. But it also indicates to us how rich this story of the restoring of Peter truly is!

What is undisputable in this story, however, is that Peter denied Jesus three times (13:38; 18:27), and three times Jesus gave Peter the chance to confess his love for Christ and to reaffirm his intention to follow Christ by doing that work to which Jesus had called him. Jesus gave Peter the chance to forgive himself as well as to know that he was already forgiven by Jesus and the church!

Psalm 30 is apparently occasioned by the recovery of the Psalmist from a grave illness. The Psalmist centers on the praise of God for rescuing him from that sickness. It is a psalm with several well-known lines and metaphors.

“Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night; but joy comes with the morning” (30:4-5).

Or, again,

“You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever” (vss. 11-12).

These are popular and very vivid phrases. But behind their drama lies a very profound truth – that God is at work in our lives and in our circumstances, and acts in ways that can bring triumph out of defeat, joy out of bitterness, health out of sickness. It is important that we perceive that such healing and deliverance is the action of God, and not just circumstance.

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20) deals with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the man who would eventually become Paul the Apostle. Verses 1-6 concentrates on Saul’s actual encounter with Jesus, while verses 7-20 deal with Saul’s response to that encounter in his conversion.

As today’s gospel lesson tells the story of Jesus’ confrontation with Peter that resulted in a second call being extended to him, so this story tells of Jesus’ confrontation with Saul (Paul) that resulted in his call to follow Christ. In this story, Saul is on his way to Damascus with letters of authority from Israel’s high priest to arrest Christians and to persecute the church. But on his way to that city, he is struck from his horse to the ground by a blinding light, and a voice demanding “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me” (9:4)? He understandably responds, “Who are you, Lord” (or “sir”; the term is not a confession of faith but a polite address)? The voice then states, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (vs. 6). This concludes Paul’s encounter with Jesus, but the story continues with Paul’s conversion.

Paul finds that he has been struck blind by this encounter with Jesus. He gropes his way into Damascus. Jesus appears to the Christian Ananias in a vision, instructing him to go to Saul and heal him. After some initial debate, Ananias obeys Jesus, goes to Saul and heals him. With his healing, Saul embraces Jesus as his Lord and savior, is converted and immediately begins to proclaim Jesus “in the synagogues” as “the Son of God” (9:7-20).

Of course, the overwhelming center of this story is Saul’s amazing encounter with Jesus that leads to his conversion. The event becomes so important to Saul as well as to the story-teller, Luke, that Luke repeats it three times in the book of Acts (9:1-20; 22:1-16; 26:9-18), and it is further referenced in several of Paul’s (Saul’s) letters (e.g., Gal. 1:13-17; Phil. 3:1-11). It is the most important experience in Paul’s entire life!

Within this story, Jesus makes an extremely important statement to Ananias to justify the Lord’s demand that this Christian heal Saul. Jesus says, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name to Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (9:16). It is both a very important and a very peculiar statement that sheds great light on the doctrine of being chosen.

In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus makes clear that Peter is chosen by him. But before he can begin to act out that chosenness, there are barriers between Jesus and Peter caused by Peter’s action with which the big fisherman has to deal. In the epistle lesson for today, Jesus makes clear that Paul is also chosen by him. But before *he* can begin to act out that chosenness, the overwhelming barriers of his opposition to Jesus and his need for redemption (Phil. 3:7-10) have to be overcome. What is significant is that both men are chosen, but both men have erected barriers between themselves and Jesus that must be confronted and overwhelmed. Jesus, in his grace, extends the means to both men to deal with those barriers. But it requires decision and action on their part, as well.

There are many Christians who have a hard time dealing with the concept of God choosing people to be God’s own, even though this is an overwhelming message of scripture (e.g., Deut. 10:14-15; Psalm 33:12, 65:4, 106:5; Isa. 61:1-10; Jer. 1:4-10; Haggai 2:23; Matt. 11:27, 22:14, 24:22-31; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:28-30, 33, 11:28; Col. 3:12; I Thess. 5:9; Titus 1:1; I Pet. 1:1-2, 2:8-9; Rev. 17:14). It smacks of arbitrary exclusivity to democratic minds! But here, in Jesus’ statement to Ananias, it is clear that being chosen is not so much a privilege as it is a burden! Paul is described by Jesus as “an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel”, but the price Paul will pay for this so-called “privilege” will be “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (9:15-16).

The primary emphasis on election in scripture is that one has been chosen to serve – and that often that service has a price connected to it! In most instances (but not all – see Isa. 45:1-19, for example) those chosen to serve God are also chosen to be saved. That is the case with Paul. He cannot be Christ’s “instrument to bring the name of Jesus before Gentiles and kings and before Israel” unless he first embraces Jesus as his savior and Lord. But salvation is not the end of the matter. It is a primary means to the end of service. Salvation is a very important means, a strategic means, an extremely essential means. But it is a means, nevertheless. For all who are

chosen by God are chosen to serve (even the thief on the cross who, through his testimony at his death, bore witness to Christ). We are saved to serve. And, although that service may at times be grand (“bring my name before Gentiles and kings and Israel”), it will at times demand great sacrifice and even pain (“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name”). For being chosen is the ground for the service of God and of humanity, with both its rich privilege and with its heavy burden.

Revelation 5:11-14 is a hymn of praise to God and to Jesus Christ, the hymn being sung by “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” of angels, “living creatures” and the elders. Their hymn is, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (5:12). The hymn is then joined by “every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea” (5:13a), all singing in unison, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever” (5:13b)!

This hymn is by far the most universalistic hymn that appears in scripture. It is not only a hymn of praise offered to God but to Jesus as well, with Jesus clearly equal with God. Further, it is sung not only by Israel or by the church but also by the angel host, the “living creatures” around God’s throne, the elders, and “every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea”.

What is pictured here is a steadily expanding host of worshippers. It starts with those who are gathered around God’s throne, but expands to include every living creature, not only in the world but also in heaven and in the underworld. All are included in this praise of God, for not one creature is excluded. In truth, Paul’s claim is being lived out, “Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10b-11).

What is equally important is to note that the praise is primarily being given to Jesus, and not to God the Creator. Revelation 4:6-11 is a hymn of praise to the Creator God, but Revelation 5:11-14 is primarily a hymn of praise to Jesus. It is recognizing that this “Lamb that was slaughtered” for the deliverance of the world, is as worthy of receiving the conferring of “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” as is God the Creator. The author makes clear that both are God in God’s twin functions of creating and redeeming. Thus, praise is both the apex and the fulfillment of human existence, for “man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”²

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² “The Westminster Shorter Catechism”, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, The Presbyterian Church (USA), 1999), Question 1, p. 175.