

Sometimes when the big picture appears bleak, when making sense of one's experience feels futile, it is helpful to do something practical, useful, like mowing the lawn, tending the garden, washing the car, cleaning the house, baking cookies. Peter and the other disciples go fishing.

John's is the most literarily sophisticated of the Gospels, and nowhere is its narrative subtlety more apparent than in its closing episode, in which the risen Christ appears by the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberias) while his disciples are on the water, tending their fishing nets.

After Jesus miraculously fills their nets, they recognize him for who he is and join him on the shore, where he has prepared a fire of coals to cook their breakfast. There, after breakfast, over a fire just like the one Peter had warmed his hands over in the high priest's courtyard while Jesus was interrogated, Peter is now interrogated by Jesus.

No charcoal fire could dissipate the chill that gripped Peter's soul in this moment. What did Peter imagine Jesus' response to his betrayal would be? "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" The reference is unclear. Jesus may be asking Peter if he loves him more than these others (disciples) do. He may be asking Peter if he loves him more than he loves fishing.

A second time Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you cherish me?" (Hart's translation) The threefold confession of Peter is meant to counteract his earlier threefold denial.

Just as Peter grieved when the cock crowed, so now Peter grieves when asked a third time if he loves Jesus. We know Peter's emotional register, but what do we know of Jesus'? The text doesn't give much, if any clue. What we know is what he did—something practical.

Chef Jesus builds a fire, bakes bread, grills fish and feeds Peter and the boys after their long night on the water. Instead of feeding Peter, why didn't Jesus make him do some penance, give him forty lashes, banish him to the desert where no fish are to be found, or just strike him down with leprosy?

Peter is not the only one to be interrogated by the risen Christ. Jesus confronts the blinded Saul, "Why do you persecute me?" Saul responds, "Who are you, Sir?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Instead of blinding Saul temporarily, why didn't Jesus just strike him dead?

Because he would then be acting like we would like to act, if we had the power to effect our revenge. What Jesus does requires far more power than any retaliatory action we might imagine; he turns deserters and enemies into emissaries. Saul becomes Paul, apostle to the Gentiles; Simon,

son of John, becomes The Rock (Peter), leader of the Jerusalem church. People can and do change!

As temporarily gratifying as revenge is, its satisfaction is short-lived. What is gained if Jesus treats Saul as Saul treats the followers of Jesus? What is gained if Jesus treats Peter as Peter treated him? Whatever is gained is overwhelmed by what is lost: namely, Jesus!

If there was no reconciliation of Peter, there would be no church in Jerusalem; no reconciliation of Paul, no church in Corinth, Ephesus, Thessaloniki, Galatia, Rome. No reconciliation of Mathew, Mark, Luke and, John, no Gospels, no Sermon on the Mount, no parable of the prodigal son, no “If I speak in the tongues of human beings and angels, but do not have love, I am nothing. Love tolerates all things, has faith in all things, hopes in all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”

No reconciliation, Caesar remains Lord; the way of power prevails over the way of love. No reconciliation, no Origen, no Augustine, no monastic movement that preserved the wisdom of both East and West, no Hagia Sophia, no Sistine Chapel, no “Requiem Mass” by Mozart, no “Resurrection Symphony” by Mahler, no *Brother’s Karamazov* by Dostoevsky, no Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity, no . . . well, you get the idea: no Jesus.

Franz Wright tells us, “The ultimate act of compassion is to return from peace to the place where you were tortured to death, in order to comfort once more the frightened friends who’d deserted you, denying even having known you.”

Because Jesus lived what he taught, we know he lived. Jesus cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire, his feeding Peter and the others, is more than an act of gracious hospitality. The bread and fish are more than food, they are a sacrament of acceptance.

“If you enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him drink . . . Do not be vanquished by evil, but vanquish the evil with good.”