

The Third Sunday of Easter
St. John 21:1-19

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There once was a man in Galilee who was a fisherman. He did not work at this alone, for his brother and at least two friends were partnered with him. One night, he and his partners went fishing. They cast their nets and toiled through the night, but caught nothing. Dejected, they returned to shore in the morning. After a long night of fruitless work, it had to have been hard to tend to the necessary chores—harder, at least, than had they caught fish, ironically. However, they had to tend to their nets, so they cleaned them and did any mending that they needed.

Before they knew it, however, a crowd approached the shoreline. They were following a man who was talking to them. The crowd reached the docks, and this teacher looked down at the fisherman and asked to use his boat. The teacher was going to continue teaching, using the fisherman's boat as his lectern.

"Sure, why not...it's been one of those days. We'll do it," the fisherman might have thought. So, the fisherman, a partner or two, and this teacher got into the boat and pushed out a little from shore. The teacher taught. The fishermen listened or napped or continued to look after their nets.

After a while, the teacher completed his lesson. He looked down at the fisherman and said, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." Now, you might imagine a bit of a confused look on the fisherman's face. They were used to fishing at night, when the fish are in shallower waters and when their nets are harder for the fish to see. But it was the middle of the day and this teacher—what does he know about fishing?—told him to go to deeper water and catch some fish. "This teacher certainly knows a lot—he's taught a convincing lesson—but he's got a thing to learn about fishing. Okay, here's an opportunity for me to teach the teacher," the fisherman could have thought.

"Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets," the fisherman said. So, they went out into the deeper water, let down their nets, and pulled in a catch so large, their nets started to break! They signaled to the rest of their partners for help. They needed the other boat to carry this large catch of fish. The boats were filled, and they began to sink.

The fisherman was amazed at this. He must have thought, "Who is this teacher that even HE knows how to catch fish, and at a time when we don't catch fish?" The fisherman fell at the teacher's feet and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The fisherman recognized the teacher as something more than a mere teacher...something more than a regular man. This teacher was sent from God! And he recognized in himself a sinner, unable to stand in the presence of the divine. (cf. Luke 5:1-11)

So, put yourselves in this Galilean fisherman's sandals for a moment. If, like Simon, you were to meet Jesus, how would you react? If you came face to face with the Son of God, what would you say? Would you recognize Him? Do you even know how to recognize Him? Better yet, what would you do if you found yourself in the very physical presence of God the Father? Simon did find himself in the presence of Son of God, the teacher. His reaction is, perhaps, the knee-jerk reaction of any mortal who is in the presence of the Divine. Man has every reason to fear God. God created man, and man transgresses against what God commands and doesn't fulfill what God expects; why wouldn't man expect to be stricken, smitten by God, especially when they find themselves in the presence of God. Simon did it that day in Galilee. The prophet Isaiah had a similar account which he related in the sixth chapter of his book, and he did pretty much the same thing as Simon. (cf. Isaiah 6:1-7)

And it is a valid way to approach being in God's presence. As you recall from the Law, chiefly the Ten Commandments, you are taught that you should "fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

Fear is the first order of your relationship with God according to the Law. So, you might consider reciting the penitential psalms when you come into God's presence: Psalm 22, Psalm 51, and this verse from Psalm 25: "Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!" (Psalm 25:7)

Therefore, do you come into this house with even a modicum of fear? Do you approach the rail to receive the body and blood of Christ with a bit of shame and trembling? After all, you are a sinful mortal coming into the very real presence of the immortal, holy God.

He created you, and you transgress against what God commands and don't fulfill what God expects—that is to say, you sin against God. Remember, then, that which is sinful cannot exist in the presence of that which is holy. What is there to keep God from striking you down right here and now, in his presence, for your sin?

That is why Simon said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." That is why Isaiah said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

But there is also this clear invitation from Scripture:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

And so you recite at the beginning of the Divine Service:

O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.

About three years later, the fisherman was back in Galilee after have traveled through the region of Judea and Samaria, following that very same Teacher. He and ten other men had done so and had just returned from Jerusalem where the Teacher was crucified and on the third day following, rose from the dead. He had appeared to these men behind locked doors...twice. He had given them instructions to go back to Galilee and wait for Him. That's what they were doing in today's text.

Old habits die hard. This fisherman decided he's going to go fishing. Six of the other men decided to go with him. And, just like that night three years prior, their efforts were fruitless. Morning broke and the men were about the head back to shore; after all, there are chores to attend to, even when there is no catch.

Before they could get back, however, a man was standing on the shore and called out to the boats: "Children, have you any fish?" Children...it's what a teacher would lovingly call his disciples; a clue to who this man on shore was. "No," they answered him. "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some," he replied, another clue to who he is. He is telling them where and when to catch, just like Peter was told about three years earlier.

They do as he told them, and just like three years earlier, the catch was large; so large this time, they had trouble bringing it in. John turned to Peter and said, "It is the Lord!" It's likely they all recognized who He was by then, so I like to imagine John's words being said with a giddy excitement. "He's risen! He's come to Galilee, now, like He said He would; like He instructed us to do!"

This time, however, Peter's reaction was different. This time, there was no bowing at the feet and begging for mercy. This time, there was no fear of impending judgment. This time, Peter rushed to get to his Teacher. He put on his outer garment, jumped into the Sea of Galilee, and swam to shore.

Now, you might see this as an act of excitement that the man they had been with for three years was with them again; there is some of that, to be sure. But there is more going on here. Recall that three years earlier, Jesus responded to Simon, "Do not be afraid." Here, Peter is not afraid. Three years later, he knew his Teacher; he knew his Teacher came not to judge, but came to be judged, was judged, and brings forgiveness and healing.

John helps paint the picture. Before jumping into the water, Peter put on his coat. He got it sopping wet in order to rush to be by His Teacher's side. This, dear hearers, is a picture of Baptism. In Baptism, you were washed—soaked—in order to be by your Lord's side, or in light of the events of last week's Gospel, to be *in* your Lord's side. It is in Baptism, then, that you are clothed in the robes of righteousness, having been washed clean in the blood of the spotless Lamb of God. It is as St. Paul wrote,

[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
(Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 8:1)

No condemnation...that's why Peter was eager to leave the boat and get to Jesus. Peter was no longer afraid; He couldn't be for He was *in* His Lord Jesus Christ, forgiven and not condemned. So it was also with Isaiah, who had a coal touched to his lips, taking away his iniquity and removing his fear so that he could eagerly reply to the question, "Whom shall I send?" with "Here am I! Send me." (cf. Isaiah 6:8)

So it is also, with you. You can come into this house knowing full well that you have put on Christ because you are Baptized. You are found to be in Christ, therefore there is no condemnation for you. Oh, to be sure, there's room for righteous fear, according to the Law, but that fear is allayed according to the Gospel which is found in Christ who has died for you, according to the Law, but who is now risen and ascended for you and comes to you today and every day in His Word and Sacraments to give you forgiveness, life, and salvation! "Do not be afraid."

That is the answer to my question earlier: What is to keep God from striking you down? It is Jesus and that you have been put into Him by way of Baptism into His death and resurrection. And because you have been clothed in Christ's righteousness through Baptism, now it is His risen Son that God sees when He looks at you; since His Son already bore God's wrath on your behalf, by the will of the Father, He no longer has wrath for His Son—for you—to bear. Through that, you can rightly say Christ died for you and you have received the benefits of His death on the cross. Yes, you sin, but Christ has atoned for those sins, and by grace through faith, your sins are covered by the blood of the Lamb—washed off in the pure Word-driven water of Holy Baptism.

This can give you a righteous boldness and confidence, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

St. Paul confirmed this when he wrote that in Christ Jesus the Lord you have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. (cf. Ephesians 3:11-12)

As today's Gospel ends, Jesus spoke with Peter after breakfast. Three times He asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" You are supposed to recall the episode at Jesus' arrest, before which Jesus told Peter that he would deny Him three times. You should also recall that when Jesus had said this, He also told Peter that Peter would return to Him and be restored: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32)

So, three times Peter was asked, "Do you love Me?" Three times he answered, "Yes, I do." And each time, he is told to tend to the flock. Peter, who was once an ordinary Galilean fisherman and who was made a fisher of men, is now returned and restored and made leader of this group of disciples. He is told to feed this flock. With what is he to feed them? With the same grace he has received and which gave him the confidence to leap from the boat and swim to shore to be by his Teacher's side.

It's that same grace with which you who are gathered here are fed, too. It's the grace that reminds you that you are clothed with the righteousness of Christ who was crucified for you and received the full blast of God's wrath intended for you. Now, there is no wrath left, only the love that God has for His Son, which His Son exchanged with you for the wrath you deserve: "[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith." It's the grace by which you were welcomed into this family through the waters of Holy Baptism. It's the grace by which your faith is fed as you receive your Lord's body and blood, given as bread and wine. It's the grace which grants you the boldness and confidence to walk into this house and receive the holy things of God. It's the grace which says to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.