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May 5, 2019

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Today, we witness the scene of Jesus' last earthly meal and encounter with his disciples. In John's Gospel, Jesus had turned what we popularly call the Last Supper into an occasion to teach his disciples at length. The only mention of food at that table was the "morsel" Jesus offered Judas, a powerful communion offering to the friend who was about to betray him. The last meal Jesus shared with his disciples was not that supper, but this breakfast he prepared for them on the shore.

Although this story sounds like one of the simplest in John's Gospel, it is full of symbolism. It all began when seven disciples decided to go fishing. Whether it was an attempt to return to normal life or a symbol of mission, John makes it clear that they started while it was night. That may be a good time for fishing, but it is never a good time in the Gospel of John because for John, Jesus is light. Of course, they had no success.

At dawn, the risen Jesus appeared on the shore. Just as he had earlier asked Mary Magdalen in the garden why she was weeping, he asked the disciples if they had had any success. In response to their "no," he suggested an alternative that brought in almost more than they could handle. In a variation on John the Baptist's announcement at the beginning of the Gospel, the beloved disciple proclaimed, "It is the Lord!"

In response, Peter dressed himself, abandoned his nets and boat, and jumped into the water. On the shore, he met Jesus who awaited them with bread and fish, the same food they had once shared with a multitude near that very lake when they first traveled with him.

If the food was meant to jog their memory, much more so the charcoal fire where Peter encountered Jesus. The only other time this Gospel mentions a charcoal fire, Peter was warming himself by it while he denied knowing Jesus. At this fireside, Peter would encounter Jesus as never before.

Jesus never mentioned Peter's failings, and Peter made no apologies or excuses. For Jesus, reconciliation was not a matter of guilt, blame or penance, but an opportunity for transformation. Three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" The first time, Jesus specifically asked if Peter loved him "more than these," perhaps referring to Peter's preference for being first. At this point, Peter would not claim priority. He simply answered, "You know that I love you."

This was Peter's confession. Standing humbled before Jesus, knowing that Jesus was fully aware of who he was and everything he had done, Peter acknowledged his weakness and claimed his source of strength. He needed to say no more than, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

In response, Jesus made no mention of the past. As he had done with everyone he healed or forgave, Jesus looked to the future and gave his forgiveness and grace by entrusting Peter with his mission. When Jesus had appeared among the disciples in the locked room, he commissioned them to forgive. Now, as Peter learned what divine forgiveness meant, Jesus commissioned Peter to feed and tend his sheep.

Until this moment, Peter could not have carried out Jesus' mission. Until Peter had been broken and wept, he didn't really know himself. Peter had to realize that when his loyalty was fragile and his love overcome by fear, Jesus still loved and even trusted him. Despite his best efforts, Peter had to accept his frailty as Jesus did. Then, and only then, could he understand what it means to love as Jesus loves. Until Peter had passed through this experience of betraying and being forgiven, he lacked the necessary knowledge and humility to tend Jesus' sheep.

Pope Francis could have been reflecting on this scene when he wrote to the U.S. bishops during their communal retreat last January. Francis reminded our bishops — and all of us as well — that we need an awareness of being sinners to enter into

affective communion with one another. He added that without a heartfelt and prayerful acknowledgment of our limitations, grace cannot work effectively within us.

This scene by the water recapitulates the entire Gospel message in a profoundly humbling story of reconciliation and mission. It is John the Evangelist's final reminder that only to the extent that we have been touched by God's loving acceptance of our weakness, can we proclaim a joyful Gospel about the forgiveness of sin. We are all invited to the eucharistic feast on the shore, the only requirement is that we come as we are and accept the love that is offered. When it comes to pastoring the flock or loving as Jesus did, only acknowledged sinners need apply.

### **ACTS 5:27-32, 40b-41**

As this scene opens, the apostles have been brought to the Sanhedrin, a formal council of 71 members that included elders from the most important families, the high priests, and the scribes who were often lawyers. According to John McKenzie's Dictionary of The Bible, this council was the supreme native court of the Jewish nation, with both religious and secular authority. While they could not impose the death sentence, they did have their own prisons and police. Part of this group had jailed the disciples for their preaching and healing, but their plans were thwarted by an angel who freed the disciples and ordered them to return to their preaching ministry in the Temple area. When the disciples obeyed the angel, the authorities had them rounded up again and brought them to the trial we hear about today.

This scene mirrors proceedings against people of conscience through the ages. The judge, impressively robed to convey his importance, attempted to impose his authority: "We gave you strict orders, did we not?" But speaking for the group, Peter laid out his case. He preached to the judges, explaining the disciples' perspective: "Your law brought death to Jesus. God raised him up. Isn't it obvious that we should obey the God of life rather than the purveyors of death?" Peter went on to point out that the leaders' plot against Jesus was inherently destined to fail because earthly authority is impotent to thwart God's plans.

As Luke builds up his story, he is pointing out the powerlessness of everyone who tries to stop the growing Christian movement. Try as they might to flaunt their power and authority, it comes to naught in the eyes of people on fire with the mission of the risen Christ. The final demonstration of authoritarianism's impotence

is the last line of the reading: “The apostles ... left ..., rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.”

### **PSALM 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11-12, 13**

This psalm is wonderful and slightly ironic as a response to our reading from Acts. Clearly, the apostles could have wholeheartedly sung, “I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me!” It mattered little that they were almost immediately back in the hands of their adversaries. The first verse we sing sounds like the escaped prisoners’ song of victory: “You drew me clear and did not let my enemies rejoice over me.” Although in the rhythms of real life such a victory may be short-lived, it is enough to keep the faithful going. They know God’s cause will succeed in the end, even when life seems to teeter-totter more than progress.

The second verse’s proclamation of God’s forgiveness can take us in two directions. The first, especially in the mouth of a model like Peter, leads us to sing of God’s forgiveness of our own personal failings. God’s faithfulness rests not on our virtue but on God’s everlasting love and good will. The second direction leads us toward forgiveness of those who persecute good people. The God who rescues the innocent and vulnerable is the same God who will lovingly accept anyone who asks for forgiveness.

With the third verse, we bring together what we have previously sung. We remember that even when we suffer for the cause of right, we are not innocent. We need God’s help in order to remain faithful enough to forgive. And when we accept ourselves as people needing God’s grace, we learn what it means to pray, “You changed my mourning into dancing.”

This psalm, a repeat of what we sang at the Easter Vigil, helps us remain in touch with God’s loving kindness. It invites us to remember the moments when we have been saved — both individually and collectively. Then, as a result of cherishing those memories, this prayer leads us into the profound thanksgiving that helps us to cultivate a truly humble heart.

### **REVELATION 5:11-14**

As a pastor and writer, John finds the genius of Greek mathematics inadequate to enumerate the creatures populating his heavenly vision. Speaking of a “myriad” (10,000), the highest number known to the Greeks, John says that there were

myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands — an explanation our version translates rather blandly as “countless in number.” This idea harkens back to various incidents in the Hebrew Scriptures, and John seems to be borrowing vocabulary from Psalm 68:18, which says, “God’s chariots were myriad, thousands upon thousands.” But nothing in the scriptural repertoire can measure up to John’s number. To imagine the angels and elders and creatures John describes, one would have to imagine individual faces on each of the countless grains of sand on the seashore; only God can name all of Abraham’s descendants. That is the breadth of God’s saving grace.

John sees this immeasurable congregation involved in a heavenly liturgy of praise, singing to the Lamb that was slain. The image of Christ as the lamb comes from John the Baptist (John 1:29) and echoes one of Isaiah’s Servant Songs (Isaiah 53:7). The image of the lamb that takes away the sin of the world caught the early Christian imagination and has remained with us as a permanent part of our Communion rite. According to Johannes Bauer in the book *Sacramentum Verbi*, the phrase “to take away sin” corresponds to “to set free from the power of Satan.” It implies that by revealing the truth, Christ gives humanity the means to “withstand the attack of the Evil One.”

But more than the salvation brought by the Lamb, this passage refers to the honor due Christ. He is the one who was slain; he is the one who remained faithful even through death. Because of that, he is worthy to receive the same honor as the God whom he did not forsake and who did not forsake him.

This reading proclaims Christ’s worthiness to be praised and worships Christ as the representative of the God who forgives, no matter how sinful or traitorous humanity may be. As such, this hymn reassures the faithful that they are on the right side of history. Those who are willing to suffer like Christ and for the sake of Christ will know his glory.

John’s awe-inspiring depiction of the rejoicing heavenly host proclaims that Christ will be recognized by all creation. Heaven and earth are full of his glory.

## **JOHN 21:1-19**

This is the epilogue of John’s Gospel. Whereas the prologue is highly philosophical, the epilogue is eminently practical, so much so that it would fit easily in the synoptic Gospels. We might consider this chapter as John’s compact version of Luke’s Acts of

the Apostles. But even with all its practical simplicity, it bears all the marks of John's symbolic writing.

The story begins at night — again, never a good time in John's Gospel. We need to remember that at this point in John's Gospel, although Jesus has already breathed out his Spirit on the disciples, they were not miraculously or instantaneously transformed. They were still a people in the process of conversion and growing discipleship. Although they began their mission in the night, the good news was that they were no longer locked up and hiding, but out on the open water, a locale that hints at a new creation.

John makes it clear that they started while it was night. That may be a good time for fishing, but it is never a good time in the Gospel of John. For John, Jesus is the light.

John tells us that Jesus revealed himself when dawn came. The disciples caught sight of him on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius, near where he had revealed himself as the bread of life, but as before, they did not really recognize him. Taking the initiative, Jesus called out to them as "children," asking if they had been successful. According to Edward W. Klink III, in his book *John*, Jesus' use of the term children is a subtle reference to the prologue's promise that those who believe in the name of Jesus will have the power to become children of God. (See a similar use of two terms for children in 1 John 2:1, 18.) This reference, along with the surprising lack of emphasis on the quantity of fish they caught, indicates that this story is more than a simple fishing miracle. It is a teaching about the power that comes from doing the Lord's bidding.

When the disciples arrived at the shore, they found Jesus tending a charcoal fire with fish and bread. These two details reach back to key moments of their life with Jesus. The other charcoal fire mentioned in John's Gospel was the place where Peter warmed himself as he denied knowing Jesus. This new fireside becomes the place where Jesus reconciles them, offering them bread and fish, the same meal they shared once before near this lake (John 18:18; 6:9). John caps his story with liturgical language as he says, "Jesus took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner, the fish." Those phrases lead the reader to understand this as a eucharistic encounter.

This was the disciples' last meal with Jesus. John's Gospel begins with Jesus' invitation that the seeking disciples stay with him. He performs his first sign at a

wedding feast. In the middle of the Gospel, Jesus shares bread and fish and teaches them that he is the bread of life. This last meal signifies that he will remain with them, and it supplies for the lack of any mention of bread at the Last Supper in John's Gospel.

John finishes this story with the simple summary statement, "This was the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples." This part of the epilogue reflects on the revelation that the risen Lord will not leave his children like orphans but will give them his power for mission. The second part reflects on the mission for which they will be empowered.

While still near the charcoal fire he had prepared, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Three times, Peter answers yes. Now, as at the Last Supper, Jesus tells Peter to do what he has done. Jesus, the good shepherd, tells Peter to follow him, not as a fisherman, but as a shepherd who will feed the flock.

Jesus' final command to Peter summarizes the Gospel mandate. In the beginning, curious disciples followed Jesus (John 1:37-43). At the end, after he has revealed himself as the ever-present shepherd who nurtures the sheep, Jesus simply says, "Follow me."

## **Planning: Third Sunday of Easter**

By Lawrence Mick

Today's readings might remind us that this is a season for mystagogy, both for the newly baptized and for the whole community. Our first reading recounts the opposition that the early disciples encountered from the Jewish leaders. One key line for mystagogy is "We must obey God rather than men." The newly baptized need to remember the gap between the values of the world and the values of the Gospel. One hopes that they faced that reality in their catechumenal formation, but they, like the rest of us, may be tempted to "go along to get along" in society. Living the Gospel is not easy these days. But the reading also reminds us that the disciples "left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name." There is joy to be found even when we are opposed and subjected to suffering.

The Gospel today suggests another message for the newly initiated. After Easter, Jesus appears to the disciples by the sea and subtly but powerfully reminds Peter (and surely the rest as well) of his betrayal. Yet he does not condemn or berate. Three times, he invites Peter to renew his love and to recommit himself to the mission entrusted to him. All of us fail too, the newly baptized included. And all of us are called repeatedly to renew our love relationship with Christ and to recommit ourselves to our mission.

As liturgical planners, we are also called to that kind of recommitment. When the risen Christ tells Peter to “Tend my sheep,” we might hear that as a mission entrusted to us as well. Our task is to help the assembly worship well and grow into deeper union with Christ. That may at times bring us opposition and emotional suffering, but it should also be a source of deep joy as we see our assemblies at worship.

Like the apostles, we are commissioned to lead people to Christ. We do that within the church walls by fostering good worship that invites people into an ever-deepening union with Christ and therefore with all our brothers and sisters. But we also need to remember that no Christian can limit his or her mission to the time and place of worship. We are all called to carry what we experience in the assembly to the streets and gathering places of people throughout society. Liturgy necessarily leads to mission beyond the church walls. Otherwise, it becomes a sterile pretense of worship, ultimately helping no one.

Find hymns and craft prayer intentions today that help the whole assembly to recognize the call to bring the Gospel to the world, no matter what suffering or opposition that mission may bring.

## **Prayers: Third Sunday of Easter**

By Joan DeMerchant\_

### **Introduction**

As in any new counter-movement, early Christians made their case regarding Christ’s identity and redemptive work under perilous conditions and the possibility of persecution. Their faith and commitment were expressed at enormous risk. This is still true for Christians in some places and situations, but not for most of us. Today’s readings challenge us who are not personally endangered: How compelling is our



personal faith commitment?

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you showed your identity to the disciples: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you called them to feed your lambs and your sheep: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you challenged them and us to love, above all: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We pray now for the grace to carry on the work of all who are called to follow Christ.

**Minister** For the universal church and all Christians, may our witness to Christ's unbounded love overshadow bureaucracy, fear and the desire for power, we pray:

- For those whose lives, reputations or livelihood are at risk because of their faith, especially those working in dangerous situations or seeking to live the Gospel with integrity in a secular world, we pray:
- For those who are not afraid to advocate for policies or practices that reflect the call to love others in politics, business and culture; and for those who use religion for political or monetary gain, we pray:
- For our Muslim brothers and sisters as they begin the rigorous penitential season of Ramadan; and for those who do not respect them, we pray:
- For those of us whose faith has become routine or tepid, rigid or judgmental; or who fear that we may be asked to grow in new and unfamiliar ways, we pray:
- For those in this community whose faith commitment is shattered because of illness, depression or addiction; and for those willing to help and support them, we pray:

**Presider** God who upholds us in all circumstances, we seek your support and guidance as we navigate the challenges of living our faith. We know we are called to follow Jesus day in and day out, with the same fervor as those who have gone before us. We ask for strength, courage and determination in God's holy name. Amen.

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