

“Chillin’ on the Beach with Jesus”

John 21:1-19

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In my mind, today’s passage from John’s Gospel is one of the most peaceful and idyllic passages anywhere in the New Testament. There’s no danger, there’s no dramatic conflict, there’s nobody here who is out to get Jesus in any way. The disciples just end up chillin’ on the beach with Jesus, enjoying a peaceful breakfast together, undoubtedly watching the sun rise over the Sea of Galilee on what was probably a beautiful day. It’s so peaceful. There is so much love here. It’s almost like a second Eden.

Sure, some things happen in this passage. It’s not that there’s *nothing* going on. But all the things that happen here are *good*. They bring joy and hope, peace and reconciliation. Such a contrast to all the drama that had accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry, all the people who wanted to kill him, all the people who wanted to stop him, all the people – and demons – who stood in his way.

The story begins in the evening. Seven of Jesus’s apostles are sitting together, perhaps reflecting on everything that had happened over the previous three years, and especially the previous few weeks. Judas Iscariot, one of their own, someone who had probably, at least for a time, felt like a close friend, had done the unthinkable. He had abandoned his faith and his principles; he had become a traitor to their cause; he had chosen to value his own life – and his own financial well-being – more than the life of their Lord. That hadn’t gotten him much. Matthew tells us that, in his remorse, he killed himself. So now they were down to eleven. They were all carrying around some guilt. Ten of them had fled that night when the soldiers arrived; they hadn’t stayed with Jesus in his hour of need; they hadn’t stood by him at his trial, they hadn’t witnessed his agony on the cross, or his death. Thankfully, miraculously, he hadn’t *stayed* dead; he had appeared to them two days after his death, and again a week later. For some reason that they couldn’t fully grasp, he still loved them. But none of them knew where he was now.

Simon Peter’s turmoil was perhaps the greatest of all. He hadn’t just *abandoned* Jesus. He had *lied about knowing* Jesus. Not just one, not just twice, but three times. He had been the first apostle Jesus had called. He was the one whom Jesus called “Rock.” He was the one upon whom, Jesus had said, he would build his church. He was the one to whom Jesus had promised to give the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Yet, in that hour of darkness, he lied about his relationship with Jesus multiple times, and then he just ... disappeared. Where was he on the day Jesus died? We don’t know. The Gospels don’t tell us. He just ... *wasn’t there*. He hadn’t loved Jesus enough to see the events unfold all the way to their bitter end. Surely, he was living with regret. Surely, he wished he had made different choices.

We can all relate, to some extent, right? Those times when we aren’t there for someone who’s counting on us. Those times when we run away from a bad situation because we’re just too scared to face it. Those times when we say things that aren’t true, in order to save our own skin. We can all relate.

Simon Peter gets up. "I'm going fishing," he declares. This was what he knew how to do. This is what he had been doing with his life before he met Jesus. Maybe it would take his mind off his troubles. The other six join him. They don't know what else to do. At this point, they have no clear *purpose*. That would come, a few weeks later; but right now, they do what they know how to do. They go fishing.

And they catch ... nothing. They're out there, all night, on the Sea of Galilee, seven of them, hurling their nets into the water time after time, trying *this* part of the lake, and then *that* part, and then another, and ... nothing. Not a single fish. They are failing. They can't even fish anymore.

Morning dawns. The sky towards the eastern shore glows in hues of pink and orange, over what is now the Golan Heights. The light from the rising sun shines towards the western shore, towards Galilee, towards all those towns where Jesus and the apostles had done so much over the past three years. There, on the beach, basking in the glory of the morning sun, stands Jesus, rays of light shining down on him from on high. The discouraged disciples in the boat see a man standing on the beach, but they don't recognize him. We don't always recognize Jesus when he's standing right in front of us.

He calls out. "Children, you don't have any fish, do you?" "No." They're tired. They're hungry. They're frustrated. Jesus tells them what to do: "Throw your net over the right side of the boat. You'll find some fish there." Undoubtedly, they've already tried that side. But they give it one more shot. They hurl the net into the water ... and suddenly there are so many fish they can barely pull them in.

Wait ... hasn't this happened before? Didn't they have this exact same experience, in just about this very same spot, three years earlier? Yes. Yes, indeed. That day when Simon and Andrew and James and John met Jesus the very first time. That day when they first began to realize who he was. That day when Simon Peter had gotten down on his knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" That day when they had left everything behind to follow Jesus. We've come full circle. Three years have passed, so much has changed, so much remains the same, and Jesus calls to the apostles one more time. John exclaims: "It is the Lord!" Simon Peter, throwing his outer garment around himself – I suppose he wanted to be wearing more than just his skivvies when he came to Jesus – jumps into the water and swims a hundred yards to the shore. The rest follow, in the boat, with their huge catch of fish. Jesus is ready to welcome them. He's been fixing breakfast for them, on the shoreline, over a charcoal fire. He offers them bread and fish, similar to how they had once shared five barley loaves and two fish with five thousand people on a nearby hill. "Come," says Jesus. "Come and have breakfast."

So they eat, their hearts bursting with joy. *Jesus is here*. With them. Again. Despite everything that had happened, everything they had done and not done, all the ways they had failed him, Jesus is there, sharing and communing with them out of the goodness of his heart. For that is what Jesus does.

Jesus does that for us too, you know. Offering himself to us again and again. Despite everything that we do, or don't do, despite all the ways that we fail him again and again, Jesus invites us, Jesus gives to us, sharing and communing with us out of the goodness of his heart. For that is what Jesus does.

But some unfinished business remains. All is not yet as it should be. There is a wound in need of healing. A sin that needs to be forgiven. It's hard to commune with Jesus if you haven't come clean with him. Jesus turns to Simon Peter. "Simon son of John," he says, tenderly, "do you love me more than these?" That question is enigmatic; what, exactly, does it mean? Do you love me more than you love your fellow disciples? Do you love me more than *they* love me? I don't think it's either of those. I think

what Jesus is inviting Peter to do is to look out at the beautiful vast expanse in front of them, the sandy beach, the tranquil sea, the distant mountains, the bright golden sun, the fishing boats, the nets, Simon Peter's whole vocation as a fisherman, and consider: "Simon Peter, do you love me more than you love *all of this?*" In other words: "Do I matter to you more than *anything else in the whole wide world?*"

Simon Peter doesn't hesitate. "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus replies, "Feed my lambs." *Make sure my people have enough to eat.* Jesus asks the question a second time: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon Peter affirms again: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Tend my sheep." *Take good care of all the members of my flock.* Then Jesus asks it a third time: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon Peter feels hurt. Why did Jesus need to ask the same question *three times?* Didn't he believe Simon Peter's first two answers? Or, alternatively, Simon Peter had incurred *three* debts to Jesus, there were *three sins* in need of redemption, because Simon Peter had lied about his relationship with Jesus *three times*. Three times, Simon Peter had put his own skin ahead of his Lord. Jesus *had* to ask the question three times, because Simon Peter *had* to own up to his three lies. Does it hurt? Of course it does. It hurts *anytime* Jesus invites us look at our failings, the things we have said or done or not said or not done, that have demonstrated that we care more about *ourselves* than we care about our *Lord*. If we're going to enjoy *full* communion with Jesus, we have to own up to the truth.

"Lord," says Simon Peter, "you know everything; you *know* that I love you." He sounds a little frustrated. But if he's going to be frustrated at somebody, it should be *himself*, not Jesus. Simon Peter had made those choices out of his own free will. The same way *we* do, every time we do something other than what Jesus wants. Simon Peter is right, though. Jesus *does* know everything. Jesus *does* know that Simon Peter loves him. But Jesus asks him to *say* it, that third time, for the good of his *soul*.

"Feed my sheep," Jesus says, one more time. This time, he spells out what it will mean – and what it will *cost*: "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." John, the narrator, adds this comment: "He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God." Jesus is hinting at the future that is in store for Simon Peter, if he continues following Jesus. His life won't end well. If Simon Peter *really loves* Jesus, he's going to have to be willing to *die* for Jesus ... the same way Jesus had died for him.

What happened to Simon Peter, in the end? The New Testament doesn't say, but several early Christian writers tell us what they think happened. Simon Peter eventually made his way to Rome. He helped build the church there. He became the first Bishop of Rome, and thus, looking back on it now, the very first Pope. He died there in Rome. He was *executed*. Indeed, he was *crucified*, like Jesus, but unlike Jesus, in that he asked his executioners to crucify him *upside-down*, because he didn't believe he was worthy enough to die the same way as his Lord. This took place, so tradition says, on Vatican Hill, on the site where the Basilica of Saint Peter now stands. If you look at Saint Peter's Basilica from Saint Peter's Square, you're looking at the spot where – many Christians believe – Simon Peter was executed.

So Simon Peter really *did* love Jesus so much that he was willing to die for him, persecuted for his faith in Jesus. And what about us? If we *really love* Jesus, would we be willing to *die* for him? How much – in all honesty – do we *really* love Jesus? Do we – in all sincerity – truly love him *that* much?

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