

Eat-Pray-Love

A sermon preached by Rev. Rachel Knuth

5.1.22, Community Church of Sebastopol

Easter 3, Year C: John 21:1-19

I.

Today's scripture is just delicious! I mean, if you've ever been camping, you know there is nothing like fresh fish cooked over an open fire with people you love. Of course, the Risen Jesus would make himself known to the disciples over breakfast! And it makes perfect sense they'd recognize him when they try their nets on the opposite side of the boat. It's all so familiar and comforting and tasty. The only thing missing is a hot cup of coffee.

This scripture comes to us from the Gospel of John, so there are lots of symbolic sensory details. Some are a bit esoteric— like 153 fish exactly (I mean, who counted all those fish and why 153?), Peter puts clothes on to jump into the sea (wait, he was naked this whole time?), and the slightly off-putting ending about elders being led where they do not want to go. There is a lot of rich imagery here, all worthy of exploring. But I think if we step back and view it as a whole, this is a story about forgiveness.

II.

It is probably fresh in Peter's memory that he denied knowing Jesus three times, back when Jesus was first arrested. He had three chances to acknowledge his relationship with Jesus, and each time he said No. I prefer to give Peter the benefit of the doubt; he was probably scared and it would have been dangerous for him to be a known associate of Jesus. But I would also guess that Peter has been replaying this over and over to himself, and has a lot of feelings about what he maybe "coulda, shoulda, woulda" done. Because what Peter did was lie in order to save himself. He wasn't brave: When he could have stood up for his beloved Teacher, he denied knowing him at all. He might be alive because of it, but he is likely consumed with guilt.

So when we get to this moment, the Gospel of John tells us, the Risen Jesus has already appeared to Mary, the disciples in the upper room, and to Thomas. Now he is at the side of the lake, relaxing by a campfire. Which seems kind of disarming, but then he pointedly asks Peter three times— Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? You can feel the tension build. It's the awkward tension of being called out for something Peter is ashamed of.

And haven't we all experienced awkward tension in a relationship? Haven't we all felt guilty and ashamed of things we've done— or sometimes worse—things we haven't done? So often we hold onto guilt, or its reverse: resentment for being wronged. Whether we are the guilty one or the one who's suffered from someone else's flaws, these feelings can grab hold of us and paralyze us from thinking clearly. They can keep us from being fully who God calls us to be. Which leads us to the process of forgiveness. So often we're pretty sure we "should" forgive. Even in today's Bible passage, there's a slight urgency at the end of the text— like you won't be able to tie your own belt forever— so you better get over yourself while you can still make a difference in your relationships and in the world. But how exactly does forgiveness happen? How do we do it?

III.

There are a lot of self-help books out there about forgiveness. And I think most of them would agree on what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not letting someone off the hook just to keep everyone happy. It isn't saying "I forgive you" while holding on to an underground grudge. It's not forgetting the wrong, and it's not release from consequences. We know a lot about what forgiveness isn't.

We also know that forgiveness can impact us in positive ways. The research is clear that the process of forgiveness has health benefits like decreased blood pressure and other physical markers. It can improve a person's mental and emotional health by granting a certain peace of mind. Letting go of a deeply held pain can mean not allowing that pain to define us, and it can make us feel more fully ourselves. There are some verifiable benefits to forgiving someone.

But there's a wide variety of ideas about how forgiveness happens, exactly. Does the person have to apologize to be forgiven? Do they have to be sorry? What about the social and (dare I say) religious pressures to forgive— is that what being a "good person" or "good Christian" is? When is forgiving someone an obligation or an anxiety binder, and when is it a mature response?

I recently heard a presentation by someone who had experienced a traumatic event in her life. She had an intense desire to forgive, and spent many years delving into her feelings about what had happened, attending forgiveness seminars, reading every book she could find about forgiveness, and working with therapists. Now in her 70s, she says what helped her most in moving forward in her life is this: To feel the feelings, and then make a decision about them. I think what she means is that our hurt feelings can't be ignored, the situation that caused them is real, and we need time to

acknowledge that. And then when we are able to step back and make a decision about our next steps, then we are not being controlled by our feelings, but are thinking through them.

What forgiveness can look like is probably different for people in different situations. Maybe it can follow a formula like many of the hundreds of web sites in the forgiveness sphere suggest. But can't forgiveness also be less dramatic? Can't it look like a couple of friends awkwardly eating breakfast on the beach, deciding that because they love each other, their relationship can move forward? I mean, Jesus doesn't make demands, he doesn't pull Peter aside and say, *I want to have a challenging conversation about how you denied me three times. When you did that, I felt hurt. And what I need from you now is an apology.* No; there's no scripted technique or emotional demand— he simply says, “Come and have breakfast.”

The moment isn't without tension. Jesus keeps asking, “Do you love me?” And Peter keeps answering, “Yes, of course.” Until Peter catches on. And we know Peter catches on because the Gospel tells us “Peter felt hurt” when Jesus asks that third time. And if we focus in on that hurt that Peter is feeling, I think what we find is guilt. Jesus is inviting Peter to feel the feelings, and then make a decision about how he's going to act next. And although Peter never asks for forgiveness and Jesus never names it explicitly, in this moment forgiveness is what is happening here. Do you love me? Yes, I love you. After the betrayal and hurt and guilt, there is new life here. It's not explicit, but it is implicit. And that's enough. And there is a delicious breakfast over an open fire with friends around. Peter is learning to eat with Jesus again after loss and hurt. It is a simple and beautiful picture of forgiveness.

The actor Stanley Tucci may be famous for his roles in movies like *Prizzi's Honor* and *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Hunger Games*, but he is also a foodie who has published several cookbooks. He loves being Italian and he loves Italian food. In his work with the United Nations, he has noticed how important food is to cultural identities, how in refugee camps people recreate recipes that feel like home. He writes extensively about his love of cheese, and during the pandemic he created short videos showing how to make fancy cocktails at home. So food is one of his loves. But Stanley Tucci was diagnosed with throat cancer a few years ago, and because of the size and location of the tumor, he needed both radiation and chemotherapy. Unfortunately, as it is for many people who go through cancer treatments, this meant that he lost his sense of taste. So this incredible love he had for food became less of a pleasure and more of a grief. Eating was not voluptuous and wonderful, but a painful chore.

Slowly and slowly, Stanley Tucci's taste buds have come back. That doesn't happen for everyone, but it did for him. After loss and hurt, he has learned how to eat bread again. Because his salivary glands are damaged, he has to dip his bread into broth or liquid to eat it, and he has to go slowly. I share this because I think that's how it is for Jesus and Peter too— after loss and hurt they have to learn how to eat bread together again. Things are not quite the same between them, but they're committed to trying, even if it's awkward. Some of us may be coming to the Communion Table after loss and hurt. Some of us may be learning how to eat bread again, how to forgive and be forgiven. If that's you, I want to say: Welcome. Embrace the awkward. You're in good company. Go ahead and taste the bread.

IV.

And what happens next, for Peter, and for us? Jesus says, feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. When you step forward to take Communion today, I want to invite you to pay attention to a certain moment. The bread will be placed in your hands, and you will taste it. And then as you walk to the side, there will be a moment when you turn the corner to go back to your seat. Savor that corner. Look to the back of the church where you'll be walking out from here. Because your work, our work, as fed and forgiven people, is to feed lambs. It's to live the liturgy in our lives, through service to others in the world. It's to go forth and act with love.