Homily for the Third Sunday of Easter – C

It seems that in many ways the disciples were not unlike the man who once proposed marriage to a young woman. When he proposed she responded, “You are crude, ugly, and lazy. I wouldn’t marry you in a million years.” When asked by a friend later if the woman had accepted his proposal, the man responded, “She wants me to give her a little time to think about it.” We do tend to process things through our own filters, don’t we? And the disciples of Jesus were no exception.

I think that one of the reasons the disciples had taken Jesus’ arrest and execution so hard was that, regardless of what he had said, when Jesus went up to Jerusalem, the disciples still expected that by some awesome act of God, he would assume his rightful role as messiah, Israel’s king, and would reign over his people. And being his handpicked disciples, they expected that they would have a special place of prominence in his kingdom.

So we can understand why the disciples were so crushed by the death of Jesus. It wasn’t just that they had lost a beloved friend. It was as though everything had been taken away from them in an instant. All their hopes were dashed. Throughout their time with Jesus, one of their recurring temptations was to see their relationship with him through the filter of what was in it for them. In this regard the disciples weren’t all that different from the crowds that had followed Jesus because they thought he could do something for them. This is why the disciples were so crushed by Jesus’ death. They thought that they were left with nothing but troubles, after they had given up everything to follow him.

Of course, the resurrection gave them the hope that they were back on track -- that their investment in Jesus was finally paying off. We caught a glimpse of this in today’s gospel, I think. There we found Peter, John, Thomas, and four other disciples in a boat. They had fished all night and had caught nothing. They were about a hundred yards off shore. And though they didn’t immediately recognize the stranger on the shore, when he told them to cast their net on the right side of the boat and it immediately filled with fish, they knew who it was. It was the same thing Jesus had done when he first met them.

So they all hurried to shore to welcome their risen Lord. But one of them stayed back to count the fish. After all, they were fishermen, and surely Jesus and the others would want to know how many they had caught. “One hundred and fifty-three big ones,” he announced as he ran up with a couple of fish for Jesus to cook. “It’s amazing the net could hold that many without tearing.” So there it was -- another miracle. Once again, Jesus had demonstrated what he could do for them. They were back in business! They were filled with new hope that all they had endured as his followers finally was going to pay off. At least, I imagine a few of them were thinking something like this.

And all the while, there was Jesus, the risen Lord, fixing breakfast for them. But, as so often had been the case with his disciples, it seems that they didn’t get the connection between this meal that Jesus was preparing for them and the last meal he had served up for them – that last supper where he had taken a towel and washbasin and went around and washed all their feet -- and where he had said afterwards, “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you also should do.” And here he was again, giving them a model to follow. The risen Lord was cooking breakfast for them.

In addition to this, at his command, they had caught 153 fish without the net being torn. Obviously they didn’t get the significance of that either. We can hardly blame them for not understanding what this was all about. But the number of fish and the net not tearing are significant.
Centuries later, Jerome explained it like this. In his day, those who studied such things said that there were 153 different species of fish in the known world. Jerome said that what Jesus was revealing to us through the number of fish caught and the net not being torn is that there is room in the Church for all the different peoples of the world. It will hold as many as we can bring in. In other words, this was a reminder to the disciples that they had not been called to be princes, who were to be served by others, but rather, they had been called to be servants, who would do everything they could to bring people into the kingdom of God.

But since they obviously didn’t get the fish and net thing, Jesus said to Peter after breakfast, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Now many people assume that Jesus said this after taking Peter aside for a private conversation between the two of them. But the text doesn’t say this. And it makes more sense to me that this conversation was intended to be heard by all of them, because it had something to do with all of them.

“Do you love me more than these?” Now in asking this, did Jesus mean did Peter love him more than the fish, or did Peter love him more than he did the other disciples, or did Peter love him more than the other disciples loved him?” I have to say that after reflecting on the gospel this year, it was the first time I ever thought that maybe he was referring to the fish, meaning, did Peter love Jesus more than the things that Jesus could do for him? But regardless of what Jesus actually intended by “more than these” the bottom line was that Jesus was teaching Peter and the others, one more time, what it really meant to love him. It meant to do what he had done – to give themselves in service to others. And so following Peter’s assurance of his love, Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Jesus asked Peter the same thing three times and each time he made the same response to Peter’s profession of love. Some think that Jesus did this three times as a way of giving Peter the opportunity to make amends for denying him three times. But really, now, could this possibly do it? I’m sure that in Peter’s mind nothing could really make up for that. I think instead that John tells it this way because in the scriptures, three is a significant number. It is a number that suggests completeness. For instance, Jesus was tempted three times by the devil. Peter denied Jesus three times. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day.

So in this gospel, Jesus asks Peter for the third time, “Do you love me?” For the third time Peter says “Yes! You know that I love you.” And for the third time Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.” In other words, this is what loving Jesus is all about -- serving those he loves, as Jesus had served them. In his final encounter with his disciples, as John tells the story, the risen Jesus laid it all out for them simply and completely – that they were to love one another as he had loved them.

And through them he says the same thing to us. “Do you love me more than anything? Then feed my sheep. Tend to the needs of one another.” And as it was to them, this is Jesus’ final word to us, “Don’t be concerned about what you’re going to get – I’ll tend to that – just concern yourselves with what you’re going to give.” That’s what it’s all about.

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