

Easter 3 – May 1, 2022- A Conversation - Two Deacons'

I have a question for you.

Shoot. I just came back from Bible study.

Good. Then you might be able to tell me.

Go ahead.

How many times does the Bible mention charcoal fires?

What kind of question is that?

Well, I take it you don't know. So I'll tell you. Exactly twice. And both of them involve St. Peter.

Enlighten me further, O wise one.

The first time the charcoal fire is mentioned is when Peter denies knowing Jesus.

Ah yes, I remember. He was outside the courtyard warming himself while Jesus was being tried.

When was the second time?

At the lakeshore after the resurrection. You remember,...when Jesus was making breakfast for the disciples. There again John notes that there was a charcoal fire.

Yes. So?

That's the time when Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. Three times He asked. Well, what the Gospel writer wants us to notice is that the threefold denial and the threefold questioning are connected. Jesus is giving Peter a chance to erase the denial.

So?

So, God is gracious. The risen Jesus reinstates Peter. He feeds Peter and then gives him a job as his shepherd, to feed the lambs and the sheep and to care for them.

Ah, I see what John was pointing out. Peter was forgiven and in spite of his denials, Jesus gave him a leadership role.

This is the third Sunday of Easter. We are celebrating the Resurrection, the risen Jesus. His appearance to Peter celebrates divine grace. Throughout history there has been and still is so much judgment, peoples' lives crushed under its weight.

But here in the final chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus comes to his disciples where they are, on the shores of Lake Tiberius at dawn. He has built them a charcoal fire. Unlike the first charcoal fire where Peter warmed himself, in a dangerous courtyard, afraid to reveal who he really was; this charcoal fire is built expressly for the disciples, built so fish can be cooked on it. Jesus is feeding his disciples.

Three times Jesus questioned Peter's love. Can we imagine that three times Jesus looked deep into Peter's eyes and heart and soul and asked, "Peter, do you love me?" And three times Peter answered, "Lord, you know that I love you."

Filled with the smell of the charcoal fire, it wasn't until the third time that Peter, realized what was going on. At that moment, did Peter look into the eyes of Jesus and feel the mercy, grace and forgiveness? And the last time Peter said, "Lord, you know I love you." Could there have been a smile lightening his whole face? Or, maybe it took a while for what had happened to sink in. But we know it did sink in and that Peter went on to be outstanding.

Had there not been failure, there never would have been the indescribable joy of forgiveness.

Had there not been failure, Peter never would have felt the burdens of his soul lifted that morning and he wouldn't have known the real depth of Jesus' love for Him and the price Jesus paid on the cross. Had it not been for the FIRE OF FAILURE there would have been no FIRE OF FORGIVENESS.

The smell of a charcoal fire would have haunted Peter for the rest of his life. But because of the FIRE OF FORGIVENESS, the smell of charcoal burning was transformed just like Peter. The smell of charcoal became sweet, bittersweet, but sweet to Peter's nose. He'd remember and feel a pang of remorse but he'd also smile a knowing smile. A smile that said, "I'm forgiven."

If we are honest, and sometimes it is difficult, we can see how we are just like Peter. We have all had those Peter moments in our lives. We've all had those moments when we feel we have let Christ down when we have hidden our identity and denied being a Disciple of Christ.

I have a colleague, Ros, a retired priest in the Diocese of Montreal. She worked in the east end of Montreal and at Mile End Mission. Recently on Facebook, she asked people to send in what they remember about her. One woman remembers her motto "We don't do perfect". She found those words welcoming and relaxing.

If you've ever smelled THE FIRE OF FAILURE then I invite you to take a deep breath and smell the FIRE OF FORGIVENESS. You see that's the Good News. Like Peter, we can experience the FIRE OF FORGIVENESS. That's why he came. That's why this breakfast on the beach is here, as a reminder that in the Name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

What Christ was asking of Peter and what Christ is asking of us is, despite our past mistakes, to show our love by caring for others.

This can include the literal act of feeding demonstrated in our monthly community breakfast at St George's which we have been doing for almost five years.

The presence of hunger in a world with enough food is a great moral and spiritual contradiction. Hunger is a symptom of things gone wrong. It results from poverty, mental illness, lack of affordable housing, war, corrupt government, unfair trading practices, insufficient water for irrigation, and changing weather patterns. These are what we call the "root causes" of hunger.

If we love Jesus, if our answer is 'yes Lord, I love you', then our love is demonstrated in action, by feeding his people. Our love for Jesus is a living thing which spills out in an enthusiasm for loving others. I came across this quote by

Mother Maria of Paris

The way to God lies through love of other people and there is no other way. Personal almsgiving and the most wide-ranging social work are equally justifiable and necessary.

When I was a student at Wycliffe College in Toronto, I used to go on the 'Saturday night sandwich run'. We walked around downtown giving out food to the homeless, literally feeding God's sheep.

Paul, our leader had t-shirts made for us at the end of the year... On the front 'Wycliffe College Sandwich Run' and what do you know...on the back was the Gospel we heard this morning...the Gospel which ends with "Feed my sheep."

And that's what we were doing, it was really a small gesture, a sandwich and a cup of hot chocolate. It did nothing to solve the bigger problems, like lack of low-cost housing. But it did give those souls living on the edge a little something to eat and a little human recognition. There are countless other acts of love and service both big and small which we can do for others.

Just as Peter was forgiven, so are we. Despite our mess ups, we are forgiven. Being perfect is not required. Our Lord feeds us with his body and blood at every Eucharist. In turn, as he said to Peter, he says to us...feed my sheep.