

## Third Sunday of Easter — May 5, 2019

John 21:1-19

What people see in us—what people see us do—is the embodiment of our thoughts and words. Our interests, our values, our convictions are manifested in our actions. Sometimes we say, “actions speak louder than words.” Usually they do. Actions follow on the things we hold to be important.

Today’s gospel reading is about words and actions, show and tell. [The children’s time was about show and tell, emphasizing the importance both of telling Jesus that we love him and showing it in our loving actions for others.] It begins with the Risen One showing himself to some of the disciples. I imagine them wondering what they should do next after they have experienced the trauma of Jesus’ death and then the shock of his resurrection. They have discovered the empty tomb. Jesus has appeared to Mary, then to ten of the disciples, and then to Thomas. But now what? Their world has been turned absolutely upside down, but now what do they do?

Peter, their leader, has an idea: “Let’s go fishing,” he says. That always strikes me as a little odd, until I remember “Oh year, that’s what they do. They’re fisherman.” Peter, in other words, is proposing that they go back to work, get back to doing what they know. We do it too, don’t we? After we have experienced a trauma, a radical upset of our routine, it feels good to get back to what we know.

Then Jesus shows himself to the disciples. But notice, as is the case with all the post-resurrection appearances, they do not recognize from his physical appearance. Mary did not recognize him outside the tomb but assumed he was the gardener. That evening in the house the disciples did not recognize him until he showed them his wounds.

Now after fishing all night and catching nothing, this stranger shows up on the shore offering advice. “Throw your net off the starboard side and you’ll catch something.” For whatever reason, they do what he says, and haul in a catch that strains their net.

We read that the beloved disciple is in the boat. Who is he, anyway? We don’t have any details, but there is one disciple who throughout John’s gospel is described as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Evidently, Jesus was closer to this one disciple than all the rest, and as you may remember, he was the one who ran with Peter to discover the empty tomb.

The beloved disciple sees this amazing, abundant catch and proclaims, “It is the Lord!” He recognizes Jesus not by his physical appearance, but by the abundance that comes in his presence. It is reminiscent of the feeding of the five thousand. This is what Jesus does when he comes near: he brings abundant life. So it must be the Risen Lord showing himself again!

Then Peter gets it too. He recognizes that the abundant catch has to mean that Jesus is near. So he grabs his sweatshirt and throws it on (he had been stripped down to the waist for fishing), jumps into the water, and swims to greet Jesus on the shore. When the other disciples arrive in the boat, they find that Jesus has prepared a meal for them. What a Jesus-like thing to do! He feeds people. He brings abundance. Like the feeding of the five thousand, like a good shepherd feeding his flock, like Jesus fed the disciples at the last supper. They recognize Jesus as the host who invites them to come and eat.

Notice again, it is by the gifts that accompany Jesus’ presence that the disciples recognize the Risen Lord, not by his physical appearance. We come to realize this as they sit around the fire sharing breakfast. Some of them obviously want to ask him who he is—which they wouldn’t if he were easily recognizable physically—and yet they are hesitant to ask because who else could it be? The signs of his presence are all around. It has to be Jesus.

You know, this is how it is for us too. We who no longer see Jesus physically, nevertheless recognize the Risen Lord by the gifts he brings with his presence among us.

Today’s gospel reading is a show and tell story. So far, it’s been showing—Jesus showing himself by signs of abundance. But now we come to the telling part.

Now we see just Jesus and Peter sitting around a fire. Hmmm, sound familiar? The last time we saw Peter around a fire was the time that he denied Jesus. How many times did he deny Jesus? Three.

So notice what happens around this fire. Jesus asks Peter *three times*, “Do you love me?” And Peter responds, *three times*, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” This is Peter’s opportunity to repent of his denial and to receive the Lord’s forgiveness. Peter told it wrong when around that other fire he said, “I am not his disciple.” Now he is given a second chance, a new opportunity to tell it right. Three times he says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

As powerful as this opportunity for repentance and forgiveness is for Peter, telling it like it is is not all there is. Each time that Peter tells his love for Jesus, Jesus asks him also

to show it. "Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep." Jesus repeatedly calls Peter to love and to serve; to tell, yes, but also to show his love for Jesus through his loving actions for others. It seems as if Jesus is saying to Peter and all disciples that our most effective witness to Jesus' love is how we love one another and the world in which we live. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," says Jesus, "If you have love for one another."

I asked you last week to ponder during the 50 days of Easter how you are going to live differently today because Jesus is risen. Using the language of today's gospel reading, we might ask ourselves, How are we going to feed Jesus' lambs? How are we going to feed his sheep? How are we called to tend and nurture the flock, with special concern for the weakest most vulnerable ones? How can we bring abundance where there is scarcity? How can we sow hope where there is despair? How can we bring kindness where there is hatred? Acceptance where there is exclusion? Peace where there is strife? And how will we do all this in the context of our daily life and work, the places where we do our fishing?

As the old song says, "They will know we are Christians by our love." True. Let us find the ways to walk and to work and to love together so all will know that the Risen Lord is truly present in our midst.