

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Third Sunday of Easter; April 10, 2016

“Thrice Redeemed”

Scripture: John 21:1-19 (and John's Passion Narrative)

[Ominously...]

Be careful now. It is as though we (along with Peter) have seen all of this before: the dusky, shadowy light stretching slowly out from the horizon of the morning's new dawn; the stooped and quiet figures gathered round a crackling fire for light and for warmth, faces flickering in and out of the firelight, brooding, mysterious, and unsure. And the question that rises out of the half-darkness: “Simon [Peter], son of John, do you love me more than these?”

Just for a moment, did Peter think he heard another voice echoing deeply somewhere in his mind, an unfriendly voice saying: “This man was also with Jesus.”?

But Peter shakes it off just in time to respond: “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.”

Really? Was he sure?

Because a second time Jesus asks the question in the quickening light: “Do you love me?” But, in that moment, could Peter fail to remember other words uttered only days ago, an accusation in the same near darkness: “You also are one of them.”? But Peter pulls it together to respond a second time: “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.”

But three times... Three times proves too much for Peter. “You also are one of them!”

“Man, I am not!”

But wait, that isn’t what Peter just heard. Jesus has only asked him a third time: “Do you love me?” And Peter, tired and frustrated exclaims, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!” And I wonder, at that moment, somewhere off in the distance, might Peter once again have heard the sound of the cock crowing at a new and brightening day?

Three times Peter denied his Lord in the time of need as the crucifixion loomed so terribly before Jesus. Now, three times Jesus calls Peter to affirm his renewed destiny. Just days ago, Peter was hiding in fear for his life. Just days ago Peter had proclaimed: “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!”

Now, Jesus tells Peter he will indeed follow him to such places, though Peter will no longer wish to go.

Love gives Peter another chance, a chance to move beyond the bluster of misplaced heroism, beyond the brokenness of betrayal and cowardice and denial. Peter is given a chance to be thrice redeemed, to begin again, to take up the work of a beloved and faithful and appreciated friend and follower of Jesus, not some denying coward of no worth, but a true and faithful friend.

And what does Jesus tell him will be the expression of his redemption? It seems so simple: “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep, Peter.” “Feed my sheep.”

No swords. No earthly thrones. No titles and honors. No particular love from the masses. Just... *Take care of others for me, Peter.* That is what Jesus asks.

Now I do not believe that Jesus asks this solely of Peter. I don't believe this any more than I believe that Peter is the only follower of Jesus who has ever denied him. I've had my moments. Perhaps you have too. So when Jesus reaches out with an offer of redemption, neither is it offered solely for Peter. It's for all of us. And isn't that the heart of the Easter message anyway? Easter is new life out of death. Light out of darkness. Redemption out of condemnation. Healing out of

brokenness. Hope out of hopelessness. I'm telling you... those who fail to observe the significance of Good Friday can never fully understand the power of Easter. It is from Peter's brokenness that he now knows the power of redemption. It is from our failures that we are raised to new life by the gift of God's grace and love.

And what is the expression of our renewal of life, of our redemption and of our faithfulness? "Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep."

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There once was a man named Simon, renamed Peter by his Lord. He was a coward and false-friend in the time of need. By the grace and redemption of his Savior, he became the leader of the early Church and gave his life to share with us the message of salvation through the love of Jesus Christ.

There once was a man named Saul, renamed Paul by his Lord. He was angry, venomous, and murderous toward the tiny but growing band of those who followed the Way, the way of Jesus. By the grace and redemption of his Savior, he eventually gave his life to Jesus and spread the word far and wide in a world before cars and planes and internet. He did it the old-fashioned way: on foot, by voice and letter from homes, synagogues, prisons, and even the halls of government.

We come with many names. Gathered as one, we are renamed in the honor of St. Stephen, the first deacon of Christ's Church and witness to his risen Lord. By the grace and redemption of the Savior, we are called to serve the world in Jesus' name --- to feed, tend, and serve. This is our meaning. This is our purpose. In this we will find our salvation.