

‘Baptism By Fire’

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
May 1, 2011

I Peter 1:3-9

John 21:1-19

[The Apostle Peter said,]

“In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while
you have had to suffer various trials,
so that the genuineness of your faith—
being more precious than gold
that, though perishable, is tested by fire—
may be found to result in praise and glory and honour
when Jesus Christ is revealed.

I Peter 1:6-7

Let us pray... O God,

Strengthen us for the tasks you send and do not allow us to be consumed.

May we prove worthy in the times of trial.

Amen

Peter is my favorite disciple –

he is rough and impetuous and not afraid to jump in with both feet,
though he often has to backpedal out of the mess he gets into.

He was the second in command of the disciples and had big dreams
about what they could do because of what Jesus could do.

But when Jesus got arrested, even then Peter followed, believing
Jesus was somehow going to pull off a miracle like all the other times –
maybe call down an army of angels to finally rid their land
of the Evil Empire of Rome
and set the 12 disciples up on thrones to reign over the Earth
just like he said.

But it didn't happen that way...

Instead, Peter found himself trying to get warm by a fire
in the high priest's courtyard while Jesus was being interrogated.

Then, Peter was *found out* as one of Jesus' followers
and his faith in a powerful and invincible Christ
was consumed by these events.

He denied being with Jesus or even knowing him, three times.

Then the rooster crowed as Jesus had predicted,
and it was like a fiery mirror was held up to show Peter
the reality of his own weakness and failings.
And he ran off into the night to try to get away from himself.

Willard, p.2

I believe there are two baptisms for us as Christians –
there is the Baptism by water through which we are
brought into the faith and family of God in Christ, and
there is the baptism by fire of our own experience during which
we are tested to see what we and our faith are made of.
I think that is what this story is about as it continues when Peter
encounters the Risen Christ three days later, once again by a fire.

Yet that encounter begins with a joke –
not to mock Peter, but to help heal him.
On the occasion when they first met,
Jesus had gotten into a boat which belonged to Peter.
Jesus was preaching to a crowd that was so big,
he was backing up into the water.

Afterwards, it's like Jesus wanted to do something
to thank Peter for the use of his boat,
so he told him to go out a little further to catch some fish.
Peter does this and to his amazement, the net is full of a huge catch of fish.
But he is also terrified.
Peter was a roughneck, working-class guy
who is suddenly in the presence of holiness –
and he doesn't know how to act.
Unable to reconcile this miraculous event with his experience
he begs Jesus to go away.
But Jesus jokes with him telling him that he will become a fisherman
who will learn to catch people.

Now, let us fast forward to the Resurrection –
the scene once again is by the shores of Galilee.
Peter has given up on his big dreams of changing the world
and has decided to go back to what he knew best – to be a fisherman
and he convinces some of the disciples to go with him.
They fish all night, but catch nothing
and in the morning, they are just drifting offshore.

But there on the beach is Jesus and he calls to them,
asking if they have any fish.

Willard, p.3

They tell him they don't have anything,
then he tells them where they're biting –
which is always going to be on the "right" side of the boat.
You know, instead of the "wrong" side –
otherwise, he would have said the "starboard" side.
And what follows is – once again, a miraculous fish!

But Peter was so troubled at the news that Jesus was alive, there on the beach,
that he put his clothes on then dove into the water –
as if he was trying to get away.

The only option would've been the open sea –
like Jonah who tried to escape God by sailing away
to the farthest corner of the known world
which was Spain at that time.

Meanwhile the other disciples row the boat ashore
and find Jesus there.

He asked them to bring the fish they had just caught,
and Peter is the one who goes back on board to drag them ashore.

He should've just stayed in the boat!

He should've just trusted Jesus in the first place
that things were going according to plan as Jesus had said –
"The Son of Man, the True Heir of Humanity must suffer and die,
but on the third day rise."

It was another joke to help Peter – but then there was the fire...

The disciples find Jesus on the beach with a fire going
with fresh baked bread and roasted fish
and he calls them all to breakfast.

Now, Jesus never did forgive Peter.

Jesus was so far past having to forgive –
so far beyond having to have an apology,
that it didn't matter to him.

After they had eaten breakfast and they were all sitting there by the fire,
Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, three times –
just like Peter denied him three times.

Willard, p.4

His purpose was not to torment Peter,
but to heal him from his shame and guilt.
Jesus had to open the wound to heal it.

Jesus wasn't joking then –

he was busy doing open heart surgery.

For Peter sitting there by that early morning fire on the beach,
it was like that terrible fire at night in the high priest's courtyard.

I don't believe there is a place of eternal punishment,
but more likely there will be the fire of truth
to burn away all that is false and unworthy in our lives,
the egotistical mask of vanity will fall away leaving only
the heart of who we are, the gold of what the Spirit of love
was able to accomplish through us.

A friend once asked me,

“What happens when we die?”

But in his case, I thought a better question would be,

“What will Heaven be like?”

And I expect those who build their lives on love

will pass through like they are walking along on a cool spring afternoon.

We can't undo whatever we did, but as long as we have life,
we are given the next moment to do things differently the next time.

Otherwise, we remain imprisoned by our refusal to forgive ourselves.

But now, we have the next moment to turn from any false ways
to live authentic, fulfilled lives and move on into new life
just like Simon Peter the Rock was able to do.

Hopefully, we don't go too far along on our life journey when we can recognize
how we have compromised ourselves and make a change

like Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' *Christmas Carol*.

Such encounters with the truth can be the occasion for repentance
and transformation – a second baptism by fire.

That's what Peter went through on the shores of Galilee,

three days after the Crucifixion and Peter's betrayal of Christ
and of himself.

Willard, p.5

And what Peter found was that love is all that's left in the end
just like the theme lyric from the film, "Midnight Cowboy".

*Hearts are made for caring
Life is made for sharing
Love is all that's left in the end
Love can turn the tide for a friend
Love can hold a dream together
Love is all that lasts forever
Love is all that lasts in the end*

<http://www.leoslyrics.com/listlyrics.php;jsessionid=1B2DBF16789404AE75755FD45DA8ADD7?hid=wxsBbmYXb0%3D>

Amen

Our lesson today is from I Peter 1:3-9 where we hear the words attributed to the Apostle Peter who abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, yet was renewed in his faith to re-gather the disciples and build the church.

1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

4and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled,
and unfading, kept in heaven for you,

5who are being protected by the power of God through faith
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

6In this you rejoice,

even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,

7so that the genuineness of your faith—

being more precious than gold that, though perishable,
is tested by fire—

may be found to result in praise and glory and honour
when Jesus Christ is revealed.

8Although you have not seen him, you love him;

and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him
and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,

9for you are receiving the outcome of your faith,
the salvation of your souls.

Inspired by John 21:2-19

AMONG THE DISCIPLES WHO HAD GONE TO GALILEE
WERE SIMON PETER, THOMAS THE TWIN,
NATHANIEL THE CANAANITE OF GALILEE,
THE SONS OF THUNDER, AND SOME OTHERS.

SIMON PETER SAID TO THEM,

“[I DON’T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT] I AM GOING FISHING.”

THEY SAID TO HIM,

“WE’LL COME WITH YOU, TOO.”

AND THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT, THEY CAUGHT NOTHING...

NOW WHEN MORNING HAD FINALLY COME,

JESUS WAS STANDING ON THE BEACH –

THOUGH NONE OF THE DISCIPLES REALIZED THIS.

AND SO, JESUS CALLED TO THEM,

“LADS, HAVEN’T YOU CAUGHT ANYTHING YET?”

THEY ANSWERED,

“NO.”

HE SAID TO THEM,

“THROW YOUR NETS TO THE STARBOARD SIDE OF THE BOAT
AND YOU WILL FIND SOMETHING.”

SO, THEY DUMPED THEIR NETS OVER THE SIDE...

BUT THEY WEREN’T STRONG ENOUGH TO PULL THEM BACK IN
BECAUSE OF THE HUGE CATCH OF FISH!

THEN, THAT DISCIPLE – WHO WAS JESUS’ BELOVED FRIEND, SAID,

“ROCKY! IT IS THE LORD!”

WHEN SIMON – THAT IS, ROCKY, HEARD THAT IT WAS THE LORD,

HE TIED ON SOME CLOTHES AROUND HIM,

BECAUSE HE WAS IN HIS SKIVVIES,

BUT THEN – HE DOVE INTO THE SEA!

MEANWHILE, THE OTHER DISCIPLES ROWED THE BOAT BACK IN

BECAUSE THEY WEREN’T SO FAR FROM LAND –

ONLY 100 YARDS AWAY,

TOWING THE NETS FULL OF FISH.

AND WHEN THEY CAME ASHORE,

THEY FOUND A CHARCOAL FIRE GOING

LAI D OUT WITH FISH BROILING AND BREAD COOKING.

JESUS SAID TO THEM,

“WHY DON’T YOU BRING SOME OF THE FISH
YOU JUST CAUGHT?”

SO, SIMON PETER HAD TO GO BACK ABOARD THE BOAT

TO DRAG THOSE NETS TO LAND,

FULL OF FISH – 153 OF THEM!

AND EVEN THOUGH THERE WERE SO MANY,

THE NETS HAD NOT SPLIT APART.

JESUS SAID TO THEM,
“COME EAT SOME BREAKFAST!”
NOW, NOT ONE OF THOSE DISCIPLES DARED ASK HIM,
“WHO ARE YOU?”
HAVING KNOWN THE LORD, HE KNEW THIS WAS HIM –
BECAUSE JESUS CAME AND SERVED THEM BREAD
AND LIKEWISE THE FISH.
SO, THIS WAS THE THIRD TIME THAT JESUS APPEARED
TO WITNESSES AFTER RISING FROM DEATH.

WHEN EVERYONE HAD FINISHED EATING,
JESUS SAID TO SIMON PETER,
“SIMON, JONAH’S SON,
DO YOU LOVE ME MORE THAN ANYTHING?”
HE SAID TO JESUS,
“YEAH, LORD, YOU KNOW THAT I CARE ABOUT YOU!”
JESUS SAID TO HIM,
“WELL, FEED MY LAMBS.”
JESUS SAID TO HIM AGAIN – A SECOND TIME,
“SIMON, JONAH’S SON, DO YOU LOVE ME?”
HE SAID TO JESUS,
“YES, LORD... YOU KNOW THAT I CARE ABOUT YOU.”
JESUS SAID TO HIM,
“GUARD MY SHEEP.”
JESUS SAID TO HIM A THIRD TIME,
“SIMON, SON OF JONAH, DO YOU CARE FOR ME?”

ROCKY WAS IN ANGUISH
BECAUSE JESUS QUESTIONED HIM FOR THE THIRD TIME –
DID HE CARE FOR JESUS?

AND HE SAID TO HIM,
“LORD, YOU KNOW... EVERYTHING!
YOU MUST KNOW THAT I CARE FOR YOU!”

JESUS SAID TO HIM,
“FEED MY SHEEP...”

[AND HE WENT ON TO SAY,]
“I’M REALLY TELLING YOU THE TRUTH –
WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG, YOU GEARED UP
TO GO WHEREVER YOU WANTED.
BUT WHEN YOU ARE GROWN UP,
YOU WILL BE READY TO STRETCH OUT YOUR HANDS
TO RECEIVE OTHERS WHO WILL BIND YOU UP
TO TAKE YOU WHERE YOU MIGHT NOT OTHERWISE GO.”
HE SAID THIS TO SYMBOLIZE FOR HIM
HOW HE WOULD GLORIFY GOD DESPITE DEATH.
HAVING SPOKEN THUS, JESUS SAID,
“FOLLOW ME!”