

The context for this morning's scripture reading was the third post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples. This particular appearance took place on the shoreline of the sea of Galilee. The disciples had been out fishing when Jesus appears to them on the shore. Once they realize it's Jesus they come ashore where Jesus is waiting for them with a charcoal fire ready to cook up some of the fish they had just caught. Our scripture for the this morning picks up the story in verse 15:

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. 18 Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." 19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

In order to fully appreciate the meaning and significance of this story we need to go back earlier in the gospels. On the night before Jesus was to be handed over to the religious authorities and crucified he met with his disciples in the upper room to share the last supper together. Jesus is hoping to prepare his friends for what is about to happen to him and unto them. In the course of the meal Jesus and Peter have this conversation:

Jesus: Peter, be on your guard. Satan has tried his best to separate all of you from me.

Peter: Master, I'm ready for anything. I'm ready to go to jail for you...in fact, I would die for you.

Jesus: I'm sorry to tell you this Peter, but before the rooster crows tomorrow morning you'll have denied three times even knowing me.

And, of course, that's exactly what happens...when confronted by those standing outside in the courtyard of the high priest Peter denies being one of Jesus' followers, denies being with him, and denies even knowing him.

this brings us back to our story of Jesus and the disciples having breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Do you remember how many times Jesus' asks Peter the same question, do you love me? Right three times. Do you remember how many times Peter denied Jesus? Right three times. Coincidence...no. I can picture Peter sitting by the charcoal fire waiting for the fish to cook...both excited to see Jesus...but still consumed by shame and guilt. Jesus, perhaps sensing Peter's inner turmoil, pulls him aside and begins his questioning:

Peter, do you love me?...Yes Lord, you know that I do.

Peter, do you love me?...Yes Lord, you know that I do.

Peter, do you love me?...Yes, Lord you know that I do.

Maybe with each question by Jesus and each response of Peter, Peter's shame and guilt are dissipating even to the point of Peter copping a bit of an attitude on the last, Do you love me?

Jesus, I believe, was restoring the relationship between himself and Peter so that Peter could move into the future strong in his faith and not consumed by shame and guilt.

That alone is a powerful outcome of the story, right? Peter was restored, some might even say forgiven for denying Jesus and Jesus could have left it there. "Thank you Peter for your confession and your profession. Thank you for your love. Now don't you feel better?"

But Jesus uses this moment, not to leave Peter where he is but to move him forward.

Peter do you love me? Feed my sheep...Take care of my sheep...Feed my sheep.

Peter do you love me?

Show me...prove it...do something about it...this is what truly loving me look like...

Peter, you have forgiven, restored for a purpose; you have been forgiven...restored not only for your sake but for the sake of others as well.

How are we doing so far?

When I reached this point in my sermon preparation a bunch of other scripture came pouring into my thoughts. Scripture like: Matthew 22:37: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself; or James 2:17: Faith without works is dead; or Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, 'will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

All good, important, powerful scripture passages that stress the importance of professing Jesus as Lord and doing God' will and work in response to that profession.

But here's the passage that struck me the most...possibly because it's one of my absolute favorites.

Ephesians 2:10 *10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

Friends, we have been created in Christ Jesus to do good works. We weren't created in Christ Jesus through good works but to do good works. In other words...and this is a really important distinction: We have not been forgiven, restored, saved by our good works but we have been forgiven, restored, saved to do good works.

Like Peter we have been forgiven, restored, and saved for a purpose.

Now, in the past I would be tempted to end the message here...leaving the idea, or the examples of just what those good works are, leave them up to each one of us to figure out on our own. Let God speak to each one of us individually about the good works we are to be about in the name of Christ. But this time I felt a deep conviction by the Holy Spirit not to stop here but to do a little more work about what it means to be created in Christ Jesus for good works and to be forgiven for a purpose.

So I turned to one unlikely source AI and one very likely source: biblical scholar and modern day prophet for the church, Walter Brueggemann. First AI.

AI says and I agree: The good works Paul is referring to in his letter to the Ephesians is not just random acts of kindness. They are specific ways God has called us to live out God's will in the world. These good works reflect God's love for us and for others, they point people to Christ, and serve as a testimony to God's love and grace. AI goes on to say...these good works born out of our relationship with Christ are those things that are aligned with God's will. They are about an ongoing, faithful lifestyle of doing good works.

Walter Brueggemann helps us drill down even further when he writes:

“As followers of Jesus we have been dispatched to the good work entrusted to us by God.

It is the work of peace-making

It is the work of truth-telling

It is the work of justice-doing.

It is the work of mercy.

It is good work...and it is God’s work and it requires our resolve to stay at it—even in the face of the forces to the contrary that are sure to prevail for a season.”

Peace-making, truth-telling, justice-doing, and mercy are all interconnected and they are the very core values of our Christian faith. They are the work God calls us to, they are the work that God has entrusted to us...they are good work...they are the work that God has prepared for us to do and they require our resolve to stay at it—even in the face of the forces to the contrary that are sure to prevail for a season.

Thanks be to God that you and I have been forgiven, restored, and saved through the blood of our crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus and that through Christ we have been tasked with the God-given purpose of peace-making...truth-telling...justice-doing...and mercy...good works born out of our relationship with Christ and aligned with God’s will.

The Psalmist gives us this powerful image of hope:

“When Mercy and Truth are met together; Justice and Peace will kiss each other.”

May it be so. Amen.

Let us pray: “God, we come seeking your guidance to discover and live out our true purpose in life. Open our hearts to your will, reveal the unique gifts and talents you have

given each us, and empower us to use them to serve others and glorify your name. May our lives be filled with intention, aligning our actions with your divine will, and bringing meaning and fulfillment to every step we take. Guide us to find our place in your world and in your work, and grant us the strength and courage to follow your path, no matter the challenges we face. In Jesus' name, Amen."

O God, giver of all good gifts, you have given us life. You have bestowed upon us your love and that love includes your plans for us. What are we to do?

All life is a call and a response. We pray for grace to hear your voice, O God, and a heart to respond. We are ready to listen.

Help us to listen to the rhythm of each day, so that we are not overwhelmed with thoughts of the future. And at the same time guide us into that future so that we know who and whose we are.

We will listen. We will listen to the voices of the faithful who have gone before us. We will listen to those who are here to give us guidance and encouragement, for it is clear that whatever plans you have for us, we will never journey alone. We will listen to our feelings as we grow in our faith and grow more into your likeness and image; processes will take a lifetime.

We will listen to you, O God. And even though we want easy answers we know that what you want is a relationship. So when we answer you, may our response be to our potential and to your love of all creatures on your good earth.

Let us serve with the gifts you give us. O God, we know that our vocation is truly a gift of your love.

What are we to do? We are ready to listen.

Amen.