

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, May 22nd 2015

I have many fond memories of sitting around a charcoal fire as a kid. A group of us would “camp out” on a Friday night in our small town. We began the night with finding a field where we could put our sleeping bags and other camping stuff. Then the first big job was to get a fire going. We made it big and hot enough to create a lot of coals that could keep us warm but also cook whatever food we could “borrow” from our neighbors’ gardens. Corn on the cob and potatoes cooked nicely under those coals. By the time I had my own children we had discovered smores. I always assured my children that the hot coals were better for preparing the marshmallows than was the flame. Alas, their mother burned her marshmallows in the flame and they took after her in not wanting to wait for a nice, soft, brown marshmallow cooked over the coals. Wonderful memories.

My sense is that the apostle Peter also had memories of charcoal fires that he would just as soon have forgotten. The apostle John tells us in the eighteenth chapter of his Gospel that it was around a charcoal fire while Peter was warming himself that he denied Jesus three times. His good friend, the one he loved, the one he was willing to take up a sword and fight for, was before the rulers who were looking for a way to kill him. Peter wanted to be close to Jesus so he followed the authorities who had arrested Jesus. John had connections and was able to get Peter near where Jesus was being held. It was there, around a charcoal fire, where Peter swore that he did not even know Jesus.

Yet this is not the end of the story. It is not the last charcoal fire that Peter will remember. Easter has come. Jesus is risen. He has appeared to his witnesses, including Peter. John tells us in the Gospel reading for today that Jesus revealed himself to his disciples and ate breakfast with them. If you read a few verses before today’s text, John makes it explicit that they ate that breakfast around a charcoal fire.

It was there, around that charcoal fire, that the man who had denied Jesus three times around a different charcoal fire was asked three times, “Do you love me?” Three times Peter said, “Yes, I love you.” Three times Jesus told Peter to feed and tend his sheep, his lambs. To Jesus, Peter is one of the sheep to which Jesus says, “Follow me.” To the rest of the sheep, he now has the responsibility to feed and tend them. Jesus even assures Peter that he will die even as Jesus had and that his death would glorify God.

In water I was born in sin and in water I was born again.

In the cloud I wondered if God exists and in the cloud I heard that I am His.

I tasted the forbidden fruit and I have tasted and seen that the Lord is good.

Around a charcoal fire, Peter denied Jesus three times; around a charcoal fire, Jesus embraced and commissioned Peter three times.

Bless the LORD, O my soul;
and all my being, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.

Or the charcoal fires.

