

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, May 13th 2016

The Gospel reading for today is one of the most beautiful Bible passages on leadership. Peter is restored to fellowship with Jesus, commissioned, told the cost of service, and then shown the path to a successful ministry.

Before Peter can be a leader, he must be reconciled to Jesus. Earlier in this chapter it says that they ate breakfast around a charcoal fire. It wasn't just any fire; it was a charcoal fire. John only mentions two charcoal fires in his Gospel. Around the first one, Peter denied Jesus three times. Around this one, Peter declares his love for Jesus three times. Peter must be healed of the events around that first charcoal fire in the purifying presence of Jesus. He had stabbed Jesus in the back. Jesus responds by inviting him to breakfast. No one can effectively lead until they have been purified of those events that the Evil One can use to immobilize them and make them ineffective leaders. I can imagine Peter teaching some young people about faithfulness to Jesus and hear the Evil One whispering in his ear, "You're a good one to be talking about faithfulness. Don't you remember that charcoal fire? You denied Jesus three times!" The power of this memory must be broken for Peter to be a bold leader. Jesus breaks it. One by one we must bring our own charcoal fires to Jesus and be healed.

A restored Peter can now be commissioned to serve the people of God. Jesus tells him to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. Pope Francis has made a point to emphasize that you cannot do this from an ivory tower or a closed off office, if that means not being in contact with the sheep. You cannot tend sheep and not get your hands on them. A good shepherd will smell like the sheep and, frankly, sheep stink. They can also get pretty filthy, too. I love the image of the Good Shepherd carrying the sheep that has wandered off from the fold. I was admiring it one day and a friend of mine said, "They cleaned that up." "What are you talking about," I responded? He replied, "Have you ever seen the underbelly of a sheep?" He began to describe to this small town boy a sheep that has wandered off and gotten in the muck and the mire of the fields. When the good shepherd picks up that sheep, he's going to have that muck and mire all over his shoulders. Jesus spent his ministry identifying with sinners. Christian leaders must do the same.

Next, Jesus tells Peter and all leaders the cost of service in his kingdom: death. Peter's service would end on a Roman cross. Execution may not be the cost for a Christian leader but the only way to be faithful to Jesus is to live a cruciform life and be willing to lay down one's life for the sheep. And "being crucified" may not come from the hands of outsiders. Sheep can hammer nails, too.

Finally, how can Peter or anyone fulfill this commission? We can work on all of our past charcoal fires and have them cleansed by the Risen Lord. We can learn how to care for others. Tending and feeding can be learned. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can live a cruciform life. But, ultimately,

there is only one path that we can walk that will show us how to be Christian leaders. Jesus told Peter and us that path when he said, "Follow me."

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