

Lord, You Know Everything

John 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-20

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Larry is one of the characters from Garrison Keillor's fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon.¹ Larry was apparently an expert at frequent conversions. In fact, he was saved a whopping 12 times at the same Lutheran Church, "an all-time record for a church that never gave altar calls." You might ask what prompted these dramatic moments of reckoning and forgiveness. There wasn't even an organ playing "Just As I Am Without One Plea" in the background that might have moved his heart. Just on his own accord, Larry Sorenson came forward 12 times between 1953 and 1961, crying his heart out at the communion rail, waiting to be fed.

This happened to the shock of the minister, especially after delivering a dry sermon on stewardship. He wasn't prepared to have to put his arm around this weeping person, pray with him and also be certain he had a way to get home. According to Keillor, even those focused more on "sin" got tired of him "because God didn't intend for people to feel guilty all their life. There comes a time when you should dry your tears and join the building committee and grapple with the problems of the church furnace and the church roof. But Larry just kept repenting and repenting."

Now what does this humorous little fictional anecdote have to tell us in relation to our scriptures and to our own lives? Our scripture passages tell us about how two central leaders of the Christian faith, Paul and Peter, were invited by Christ to turn their lives around, which lies at the heart of "repentance." Such transformation is an on-going project since we tend to succumb to our own Achilles heels that keep us from doing our best. We are invited to learn to live more freely as children of God: less tied to the ways our ego gets caught up in defending or condemning itself. Jesus wishes to empower us to live more freely and that requires work, focus, guidance, vision and courage. The

¹ I found this on the homileticsonline website. Garrison Keillor, *Leaving Home* (New York: Viking Press, 1987), 182.

point of Keillor's story for me is that the movement of the Spirit doesn't stop at helping us be honest about what we have done to harm others or ourselves. The Spirit also guides us to use our energy to serve Christ in the world according to the gifts we are given (and hopefully not just based on what committee needs to be filled).

For the sake of time, I will only focus on how this plays out in aspects of Peter's encounter with the risen one in our text from John. We are encountering Peter and the other disciples at a time when they are still trying to come to grips with the news of Christ's resurrection. They have returned to their home area and Peter goes back to doing what he knows best: fishing. Amidst not knowing, this return may feel like a source of direction and comfort. Interestingly, the writer of John's Gospel is essentially taking a story that was used as a call story for the first disciples in other older Gospels (Mark 1:16-20, expanded in Luke 5:1-11, Matthew 4:18-22) and turns it into a resurrection encounter.

At first the disciples catch nothing. A stranger calls to them from the beach to put their nets out on the different side of the boat and now they haul in a huge amount of large fish.² These are signs of abundance and generosity. At that moment, the so-called beloved disciple, who is always a step ahead of Peter,³ recognizes the Risen Christ based on this action. "It is the Lord," he cries out. While the others steer the boat full of fish to land, Peter does something almost humorous as he tries to get to Jesus as quickly as he can. We don't usually put on our regular clothes before we jump in the water but Peter does. I wonder if he does that almost instinctively to cover his own sense of shame. I don't mean shame about his body but about his previous actions. More on that in a minute.

² My research on the number 153 has yielded limited results. Some have thought that it described the number of different fish. Others go into very complicated explanations based on numerology. I am sorry not to be able to offer a helpful answer.

³ This may relate to differences and perhaps even rivalries in the early church.

Jesus is waiting for them with some bread and has already prepared a fire so that they can grill the fish and have breakfast. Jesus asks them to bring what they can now contribute to their feast and Peter gladly springs into action to help with the fish. Instead of a last supper, we have an early bird breakfast. Jesus is letting them taste and see the goodness and forgiveness of God in this act of breaking bread. They each have a place around this imaginary table although they almost all had deserted him at the cross. Again, there is no blaming and shaming. There is an invitation to be nourished to begin anew.

Jesus addresses Peter, whom he had called Peter (“the rock”) specifically by his original name three times, asking: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter answers by saying: “Yes, Lord, I love you.” This is followed up by Jesus’ admonition to let that love flow into service by caring for the young and adults. He is to feed the lambs, tend the sheep...” What is Jesus doing? It feels like Peter is asking himself that question and begins to feel hurt. Why does Jesus keep asking the same question? Aren’t Peter’s answers good enough? Eventually, Peter says, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Yes, Jesus knows everything. Jesus knows that Peter denied him three times in the courtyard after Jesus’ arrest. Jesus knows Peter’s sense of guilt and shame about his betrayal. Jesus knows how much Peter wants to serve and love but struggles with how to follow Christ faithfully. But for every denial, Peter is offered an opportunity to change his denial to an affirmation so that Peter can be freed and renewed. “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

I imagine we all have experiences and relationships in our lives that haunt us or don’t feel right. We hear the story of Peter’s conversion today for our own encouragement so that we may know that God does not forsake us when amidst the conflicts, betrayals and confusion of our lives. I always take tremendous solace in knowing that virtually all of Jesus’ disciples shared a propensity toward screwing up despite their best intentions. The risen Christ is not interested in our groveling over our trespasses. He has no need

for long lectures to stir the heart. He might check in as he did with Paul in our other story and ask: "Why are you acting that way?" Or he might just offer a meal of nurture to wary disciples who have lost touch with their original visions and passion as he did in the story of John. Or, if we feel particularly out of touch and guilty, he may offer us opportunities to make wrongs right as he did for Peter. Our story reminds us also that the best way to share our love of God with God is to love and care for each other. What might it mean in each of our lives and our communal life right now to feed lambs and tend sheep?

Finally, let us also take a look at the difficult guidance Jesus gives to Peter at the end of our passage. Jesus says, "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.... Follow me (John 21:18-19). What potent words! I imagine they ring painfully and more literally true for any of us who have dealt with infirmity in older age or had to leave their familiar home for a nursing home or other facility.

What Jesus is describing is a kind of loss of power and ability to control or order our own lives. What may be literally felt as we age, is also an apt metaphor for the spiritual path of following Jesus. Following Jesus may mean being led to challenging places, getting out of our comfort zone in who we relate to or what we have to risk for love toward ourselves and others. For Peter, his engagement to preach and live the Gospel of Jesus Christ meant having to learn to accept that God's love extends beyond his own ethnicity and religious tradition. For example, he later learned that he could and should eat with Gentiles (non-Jews) and also not worry about dietary codes (Acts 10). It would mean preaching the Gospel in the face of hostile authorities and eventually would lead to his own death on a cross as a Christian martyr. Letting go of our regrets is another form of dying. Peter knew this well as we learn today.

Our Easter life is to be one of resurrection power and not about getting stuck with the trials and failures of Good Friday. That is Amazing Grace indeed. We may not die on an actual cross but some of the risks we may be called to take may feel like a death of what we know or think we know. It may be as simple or complex as a challenging time of struggle with someone we love or a co-worker or a complete stranger, during a moment of judgment of others or when we refuse to believe that we are a created and beloved child of God. May we remember that the Risen Christ also always waits for us on the shores of life to feed us and free us again and again, knowing everything. Thanks and praise be to God. Amen.