



April 25, 2010
Fourth Sunday of Easter

"Saying 'Yes' Again"
Rev. Mike Gregg

**Acts 9:1-6; Psalm 30;
John 21:1-7a, 15-19**

Ugh. He had such an emotional hangover! And what's the best thing to do after three years of tireless service to Jesus, the adrenaline depletion from watching a friend stalked and killed, and a long night back at work with nothing to show for his efforts? A breakfast of champions – grilled fish! Um... yuck. But Peter knew better than to focus on the "strangeness" of this breakfast buffet. The smell of the charcoal fire sank his heart as the repressed memories invaded his spirit recalling his adamant betrayal of his friend around a different charcoal fire in the courtyard where Jesus was being tried, beaten, and convicted. Yet, the smell of breakfast on that cool, crisp morning had a different layer this time, a fragrance of fish - like the time he witnessed Jesus miraculously turn scarcity into plenty on a hill with 5000 people. Something was different about this breakfast. It smelled of change, promise, redemption...commission. Whatever Jesus wanted of Peter, as the aroma of remembering swirled in the air, Peter was ready to say 'yes' again.

There was an ad campaign by a major insurance company several years back that said, "Sometimes life comes at you fast." One of the ads showed a lady, learning that she had just won the lottery, running into the back of a truck filled with dirt. Another showed a man getting in his car to start it, only to have it fall to pieces around him. And one more showed something as simple and delicate as a butterfly setting of a chain reaction of events that eventually launched a sailboat through the roof of someone's home. It is true that even the little things can sometimes

cause life to be more than we can handle. There are times when life comes at us so fast we only want to slink away to the sports bar, the golf course, the salon, our bedroom with a book, to get back to the familiar and escape life, if even for second.

The disciples wanted to escape life. After they said ‘yes’ to Jesus’ request to follow him years before, they became witnesses to miracles as the lame walked, the blind saw, the deaf heard, and the hungry were filled. They had the scriptures opened to them through Jesus’ teachings. They partook in a peculiar Passover meal. They witnessed his bloody brutal beating; a massacring mob; his sham of a trial; his merciless crucifixion. They ran for their lives; they hid for their lives; they were scared for their lives. They saw a ghost; they saw death defeated; they saw the bonds broken; they were overwhelmed and overloaded.

The disciples had been on an emotional rollercoaster because of the events of Good Friday and Easter, and I’m sure they were at the point of exhaustion when they returned to what they knew best – fishing. The Sea of Galilee represented a safe place for the disciples. It was what they knew. It was what they had done for years, what they were comfortable with, before Jesus came and called them the first time, asking them to say yes and follow him. After all, it was by catching fish that they had made a living. And now that their Jesus dream was dead and derailed, they returned to their safe place – their safe place on the lake.

We too are overloaded. We are overloaded with unfulfilling jobs, caring for sick and aging spouses and parents, keeping up with and corralling our kids, our own declining health, our unquenched pain, mortgage payments, houses not selling, extreme exhaustion, short tempers and even shorter vacations. We often times need a break... a safe place, a familiar place of peace, quiet, and normalcy. When the world spins out of control for us, as it did for the disciples and for Peter, the easiest thing to say is “I’m going fishing.”

When Amanda and I traveled to Nashville recently to attend a CBF workshop and visit my folks, we drove on a section of Interstate 24 that was under construction. As we entered the construction zone, I began to look for speed limit signs, but the old ones were all covered in black cloth and, as far as I could tell, there weren’t any new signs posted. The DOT crews had covered the old signs, but hadn’t given drivers any new information to use. I set the cruise control on 65 miles per hour and hoped for the best.

I was reminded of this driving adventure when I thought about the actions of Peter. Peter was one of the first disciples and was, by all accounts, their leader. He had been called “the rock” because of his keen insight into who Jesus when he proclaimed, “You are the Christ, Son of the Living God!” Yet, Peter’s title of “the rock” came to hold a different meaning as his hard headedness wouldn’t let him see the purposes of Jesus and his hard heart pounded his denials three times into his soul. On Easter Sunday, Peter came to believe in the resurrection; but here he is, some time later, returning to what had been familiar rather than living the Kingdom of God as Christ commanded.

Had Peter covered over the signs of Christ in his life? Did his first “yes” to follow Jesus years earlier mean anything? Did the momentous ministry of Jesus and the revelation of the resurrection get covered up with a dark cloth so that the light would not shine upon his escape into the night fishing darkness?

Maybe we can learn from Peter. Maybe we have covered up the signs of Christ in our lives because following Jesus has been much more difficult than we imagined. Maybe we have put a huge tarp over our baptism, that time when we first said ‘yes’ – baptismal pool covered. Maybe we have blindfolded our eyes to the poverty, torture, abuse, and shame in our world – compassion covered. Maybe we have handcuffed our ability to tell our friends about Jesus and

about this church that seeks to follow Christ closely – evangelism covered. With these signs covered in our lives we simply set the cruise control, cross our fingers, and hope for the best. We find comfort in ‘life as usual.’ We, like Peter, have ‘gone fishing.’

But - but, you know what Jesus likes to do! Jesus like to break into our lives, welcome us to a nourishing feast, and send us out with full stomachs and full spirits to tread the precarious path of servanthood and love. Jesus broke the bond of guilt and doubt; Jesus broke through the easy escape; Jesus broke into the darkness of Peter’s night fishing to welcome Peter to breakfast and shine the light of a new day into his soul; to help him say ‘yes’ again to the call of “follow me.”

There is a story of a baseball pitcher in a tight game facing a great hitter, shaking off all the pitches the catcher called for. The catcher becomes very frustrated and finally approaches the mound and says, "I have called on every pitch in the world. What do you want?" to which the pitcher replies, "I just want to hold on to the ball as long as I possibly can."

When God interrupts our lives, as Jesus did in the lives of the disciples early that morning by the Sea of Galilee, it has a way of bringing us face to face with our divine callings. We like to be comfortable in our safe spaces, holding the baseball tightly hoping that the moment will pass. We like to retreat into the comfort of what we know and do so well, as opposed to being challenged to grow and to follow. We go back to our jobs, our homes, and our families. We go back to our bars, our gyms... our churches... and we hide from our first calling to follow Jesus. “Life has come at us fast” and the possibility of shouldering one more change is just too much to bear. So we cover up our commissionings and callings and hope that Jesus doesn’t find us.

I’m reminded of the story of a wife who put a little plaque in the kitchen that said "Prayer Changes Things." Twenty-four hours later it was gone. She went to her husband and asked, "What’s wrong? Don't you like prayer?" to which he replied, "Oh, I like prayer. I just don't like change." When we come face to face with what we are running from, when we come face to face with Jesus, it changes how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how we see the potential of what God might be working through us.

The grace that Jesus gives by finding us as we hide in our safe place is that it brings with it the challenge to change. Peter could no longer comfortably ease back into fishing. Jesus reminded him that the journey was not over. He was being given the gift of another opportunity to become what Jesus had envisioned him to be.

This journey for Peter begins with a conversation. A conversation that is just as well known as it is enigmatic. The terminology of this conversation –with its repeated questions, "Peter, do you love me?" and assertions, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you"—requires attention, starting with the words used for "love." It has long been noted, and often in misleading ways, that Greek has three words for love - eros, philos, and agape - whereas English-speakers use love in only one way. These three Greek words are often considered to be in something of a ranked order. Eros is placed at the bottom as a self-centered, selfish love that cares little for the well being of others. Philos is described as better than eros, but still second-rate, merely consisting of the love between friends, which can be deep, meaningful, and other-directed, but which cannot compare with agape. Agape stands in this ordering as the highest form of love, like God's love for the world, a pure, selfless love that could only have a divine source.

If we take this understanding of love into account, one might expect Christ to lead Peter from a lower form of love to its highest form, agape. But this is not what happens. Jesus' first two queries about Peter’s love for him use agape while Peter answers with philos. However, in

his third question, Jesus changes the terminology, asking Peter finally, "Peter, do you love me (philos)?" and Peter answers, apparently correctly, "Yes, Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you (philos)."

Instead of Peter not having enough love for Jesus and getting it wrong, what if Peter is having another "Messiah" moment where he doesn't understand what he is saying but is divinely inspired to know exactly who Jesus is and what he wants. Maybe Peter knows that love for friends is not a second-class love. "No one has greater love (agape) than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (philos)". In fact, Jesus goes on to define his relationship with his disciples in terms of friendship—"I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends (philos)". Jesus calls Peter not just to love but to love others and love them to the end. So, to be fair to Peter, he may be saying, "It is not just the preference of my heart, Lord, to love you. We've been together for three years. You are like a brother to me. This goes deep within me, Lord."

Not only is Peter loving Christ with an active love, Peter's restoration to renewed relationship is also a restoration to a new kind of leadership. Fisherman no longer, he is called to feed Christ's sheep and because of that feeding, eventually die: "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...someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go". After indicating to Peter "the kind of death by which he would glorify God," Christ says to him again, "how about now? Would you say 'yes' if I asked you to follow me again?"

This kind of love, whether it is philos or agape, involves an inherent expectation of "doing." This is love as courage, love as risk, love as not wavering, regardless of what we are called to do. Christ calls Peter and us, as individuals and as communities of faith, to follow him even where we might not want to go. This isn't the time to return to what we are used to. This is the time to call for the best love for God, friends, neighbors, and enemies that we can muster. Or, better still, these times cry out for the active philos love to which God calls us and that God will bring to life within us for the sake of others.

Jesus was always into people. He says to Peter, "I will know that you love me when you care about people. When you care about what I care about." Jesus spent most of his time with the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed, and the disadvantaged. If we're going to care about people, we might think about the AIDS crisis in Africa; we might think about the children and women being trafficked in the United States and all over the world. We might think about people whose needs are great, who are on the edge, who live without hope, helpless in the face of their lives coming at them "fast".

Many days we feel like Peter and the others when they retreated back to fishing, when all we want is a comfortable pair of pajama pants or satisfying food to fill our stomachs. We like the familiar, but if we want to follow Jesus and say 'yes' again, and truly mean it, we need to push ourselves to go on and go out. We must do more than say we will follow Jesus. We have a second chance to follow the resurrected Christ as he calls us to feed his sheep, tend his flock, and change the world. And in so doing, we like Peter, know that this time we are going to have to leave our safe spaces and protected places to go out into the world with the knowledge that this time we might actually have to die for Jesus.

Sydney Harris, a newspaper columnist in Chicago in the mid-part of the 20th century, once told about a time he gave a talk on creative writing to a group of amateur writers. Afterwards, someone asked, "Mr. Harris, what do you do when you don't feel like writing?" "I

write," he answered. "That's the difference between an amateur and a professional. I write even when I don't feel like writing."

It is much easier to hide in the busyness of our lives and the rush of our routines rather than look for Jesus in a post-Easter world. Yet there is no escaping Jesus. Christ is with us wherever we go. The ordinary is no longer the ordinary. Things have changed since the last time Peter said yes; things have changed since the last time you said yes. "Where can I go from your spirit, or where can I flee from your presence?" Jesus is waiting for us at work, at home, in the car, in the woods, in the busyness of life. Jesus is no longer asking us to follow. Jesus is telling us to feed his sheep, tend his flock, and serve his people! Here's some fish, a nice hearty breakfast! Now go!

If we are going to say YES again, we will need Jesus. We will need nourishment. We will need the Good Shepherd. This epilogue, this story of Jesus on the beach that has supposedly been added later to the book of John because it doesn't match the style or texture of the rest of the Gospel, reminds us that Christ's story is not in the past. This epilogue is added to John to give a final word that we need to do something NOW to care for God's people. We are called to say, "I love you Jesus" AND "I will serve, help and tend your people as well!"

This epilogue brings us back to the prologue of John: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God! The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it! The story of Peter, the nighttime fisherman, reminds us of the darkness of our hunger, the darkness of our failure to recognize Christ, the darkness of our denial. Yet it continues by revealing to us that the light still comes and guides us and helps us go out into the world to serve, guide, heal, protect. Peter finally gets to fulfill his promise, "I will lay my life down for your sake" that he was too scared to do when he denied Jesus. Maybe you promised Jesus to follow closely, to help your neighbor, to attend church more, to share your faith, to live in service to others. Maybe this is the time when that promise can be fulfilled, when you can say 'yes' again.

As Jesus returns in the glimmer of a new day, the fishermen are not young, enthusiastic, naïve admirers but are a post-resurrection people of maturity who now know that the invitation to follow Jesus could lead to death. This time Jesus tells Peter, the disciples, and us what is at stake. This time we know that we have to do more than remain fishermen and fisherwomen. This time Jesus wants us to do more than follow. This time Jesus wants us to feed his sheep. Jesus wants more from us. And knowing all of this, knowing what Jesus requires of us as post-Easter people, if Jesus says one more time, "follow me," would you say 'yes' again?