

Easter 03 C 2019
May 5, 2019 :: John 21:1-19
Fr. Jim Cook

“The Two Things We All Need.”

Today’s gospel reading takes up most of the last chapter of John’s gospel. And perhaps for that reason alone, it offers us a lot of possible subjects for a sermon.

For example, we could talk about why, after bearing witness to *the most singular event* in human history — by which I mean the resurrection of Jesus — and after receiving the Holy Spirit, and after being sent out by Jesus to do the grand work of spreading the good news of the gospel, it seems that *the only thing* the disciples could think of doing, was fishing?

Or, we could talk about the possible reasons for why the right side of the boat was so much better for catching fish than the left. And why didn’t those guys, who were professional fishermen before they encountered Jesus, why didn’t they already know that?

Or, we could talk about why Simon Peter was fishing in the nude? Was that a thing in first-century Palestine? And why is it that he only puts on his clothes when he intends to swim to shore. That seems backwards to me. So, what gives?

Or, we could even talk about the significance of the number of fish that were caught. I mean, did someone actually count each and every fish? And is there some significance to that particular number? What does the number 153 even mean? And, why?

But despite all those possible topics, what really struck me, was how Jesus offered to Peter, what many modern psychologists and sociologists believe each and every one of us also needs: that is, he offers to Peter a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose. And so, that's what I want to talk about today.

First, a sense of belonging. I think it's probably true that we all need to feel accepted by a larger group. And why is that? Because it enables us to have a stable *identity*, and a stable *sense of self*. And this stands in contrast to the messages we often get from our culture: that our identity is an individual affair; that our sense of self is something that we carve out *by and for ourselves*.

But that's *not* the way it works. Because the reality of the situation is that (and more often than not) we see ourselves through the eyes of those around us; through the eyes of those closest to us; and especially through the eyes of those whose opinions matter to us. My undergraduate sociology professors described how that works, through this little saying that they had come up with:

“I am not who *I* think I am.

I am not who *you* think I am.

I am who *I think you think* I am.

Give it a moment; it'll make sense. Anyway, that's why, for example, a parent's words of affirmation can be so uplifting to a child, and why a parent's words of denigration can be so devastating to a child. Because in the end, we all care what others think of us.

Now, before I get back to Jesus and Peter, I want to make sure we're all on the same page. *Belonging* to a group is different than *fitting in* to a group. In fact, they're the opposite.

Fitting in, is changing ourselves so that we become acceptable to that group of which we want to be a part. But *belonging* is being accepted by that group *just as we are*; no changing required. And when we encounter something like that, it's great news, because we all need to belong.

And in that scene with Jesus and Peter, Jesus asks him three times whether he loves him. Three times. Imagine if someone you cared about asked whether you really loved him or her not once, not twice, but three times. Painful! And Peter is, indeed, hurt by this repetition of that question. And it was probably much later that Peter figured out that Jesus wasn't *testing* Peter: Do you love me? Do you really love me? Do you really, *really* love me? No, it wasn't a test. But it was Jesus' way of reinstating Peter into the community of believers, by allowing him to profess faith the same number of times that Peter had denied that same faith, earlier, when Jesus was being interrogated. In other words, Jesus is

drawing Peter back into a community that *accepts him for who he is*. That's *belonging*. And we all need to belong.

That's the first thing we need.

And the second thing we all need is *a sense of purpose*. That is, we need to believe that what we do matters. We need to believe that if we didn't show up people would notice. We need to believe that what we can contribute makes a difference.

And as it turns out, having a *purpose* is one of the great motivators in the world. In some ways, it's more powerful than money, or fame, or power. In fact, *believing* that you have something of value to contribute, can draw us, again and again, into even challenging circumstances with joy. And so, in response to each of Peter's professions of love, Jesus gives him good work to do: Feed my sheep; Be a leader; Look out for these others; Devote yourself to this community.

So, and just to reiterate: In that exchange between Jesus and Peter, Peter is reinstated into the community of believers, fulfilling his need to belong. And then Peter is given good work to do,

fulfilling his need for a sense of purpose. And if I didn't know better, I'd think that Jesus might have had a degree in psychology or sociology.

But here's the thing: This story is just one of hundreds in the Bible that accomplishes the same thing: that offers us a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose. In fact, these two themes, of belonging and purpose, are so dominant in the Bible that Christian theologians have even created words to describe them. And those words are Justification, and Vocation.

For what else is *justification*, if it's not the promise that we are accepted by, and acceptable to, God, just as we are? And that means that we can have that *sense of belonging* that we all need and want.

And what else is *vocation*, if it's not the promise that God will use us, wherever we are, and just as we are, to take care of his people and the world? And that means that we can have that *sense of purpose* that we all need and want.

In fact, we even have a Sacrament entirely committed to meeting these two needs, and it's Baptism. You see, through baptism, we are *welcomed* from far and wide into this community of people who want to follow the words and will of God. And that's belonging!

And by our baptism, God *calls us* — and the Latin word for called is *vocatio*, from which we get the word vocation — through our baptism God calls us to make a difference in a world God that loves so much. And that's our purpose!

In the end, I suppose our main takeaway from our gospel reading, is that the very thing that Jesus was offering to Peter, God continues to offer to each and every one of us: that is, an invitation into a community where we don't have to try to fit in, but can still *belong*, and a lifetime of work that is really worth doing. And those two things that God continues to offer to us, turns out to be of infinite value, because those are the two things that we all need the most.

Amen.