

Sermon Easter 3 2019

May 5, 2019

John 21:1-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

I am sure you all saw the coverage of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, and how there was a significant fire there, resulting in severe damage to the building. I certainly was saddened at the situation, however, something that was interesting as I watched the coverage were reactions from people. Most of them fell into two camps. One camp viewed the loss with extreme sorrow that such a piece of history would be lost, many seemingly without equivalent sorrow that the Cathedral acts as a museum to the same or greater extent as it acts as a gathering place for the faithful. The other camp criticized those who would donate to its rebuilding because the money could go to the poor, hearkening to the tones of one who criticized a woman for pouring expensive perfume on the feet of our Savior as He prepared for His death.

As we reflect on these reactions, I think that says a lot about the view of the Church in our time, don't you? Many view the Church as either selfish and concerned with opulence, or at best a nice reminder of the past and the things that came from it, but something lesser to the enlightenment we have found in our greater modern intelligence. And as I say that about the world, we have to say that even within the Church these views are reflected by some of the faithful. For example, I know that there were many who were drawn into the DaVinci Code when it came out, and its alignment with the claims of the scholars of what are called the Gnostic Gospels—the writings of the groups on the fringe of the Church that claimed insight into the life of Jesus, but most of which weren't written until nearly hundred years after the Gospels we have in the Canon of the Bible. And what I mean there is that those scholars claim that the reason we don't have these other writings as part of the Bible is because there was a power struggle in the early Church where the patriarchal men had their way and shoved out those who wanted more equality and roles for women. In this power struggle the forced their way into the roles of authority, gathered the Gospels which told the “real truth” about Jesus, and had them destroyed. As I mention this, I find it sad that there a number who hold this view because it's historically inaccurate. The Gnostics were the ones who were decidedly anti-feminine, at least in some streams. The Gnostic Gospels have mentions of saying Mary Magdalene was great, but would become her greatest self when she passed from this life and became male. The Gospels we have were actually surprisingly humanizing in their view toward women. Of course, the other problem with the view is that it is also the reading of history in view of the mindset

which has become prominent in our day, the one which has its popular beginning in Marx, that is that the story of history is essentially made of up oppressors and oppressed. In this case because the Church as we call it orthodox (little “o” orthodox, not like the denomination) won out, they were the ones in power and therefore the oppressors, and those who didn’t continue were the oppressed and more correct.

Now as I say that we have to acknowledge the history of the Church certainly demonstrates that it’s not without faults. St. Augustine is attributed to have said that the “Church is a whore but she’s my mother.” In other words, this bride of Christ throughout her history has demonstrated her warts in the midst of life in this world. We see that even in the Gospel this morning, in particular in Peter.

Now, if you’re familiar with the history of the Church, you might know that this passage is used as one to support the idea that Peter was the first Pope of the Church. With that in mind, if we look closely at what John says as a whole, what we actually see is that Peter is given nothing more than what Apostles were given last week. He’s given that task associated with the forgiving and withholding of sins. That means that here Peter is representing the Church and the call of the shepherds—that is the pastors, remember that’s what the word means—of the church. Pastors are called to feed and shepherd the flock of Christ.

But of course, as we’re talking about the Church and her blemishes, which are many, and which are often most magnified in the errors of these shepherds, what we see in this passage is a beautiful image of reinstatement. Are you familiar with that? Think about it. Jesus comes to Peter and He says, “Peter, do you love me?” Peter says once, “Yes Lord, I love you.” Then again, “Peter do you love me?” A second time: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” Then a third time, much to Peter’s dismay and hurt: “But Peter do you love me?” “Yes Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you!” And in that Peter is restored to the fold properly. How so? Well, if you remember, on the night Jesus was arrested Peter stood outside the temple court where Jesus was being “tried,” and one time he said, “I don’t know Him!” Again a second time he said, “I tell you, I don’t know him!” And finally a third time and he called down curses telling the people, “I really don’t know this guy!” And at that point the cock crowed Peter’s sentence of foretold judgement: “No Peter, you won’t follow me to death, you’ll deny me three times.” But today there is not judgment, but grace. Now there is forgiveness. Now there is reinstatement by the very hands pierced on the cross and raised again. Certainly those hands a reminder to Peter as he looked upon them that he hadn’t been at the foot of the cross, a reminder of his sorrow.

Of course, joy had come. In the short time before this, there had been the resurrection. There had been the declaration of the peace of the victory of our God. And now on that beach Peter is reinstated, promised His absolution, the forgiveness won by the crucified. And it's in that blood shed, in that body buried and raised that Peter gets his assignment. Peter, "**Feed my lambs.**" Peter, "**Tend my sheep,**" shepherd them. Peter, "**Feed my sheep.**"

And we look at our lectionary, we see it's the same for Paul. Paul, this great sinner washed clean in the blood of the Lamb of God sacrificed on the Altar of the cross. Paul, made anew in the washing of baptism, the washing of rebirth in the resurrection of this Jesus whom he had persecuted. You see in the midst of their failing, in the midst of their sin, this God being so good could restore them, could reconcile them to Himself and even send them out with that very message of reconciliation.

And there we see that's really what this Church is called to do. Yes she falls short, but that's part of the point. Yes so often she tries to doll herself up, but instead looks like someone slapped lipstick on a pig. You see it. You see it in the priests accused in our day of the most horrid of impropriety. I've read a number of articles recently speaking of apparent enclaves in the Vatican which are made of whole groups of priests notorious for drug use and homosexual orgiastic carousing. But lest we look down our nose at Rome, Protestantism isn't much better. Look at the celebrity pastors and their mansions, and the accusations of infidelity and impropriety that have struck so many there. And to bring it home, look how often we as Lutherans would sell our birthright and seek to mimic those who deny our Lord's words of promise of His presence in the Supper and His work in baptism. Or consider your own sin. Consider your own denial of the Lord. How you don't defend His Word when you should; how you don't study that Word in the depth it calls you to. Consider your own lack of faith in this God who promises to care for you: your anxiety in your life, your lovelessness toward your neighbor. God has forgiven you, and have you forgiven those whose sin has hurt you? You pray for God's forgiveness as you forgive in the Lord's prayer, but do you reciprocate what this Jesus has done for you?

And when you consider this, you see what an amazing thing we actually have in this body of the Church. Or better I should say what God works through this Church. You see as He sends Peter, as He sends Paul. As He sends Pastor Bohlmanns and Ehlers, and Riordans and Zicklers, chiefs of sinners, He still works here and gives you what Jesus won for you. He still baptizes you. He still feeds you. He still shepherds you. It so often looks like a mess, but look at what He does. I mean, this is what the Church is given to do: to feed to shepherd, and she's awful at it. Yet, Jesus does that work in this visible institution. It's really incredible isn't it? She's always falling away, then being brought

back. We think it was different then, but it wasn't. That there were these glory days of the Church. The Church just after the war. The Church just after Jesus. The Church at Solomon's blessing at the Temple. But she's always been drawn to sin. Think about it. The Israelites heard the Ten Commandments from the mouth of God. And what did they do? They build the Golden Calf. They groaned and God swallowed them in the earth. They rebelled against Moses, and God punished them.

But in the midst of this, the Gospel Lesson gives us this beautiful promise of God's work and His restoration in Christ. In fact, we actually see in the other part of the lesson another beautiful picture. As Peter and the disciples were fishing all night to no avail, Jesus stands on the shore and calls out "**Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.**" And with that, they do what He says, and they're "**not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish.**" There's the Church. The fish drawn into the net by the Word of Jesus. Grasped by the Lord's net brought into the safety of the boat. Saved by the Water, just like the eight in Noah's ark. Saved in the water of baptism, washing away your sin bringing you into the boat. And you know what I think is the most beautiful part of that is the connection that for the ancients, for those at the time of this writing, the sea, that was a sign of death. That was the place where you were in danger. You could fall out of the boat, you could drown, but you've been drawn out of your death into the Church. In fact that's the significance even of the design of the sanctuary, because as much as a mess this Church is you have been saved in this ark.

Christians, know this comfort. Know the beauty of this Church. Know your beauty, not a beauty of your natural birth, but the beauty of your purification in the blood of Jesus. Know your beauty in the rebirth in the Church who is your mother. Know in fact that the foundation of this Church is this Jesus Christ her Lord, who has redeemed you and made you His own.

As the view of the Church is so dismal then. As people mock you for your shortcomings, know what this beauty actually is. This is the beauty of Jesus who has died for you, who has redeemed you from your death and sin, who has brought you out of the water and made you His own. Even as you would like to disown the Church yourself at times, remember that the ugliness of her sin is the ugliness of yours, and the her beauty comes from the same place yours does too: not from yourself, not from your own goodness, but the goodness of the One who died for you and who reconciled you, bringing you out of that sin by those He sent with that Gospel to feed you and shepherd you. Amen.