

“Grace Enables Us”

John 21:1-19 & Luke 5:1-11

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Prayer for Understanding God of second chances and God of new life, we have spent our days wandering. Like Peter, we have milled about through nearly every state of faith. We have had courageous days and convicted days, learning days, and questioning days. We have had days where we run to you, days for diving out of the boat, days for deep joy, and days where the pain of the world feels too close to bear. So as we bring our wandering hearts to you, we ask that you draw us in.

Allow this story to spark something new in us. Allow this story of grace to give us pause and pull us in. We are listening. Amen.

In Peter’s encounter with the risen Jesus, we come full circle. Peter has dropped his nets, walked on water, professed his faith, been rebuked, received a foot washing, denied Jesus, and run to the tomb. And now, Jesus once again meets Peter at the shoreline where Peter is casting his nets. Jesus offers abundant nourishment and also a new command: “Feed my sheep.” Then Jesus turns to Peter and asks three times, “Do you love me?” It’s as if Jesus says, “Here’s my heart,” which washes over Peter’s three denials like a healing balm. No matter how far we wander, may we entrust our hearts to God. No matter if our faith is strong or weak, what we can give is our love.

A charcoal fire is mentioned only twice in the gospels. First, when Peter denies Jesus three times. Second, when Peter receives God’s grace, is transformed, and empowered to love three times. This scripture is much more than an encounter between Peter and Jesus. Peter represents all of us. As scripture is read, switch out Peter for your name. Notice your threefold redemption granted by Jesus’ question: “Do you love me?” Imagine Jesus asking us the same question. God provides abundant grace that engulfs, heals, redeems, and purifies every denial, every mistake, every failure, every hesitance, every instance when we fail to love, rejoice, and be at peace. God’s grace propels us forward on our journeys.

A reading from the gospel of John. **John 21:1-19 NLT** “Later, Jesus appeared again to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. Several of the disciples were there—Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples. Simon Peter said, “I’m going fishing.” “We’ll come, too,” they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night. At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn’t see who Jesus was. Jesus called out, “Fellows, have you caught any fish?” “No,” they replied. Then Jesus said, “Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you’ll get some!” So they did, and they couldn’t haul in the net because there were so many fish in it. Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, Peter put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and headed to shore. The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards from shore. When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread. “Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus said. So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn’t torn. “Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since Jesus had been raised from the dead. After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.” “Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him. Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.” “Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said. A third time Jesus asked Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. Peter said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep. “I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.” Jesus said this to let them know by what kind of death they would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, “Follow me.”

Each of us is called to “feed God’s sheep.” The Greek word for feed means to nourish spiritually, to protect, to guide.

The parallels and connections between this scripture and the one we began lent with are profound. Jesus continually offers Peter, and us, abundance, grace upon grace. Peter's journey—like ours—is not linear, and God's grace continues to circle back to us again and again like a familiar chorus played on repeat. God is constantly speaking to you, loving you, calling you through your favorite activities, through your work, through the people around you. In seasons of uncertainty, anxiety, dryness, dark nights of the soul, often it is transformative to return to the familiar, to what you know well, to what brings you joy and be open to experiencing God. No matter how we are, and were we are, God's grace always circles around to offer grand adventures, resurrection, and Easter. For every sin, there is forgiveness; for every denial, an opportunity to love; for every apathy, an invitation to follow; for every mistake, a do over. God's grace continually circles around us encouraging us to take a step forward into God's every expanding joyful, peaceful, love. Notice the circles of grace: love for every struggle, the circle of fishing, the circle of God calling through the familiar.

A reading from the gospel of Luke. **Luke 5:1-11 NLT** **“One day as Jesus was preaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, great crowds pressed in on Jesus to listen to the word of God. Jesus noticed two empty boats at the water’s edge, for the fishers had left them and were washing their nets. Stepping into one of the boats, Jesus asked Simon, its owner, to push it out into the water. So Jesus sat in the boat and taught the crowds from there. When Jesus had finished speaking, Jesus said to Simon, “Now go out where it is deeper, and let down your nets to catch some fish.” “Master,” Simon replied, “we worked hard all last night and didn’t catch a thing. But if you say so, I’ll let the nets down again.” And this time their nets were so full of fish they began to tear! A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat, and soon both boats were filled with fish and on the verge of sinking. When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, “Oh, Lord, please leave me—I’m such a sinful man.” For Simon was awestruck by the number of fish they had caught, as were the others with him. His partners, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were also amazed. Jesus replied to Simon Peter, “Don’t be afraid! From now on you’ll be fishing for people!” And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus.”**

Last week, Peter ran to the empty tomb. Peter was amazed, curious, and wondering. Peter heard the joyful testimony of two disciples who walked with the risen Jesus and enjoyed dinner with the risen Jesus their eyes were opened to see Jesus, their minds were opened to the meaning of scripture, their hearts were warmed with the Holy Spirit and physically they were rejuvenated to run back to Jerusalem to worship God.

In this fourth resurrection appearance in the Gospel of John, Peter has decided to go back to his day job—fishing. This scripture abounds with symbolisms, flashbacks and flash forwards. They are here to help us remember and understand. At daybreak, as the light of the sun illumines the landscape Jesus, the light of the world, appears to the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and his presence leads to an abundant catch of fish. It is in this abundance, in this moment of grace upon grace, that the disciples recognize Jesus. The fish symbolizes God's abundance, God's steadfast everlasting love, the blessings with which God is blessing us so we can bless all people fulfilling the covenant made with Sarah and Abraham. Coming ashore, rowing, sometimes rowing all night through an intense storm, crossing from the familiar to a new way of being, they find that Jesus, has made breakfast for them, a meal of bread and fish, which would have recalled the abundance of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus, the bread of life, God incarnate who supplies all of our needs for eternity, comes to us to call us once again to the work of the harvest, to be partners with God in sharing God's redeeming grace freely offered to all people, sharing the good news of great joy for all people, loving to unite the world in a community diverse and in harmony. With the reference to Nathanael of Cana, we are meant to recognize this scene as a call narrative for us to do greater works than these. God is always with us, always inviting us into a more abundant life, a more joyous life, a more loving life. God, the great I am, has heard and experienced the suffering of all people and is delivering everyone to the Promised Land. Jesus weeps with us. Jesus shows that death is always overcome with life, fear and hate always overcome with love, chaos always overcome with peace, every seemingly end is always a resurrection, through the events of the arrest, trial, beating, betrayal, abandonment, crucifixion, and resurrection. The glorious tree in the Garden of Eden became a cross by our attempts to control, shame, and blame one another, our self, and God. And through resurrection, it has become the tree of life that provides healing leaves of grace that heals all and mends every relationship forever. The invitation is for us all to experience God, experience resurrection, have Easter wonder and curiosity, to partner with God in speeding the day of our glorious coming future.

There is no shaming or blaming in Jesus' conversation with Peter and us. Jesus' threefold forgiveness, symbolizes the undoing of Peter and our denials, cleansing of all our sin, enabling us to do what at times we cannot fathom, loving all people wholeheartedly, loving self wholeheartedly, loving God wholeheartedly, that is feeding God's sheep. God so loves the world through Jesus and through us.

Art conveys an array of insights and typically unique insights for each person. Look at the art on the bulletin cover portraying today's scripture. We will take a minute of silence to be inspired. What do you perceive? What is God inviting you to do or be through this art?

The artist Pastor Nicolette Penaranda writes: "Feed My Sheep holds a special place in my heart as it is inspired by the text a dear friend of mine used for their ordination. This piece reminds me of their long and complicated journey that led them to ministry, much like Peter. This piece is made of yarn. The feeling of sheep's wool kept sticking out to me every time I read this text. We refer to Jesus as both el Cordero de (L Core-a there-O), that is the lamb of God, and the shepherd. So why not lean into sheep imagery? We like Peter are wanderers so the subject of this piece sits in front of the Adinkra (L-dan-Crow) A symbol, Nkyinkyim (N-Chin-Chim), for life's twisted journey. We have seen the ins and outs of his ministry as he accompanies Jesus, which brings us to this dialogue between the two. Peter is asked three times if he loves Jesus, which to all he replies in the affirmative. In this piece, the two of them are portrayed as sheep, Peter being at the right hand of Jesus. The sheep are branded with Agyinduwura at the center of their chests. They carry with them a symbol of loyalty and faithfulness. They are loyal to Jesus, faithful to the promise of salvation, and accepting of their duty to carry the Good News with them. The face of each sheep is the symbol Kokuromotie (Coke-Row-Mo-Tie) to represent cooperation and harmony. Jesus asking Peter to feed his sheep demonstrates the faith that Jesus has in Peter to do this work. This value of cooperation is also present in the Mpatapo (Ma-Pat-A-Mo)-shaped flowers in the field. They are symbols of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Remember, Peter denied his relationship with Jesus several times before Jesus was executed. Above the sheep sits Kojo Baiden (Co-Joe b-AI-Den). God has traditionally been represented as the sun in various cultures, which brings us to this omnipresent symbol operating as such in this piece. And to the left we see Akoma, or hearts. While we interpret the heart as love, it is also a symbol for endurance and patience. Peter gets to this point by maintaining goodwill and faith in the message of Jesus. He stumbled through the journey and at times caused more harm than good, but Christ was also patient with him. Jesus is saying, "Here's my heart. Here are the things I care about so deeply. And you—someone who makes mistakes, doesn't follow directions, and sometimes even betrays me—you are so loved and trusted enough to keep this good work going." This is a message to all of us. It doesn't matter how poorly you may think of yourself or how others may view you. To Christ, you are beautifully made. And Christ believes in you in spite of it all."

"Here's My Heart"

a poem by Sarah Speed

As a child I made a nativity set for my mother—pinch pot clay, uneven angel wings,
hair made with the help of a garlic press, Joseph's staff rolled out like I was God and it was an earthworm.

There was nothing beautiful about it, nothing whispering of talent, but I made it for my mother!

So I wrapped that questionable piece of art in a box and gave it to her like I was handing her a Picasso.

Here, mother, you carried me in your womb.

You bandaged my knees when I fell.

You made soup when I was sick.

You rocked me to sleep as an infant and sewed my costumes by hand.

In return, I made you this haphazard nativity!

And in my childlike mind, I thought that the small white lamb, molded from a lumpy piece of clay, could somehow make us even, could somehow balance the scales, could somehow pay her back. And bless my mother, because in her grace, she smiled and she displayed that hodge-podge nativity set on the mantel as if it were her pride and joy.

(I believed that it was.)

Maybe that's the way it is with God. I say, Here's my heart and God smiles.

And God takes it.

And despite the ragtag nature of my human-hearted faith, whatever I can give always ends up on God's mantel.

Whatever I can give always calls for pride and joy.

Amen