

The brain is a hard thing to figure. My brain stores things that it has no reason to keep while losing things that I desperately wish I could hang onto. Case in point: my mother once told me about her cousin named Gail Fransen—who lived on a farm in Nebraska—and had a little dog... and—I kid you not—the dog's name was “Rustifer O'Ed the Babe, Ber-Ber in the Hern, Lo and Behold, Look who Bellows in the House of Gail, said Suckle Jones it's a Suckle Suckle Jones it's a Suckle Suckle Jones of the Jones and the Jones, Babe in the Woods Feller Fransen.” And why that sticks in my mind for nearly sixty years now I have no idea. Think of all the important stuff that those brain cells might otherwise be able to deal with... but nooooo.

The other thing I've noticed is that my brain, at this point, tends mash and swirl things together. It's getting harder for me to keep track who said what, and where and why. And I find this especially when I think of the story of Jesus as presented in the various Gospels... Sometimes I mix the stories that Matthew, Mark and Luke offer in the same bowl as John's story... and I swirl them together and get something that mildly resembles a whole story, but loses the detailed focus needed to make the points the individual authors are trying to make.

This became clear to me when I was looking at Karoline Lewis' thoughts on why Jesus asked Peter—three times—in our Gospel text for today, if he loved him. And the default response is that Jesus asked him if he loved him once for every time Peter had denied Jesus... as if this would somehow kind of fix things between them or something. But Karoline points us back to exactly what it is that Peter had denied in John's account. And what we find is, according to John, he wasn't denying Jesus, he was denying that he was his disciple... It wasn't about, “did you know him” or even, “did you believe in him.” In John the question was if he was a committed follower; did he study at his feet; was in the process of making Jesus' thoughts and mission his own... And in John's Gospel, Peter said, “I am not.”

So the point is then, that in our scene today, Jesus is not rubbing Peter's nose in the fact that he'd denied Jesus—which wouldn't be at all something we'd expect from Jesus—instead Peter had denied who he was in relationship to Jesus; so now Jesus is giving him the chance to reaffirm that he is indeed his follower, his disciple. Jesus is reaching out to restore Peter to his rightful place. He's clearing the ground so that Peter can reclaim his relationship and role with Jesus...

What Peter had done was to deny his own longings and hopes and beliefs and his own vision of who he was at the very core of himself. For at least the last three years if anyone had asked him who he was, the first thing out of his mouth would have been, “I'm a disciple of Jesus, I live to serve him and learn from him and do whatever I can to extend his ministry and bring his mission to fruition.” But now—even after the empty tomb and having seen the resurrected Jesus at least twice, Peter is burdened by his denial of himself and trying to sort out who he now is.

And in our text today, he's at least toying with the idea that maybe he's not a disciple after all; maybe those who deny are unworthy of that high calling, maybe he's just what he'd been before—and please don't take this in the wrong way, but—maybe he was just a fisherman. So he goes out fishing that night like he did so many times before he left his boats and nets to follow Jesus those three long years ago... and he takes a few of his friends who had also followed Jesus, and he's out all night catching nothing... when this man on the beach calls out, “You caught nothing did you?” And Peter's got to be thinking, “Who is this joker rubbing it in?”

And then the man on the beach tells them to throw their nets out on the other side of the boat and for some reason they do and there's this astonishing catch of large fish—all kinds of them—and they're straining to bring the nets in... and they're all thinking “who has the kind of

power to make something like this happen?" And then one of the other disciples whispers: "It's the Lord." And just like that Peter is out of the boat swimming, wading, running to Jesus...

And Jesus greets them all, and he prepares a few of the fish he had provided for their breakfast; and then he reminds Peter in this almost visceral way that Peter's love is still there, Peter had never given that up, it was as strong as ever. Had Peter denied his role as a disciple? Yes. But did that change Peter's love of Jesus, or Jesus' call to him? No; not in any way. "Do you love me Peter? Of course you do. Then feed my sheep. Feed my sheep."

And then there's that bit where he reminds Peter that just before all the chaos of his betrayal and crucifixion, Peter had said he would follow Jesus anywhere, but Jesus had known he wasn't ready for that yet... He knew very clearly that Peter wasn't ready to go to the cross with him. But now something new had happened. In the light of the empty tomb, and the resurrection, and the reality of the love of Jesus; the same Simon Peter who had so recently denied he was a follower of Christ was now ready to feed his sheep and follow in the humility, and with the courage, that would indeed take him where others would lead him—to places he'd rather not go—and his arms would be stretched out just as Jesus' arms were stretched out on his own cross.

And—as those early readers of John's Gospel knew so very well—that would prove to be the arc of Peter's life. Tradition has it that Peter's witness to the Lordship of Jesus led him to death on a cross in Rome; but he demurred from the honor of being crucified in the same manner as the man he had once distanced himself from—so he was crucified upside down in witness to the fact that he was truly a follower of the Messiah, the Son of God.

And that wasn't just Peter's story, that was—with minor variations—the story of generations of followers of Christ. They may not have seen him with their own eyes, but they were blessed to have believed in him through the witness of others... and they became disciples. And some may have broken in the persecutions of their life and times and denied their relationship to him; and some may have broken through the mundane rise and fall of emotions and the ebb and flow of faith. But he came to them again and again in the half-light of morning, always ready to support and nurture them; to miraculously provide for them, both physically and spiritually; to gift them with spiritual gifts—as diverse as the fish in that net—and to send them back out on the road to feed his sheep.

And that's our story too. Far too often I've spoken with people who have felt that they have let God down in little or large ways, and that they were therefore no longer worthy of the honor of following Christ or calling him their Lord... And the truth is they have lived spiritually crippled lives simply because they could not believe that God would reach out and embrace them again after such a fault. But that's not what we see in Christ Jesus. His forgiveness is always ready, his love is consistent even if ours is not, and his call to us to follow him remains.

A monk named Brother Lawrence once said that "when he had failed in his duty, he only confessed his fault, saying to GOD, I shall never do otherwise, if You leave me to myself; 'tis You must hinder my falling, and mend what is amiss." And that, "after this, he gave himself no further uneasiness about it."

And there's something very right about this. In Jesus we see just how eager God is to restore us to faith and mission in his name. May we trust God completely and waste little time in the paralysis of our guilt and shame, but come to him as Peter and other saints of the past have come—in simple and absolute confidence—that we might follow him in mission for the sake of the world. Amen