

CHURCH IS NOT A BUS

A servant-girl, seeing Peter in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was with Jesus."

But Peter denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know him."

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

A little later someone else, on seeing Peter, said, "You also are one of them."

But Peter said, "Man, I am not!"

A second time Jesus said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."

About an hour later still another kept insisting, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean."

But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!"

At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And he went out and wept bitterly.

Jesus said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep – Follow me."

The disciples have seen the risen Christ – in the morning at the tomb – in the evening behind the closed doors of their bed and breakfast – a week later in a special appearance to reassure Thomas. Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! So how has their time of discipleship influenced these followers of Jesus? What changes are they making in their lives as a result of his teaching, healing, preaching and his glorious resurrection? They go fishing. Fishing! Right back to what they used to do – right back to who they used to be. Nothing seems to have changed – it is as if Jesus had never been there. They get into the boat and go fishing.

They believe in Jesus, they have seen him resurrected and it is part of their faith but they can't seem to sustain the Easter momentum. They have not translated their experience of Christ into their life and into their mission. Jesus is raised from the dead and the disciples are out to lunch – "gone fishin'..."

Until Jesus acts, they catch nothing – accomplish nothing. Until Jesus acts, they are blind and despairing. Jesus fills their nets and feeds them breakfast. Jesus opens their eyes and renews their spirit. And finally, Jesus heals the broken betrayer, Simon Peter.

Peter affirms his love for Jesus and is commissioned to feed and tend the Lord's sheep – this is how he must follow. Seeing the risen Lord is not enough – saying he loves the Lord is not enough – dependence on the Lord is required and that dependence leads to true discipleship. This is the faith that Peter is called to reaffirm that morning on the beach. It isn't something he hasn't done before – he has, more than once during the ministry of Jesus. Simon Peter has believed in Jesus for a few years. He has been his closest follower. And yet in that experience by the sea, he is converted all over again. The moment of decision approaches again.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Okay, feed my sheep."

In this moment we witness what happens to Peter as God encounters him yet again – works change in him yet again – demands radical commitment yet again.

"Follow me!"

I think that God encountered me – or perhaps I encountered God – through a colleague this week. Change is at work in me – radical commitment is being stirred. I felt – continue to feel – challenged and encouraged to push past a barrier – to hear the question, "Do you love me?" in a new way and to live out my response.

John asked if we “pass the peace” during our worship and was distressed when I told him we did not. He went so far to assert that he would not worship anywhere that did not engage in this age-old practice.

You have probably been in a church where this is done; most likely you have passed the peace before. I haven’t been really excited about it because so often it seems to be a glad-handing, social time that disrupts worship – a variation on manly back-slapping and polite “How are you?” that we see so many other places.

It can seem like another, somewhat artificial, time of greeting each other. If we have talked with each other before worship and we will have another chance following the service, why do we need to set aside this moment to do more of the same?

Do we really know each other? Does passing the peace suggest greater or less familiarity than we actually experience? Are we a room full of strangers who need to introduce ourselves to each other?

John Bell, musician and theologian from the Iona Community in Scotland, describes our typical furniture set up in worship as a bus – we all sit in our seats looking at the back of someone else’s head. Not a big problem if we all live and work and learn and shop in a tight community throughout the week as was once the practice – but we don’t live like that. If we don’t see one another’s faces and speak intentionally on a Sunday morning we may know plenty about the hair on someone’s head and nothing about their heart and soul.

Like the question Jesus poses to Peter three times after their beach barbeque, offering and receiving the peace of Christ is something more than the words we speak. In their interaction Jesus acknowledges Peter’s betrayal – his brokenness – his failure – and his despair. Jesus also forgives – he invites Peter to love him – accepts that love – and so the relationship is restored.

Passing the peace isn’t merely a chummy greeting. We don’t just say, “Hey, how you doing. What do you have planned for this afternoon?” Instead we pass the peace of Christ to each other. It’s more than polite conversation.

We are offering to each other the peace and forgiveness that Christ offers. It is like giving the other person a blessing – like the exchange of loving compassion between Peter and Jesus that binds them again in divine purpose.

It is a kind of prayer on the other person’s behalf. One of the great things about this greeting is that it gets us out of the “me ‘n Jesus” kind of thinking – where my faith is all about me and my relationship with Jesus. Passing the peace asks us to bless others – asks us also to open ourselves as we receive a blessing.

In this moment we can be reunited with each other. If there is any animosity, anger, or ill-will, this is a step toward new beginnings. If you are angry at someone or disappointed in them – if you feel they have betrayed you – this is an opportunity to make things right between you.

Passing the peace goes back to the earliest worship in the Christian church. Again and again Paul says to his churches, "Greet one another with a holy kiss," and Peter writes, "Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ."

When they tell others to greet each other with a holy kiss, they don't mean to go plant a big, juicy smooch on each other, but offer a respectful greeting. We've seen the greeting that people in the Middle East and Europe still give each other – it is a kiss on each cheek. That is the same kiss that Paul and Peter talk about in worship – a holy greeting – a blessing. The equivalent for us today might be a handshake, eye contact with a nod, or an embrace.

We have the opportunity as we pass the peace of Christ to share ourselves with each other – to provide a prayer – a blessing. In passing the peace we not only greet and bless each other, we offer reconciliation and relationship.

Marva Dawn, American Christian theologian, tells of being in worship in her home church. When the time came for passing the peace, a man who had been having a serious conflict with another member walked clear across the sanctuary to offer *the peace* to the one he was angry with. He shook his hand and said, "The peace of Christ be with you."

The other person answered, "And also with you."

They looked at each other – truly saw one another – and embraced. Their difficulties weren't instantly resolved, but from that time on they were able to talk with each other, eventually working out their problems.

Watching the actions of those two people filled everyone in their midst with a profound sense of God's presence.

I am filled with a sense of God's presence in the experience of Peter and Jesus – in their time on the beach – in the words of love and forgiveness that pass between them – in the peace that sets the moment of their encounter apart. It is a moment suspended – Peter is restored and able to fulfil the tasks before him – forgiven, blessed, filled again with promise and hope.

The peace of Christ be with you...