

3rd Sunday of Easter “The Remedy for the Church these Days....Fishing!”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, a strange thing happened at 3 AM on Monday morning. I was packing my bags, getting ready to leave for my trip to Atlanta for the National Association of Deacon Directors meeting, and then Rome made a very important announcement. You see, 3 AM Seattle time is noon Roman time....the time when the Vatican releases the daily bulletin. It is in Italian, but you can get the gist of what the new appointments are for bishops around the world...if you are interested in these kind of things. To be honest with you, at 3 AM in the morning, I am usually not interested in these sorts of things (I value my sleep too much) but I was up anyway and there have been rumors circulating lately about Seattle, so I was curious. And, as many of you probably know by now, Rome announced that Seattle has a new coadjutor Archbishop, Archbishop Etienne from Anchorage. I had two emotions about this announcement as I was driving to the airport. The first was sadness that this announcement meant that Archbishop Sartain will be retiring in a year or so. I think he has been a wonderful Archbishop for us, challenging us to keep our focus on Jesus in everything we do. The second emotion was gratitude to the Holy Father for sending us Archbishop Etienne. He was a priest for Indianapolis before becoming bishop of Cheyenne, Wyoming and then Archbishop of Anchorage, Alaska. He comes to us with a reputation of being a spiritual shepherd who will also point us to Jesus. He also has been vocal in his ministry about keeping bishops and priests accountable to the People of God. In light of everything that we have gone through as Church this past year, I am very happy about that. He also loves to be outdoors. And so, he should fit right in here in Seattle. I look forward to meeting him.

The conference in Atlanta had a full day dedicated to deacon formation which I found to be very helpful. The rest of the conference seemed to be more geared on discerning the future of this national organization. This was an interesting conversation. I was inspired by a number of deacons there who spoke to the need for the organization to stay focused on a core mission of the diaconate, namely forming deacons who will bring the love of Christ and the Church to the peripheries of society, to the forgotten. As I absorbed what these deacons were saying, this feedback felt like good advice for the Church as a whole. We can get so busy navel gazing that we can sometimes forget why Jesus called us to ministry in the first place. I believe this insight is central to this weekend’s Gospel reading.

You see, there is something very human and down to earth about Peter these last few weeks. Peter witnessed Jesus’ arrest and condemnation. Peter also witnessed the empty tomb. Indeed, Peter had already encountered the Risen Lord before his very eyes. You would think that would be enough to create a sense of mission! However, that doesn’t seem to be what happens. It seems the disciples aren’t sure what to do next. And so, what does Peter suggest? He says, “I am going fishing.” Peter, as always, speaks for the other disciples. After everything they had been through, they don’t know what to do next. And so, the disciples seem to return to their former lives as fishermen.

Thankfully, there is something about Jesus that refuses to let us go back to our former lives. An encounter with Jesus is life changing, pointing us forward in life not backwards. Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?”. Peter responds, “Yes, I do love you.” Jesus answers, “Then feed my sheep.” Scripture Scholar Fr. Raymond Brown suggested that, although the two stories in today’s Gospel reading seem to follow one after the other haphazardly, they are, nevertheless, related and held together by the common theme of discipleship. There is Peter in the boat out in the water. The boat reminds us of the Church,

Peter's boat, sailing over the waters of time. Jesus is at the shore, calling to mind the end of time, our heavenly destination. Jesus, looking from heaven, sees the Church not being very successful in its evangelization, not catching many fish. Notice that it is dark when this happens. The darkness calls to mind the sinfulness of its evangelizers. I think this is a helpful commentary. When the light appears at dawn, the light of the world is standing at the shore. Jesus teaches his disciples how to evangelize and where to put their nets. They catch so many fish that they have trouble pulling the nets to the heavenly shore. Interestingly enough, a number of scripture scholars argue that the 153 fish mentioned in the Gospel represent the number of known species of fish at the time of its writing. That the nets do not tear suggests that the saving nets of the Church can hold every soul in the world without tearing. This is quite the challenge the Lord offers the Apostles in the Gospel reading this weekend. And, I believe this challenge is relevant for us today.

My friends, we made our pilgrimage in Lent following Jesus to Jerusalem. During Holy Week, we remembered the Last Supper, Jesus arrest, condemnation and crucifixion. On Easter morning, we celebrated the Resurrection of the Lord as we stood at the empty tomb. This Sunday, it is appropriate to ask the question, where do we go from here? After witnessing the Risen Lord, the disciples asked themselves that same question: now what? I suggest that the Gospel reading this weekend suggests strongly that everything we have liturgically celebrated through the season Lent, Holy Week, and Easter should now orient ourselves to the most important symbol the Lord shows us at the end of mass. What is the most important sign the Lord points us to at the end of mass? I hope you guessed it, the exit sign! When we leave our building, we enter into missionary territory. By our baptism, we are called to be missionary disciples. If we in fact love the Lord, like Peter's answer to Jesus in our Gospel reading, it is sincerely time to start sharing that love with others. And we know that there are a lot of lost souls out there swimming around us close to home, in the deep waters, and out on the peripheries. The invitation from the Gospel reading for this third Sunday of Easter: It is time to go fishing!