

3rd Sunday of Easter “I am Going Fishing!”

Bishop Elect Frank Schuster

This Gospel reading comes at an interesting time in my life. This coming Tuesday I will be ordained a bishop at St. James Cathedral. This is something I never could have expected to happen in my life, and yet here it comes. The trajectory of my life was mostly in my hands prior to February 26th until 6:23 PM. Once I received the phone call that I was appointed to become the next Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle, my life was no longer in my control. It was a profound moment in my life. It boiled down to simple faith in Jesus. Jesus asks his Apostle, “Do you love me”? Like Peter, my answer is, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” He then gives St. Peter a very straight forward vocation, “Feed my sheep”. Of course, what followed next always seemed harsh when I was younger, but today has become very consoling on the eve of my ordination. Jesus says to Peter, “Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” It makes me smile because of the new cloths and vestments the Church requires me to wear. Jesus’ words also give me peace because this path is not something that I chose but was chosen for me. Jesus’ words give me joy and consolation because I can now simply let go of whatever control I thought I had in life and let Jesus be my Lord and guide in a deeper way I never dreamed before. Yes, the Gospel reading comes at an interesting time for me. St. Peter gives me courage.

Of course, there is something very human and down to earth about Peter these last few weeks, wouldn’t you say? Peter witnessed Jesus’ arrest and condemnation. Peter also witnessed the empty tomb. Indeed, Peter had already encountered the Risen Lord before his very eyes. At this point in the Gospel, it seems that he and the disciples are not 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 tempted to return to their former lives as fishermen. Thankfully, there is something about Jesus that refuses to let his disciples to go back to their former lives after being with him. 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. Many scholars have argued that the 153 fish mentioned in the Gospel represent the number of known species of fish at the time of its writing. This is an interesting thought. 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, Christ died for our sins, he died for us all, Christ rose from the dead, and now, what is Jesus' expectation of his disciples? It is time to go fishing. It is time to fish for souls! We must evangelize. And we must evangelize by the light of his teaching, not our own. However, Jesus' expectation of his disciples didn't stop with evangelization. The story is incomplete. Again, Jesus takes Peter aside and asks him "Do you love me?" three times. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times, so Jesus requires Peter to answer three times, "Yes, Lord, I do love you. Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep". You see, it is not enough to be a successful fisherman of souls. It is not enough to be good at evangelization. Once we have welcomed souls into our community, Jesus requires his disciples to become shepherds who feed the flock.

My friends, we made our pilgrimage during 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 before 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: what do we do now?

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! We can rightly ask ourselves: what does that look like for me this week? For me, it means a date at the Cathedral this Tuesday to become ordained a bishop. Who would have ever thought? But this also means that my ordination to become a bishop is not about me at all but about the mission Jesus entrusts with his Church. My friends, I simply see it as a new way to go fishing. And this is an activity that I will not do alone. This is an activity we do together as a People of God who are fed by the body and blood of the One Good Shepherd who is Christ and Lord. Amen.