

A Table Full of Love

John 21:1-19
Easter Sunday
March 27, 2016

There is a lot of mystery that surrounds the resurrection. No one knows how it happened—there were no witnesses to the actual resurrection. It took place in the dark of a tomb. And in this last chapter of John, the mystery of resurrection, love and forgiveness continues. There is mystery too, that surrounds this last chapter of John. It is fairly universally seen as written by a different author than the rest of John, and it is seen as a later addition, most likely written after both Peter and the Beloved Disciple have died. Some see it as an epilogue and some an appendix. Regardless of the mystery of when it was written and by whom, this chapter brings together many themes from the rest of the book of John. In these stories, these encounters with the risen Christ, previous stories and themes are reinforced and given new life.

The book of John ends where it began—in Galilee, by the water, around fishing boats. Just as in the beginning when Jesus first called the disciples, so now at the end Jesus once again invites them to follow him. Jesus had called them from their former lives and professions, they had followed him and been with him for 3 years, and now after his death, when they've returned to what they know best, Jesus appears to them and calls them once again to follow him. We don't know why they have returned to Galilee, why they've gone back to fishing after such a profound and life-changing encounter with Jesus. Perhaps it is the only thing they know to do; perhaps returning to the familiar is their way of dealing with their grief that Jesus is gone. What has happened to them in Jerusalem—seeing their beloved Jesus crucified and buried, and then meeting him in his risen state, but only having short appearances or glimpses of him—would take a while to figure out and make sense of. Returning to the familiar would offer some way to begin to put their lives back together, even if it isn't what they will do for the long term.

As in the beginning when the Word became flesh and dwelt in their midst, so now in this new age, the Word appears to them and invites them once again into relationship, prepares the table for them, and calls them to bigger and greater things.

This table, this breakfast of bread and fish by the Sea of Tiberias, is reminiscent of the meal of bread and fish which Jesus fed to the 5000 in the same place. While the former feeding needed the food of others, this time Jesus has provided the food, even to the extent of providing the abundant catch of fish from which he asks the disciples to contribute. At Jesus' table, there is food in abundance and food for everyone.

This table is set beside a charcoal fire, which must surely have reminded Peter of the last charcoal fire around which he stood and warmed himself and denied being a follower of Jesus. In John, unlike the other gospels where Peter is asked if he knows Jesus, the question asked of Peter is whether he is a follower of Jesus; in this gospel, Peter doesn't deny knowing Jesus; he denies being his follower. (*Dictionary of Jesus and The Gospels*, p. 861) It is around this second charcoal fire, that Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Here now is Peter's chance to affirm his love for Jesus the same number of times as he denied being his follower. This table is truly a table of abundant grace and mercy; a table of second chances.

In the Gospel of John, love and friendship play an important role. Here in this gospel, the word for selfless love, *agape*, and the word for friendship and the love of friends, *philia*, are used more frequently than in any other gospel. John uses these words for love interchangeably, and yet there are nuances of difference. Agape is the kind of love that is altruistic and unconditional, it is self-offering, and has the welfare of the other in mind. Philia is the kind of love one has for one's friends and family. Surely the love we have for friends and family is also altruistic and unconditional, but there is an added element of reciprocity to philia. It is mutual love, one for another. John brings these 2 forms of love together in a way others don't, and in his gospel, the highest form of friendship—*philia*—is thought to be equal to *agape*, self-offering love. (Takaaki Haraguchi, "Philia as Agape: The Theme of Friendship in the Gospel of John, *Asia Journal of Theology*, p. 251.) In John, to be a friend—to have and show *philia*—is to be willing to lay down one's life for one's friend, which is what Jesus does.

Jesus' questions to Peter link this story to the Good Shepherd in chapter 10, in which the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (Erik M. Heen, *Feasting on the Gospels*, p. 347) Jesus is loved by God, because he is willing to lay down his life in order to take it up again. And then in chapter 15:12-15, Jesus says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has

greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

In this conversation with Peter, Jesus embodies once again the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and calls them by name. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Jesus asks 3 times, knowing that Simon Peter has previously denied being his follower 3 times. "Simon, I know you, and I give you this chance to tell me you love me. In turn, I will give you a second chance, invite you once again to follow me, to take on my task of being a shepherd to my flock; tend them, feed them, care for them. Do what good shepherds do; lay down your life for them. In so doing, you are my follower; and you will follow me all the way to the cross." Indeed, this Good Shepherd spreads a table in the presence of enemies, and invites them to be friends. "Come and have breakfast." This is surely a table full of love.

Encountering the resurrected Jesus is a bit of a mixed bag for Peter. We can see his impulsiveness in throwing his robe on and jumping in the sea to swim to shore. It's the same impulsiveness that leads him to respond to Jesus after Jesus has just said he would die, "No way, that will never happen!" And the same impulsiveness that causes him to cut off the soldier's ear when they come for Jesus in the garden; and to first refuse to let Jesus wash his feet, but then insist that he be washed all over. And yet, in spite of his impulsiveness, I can imagine that for Peter it is both wonderful and terrifying to see again the man that he loved so deeply and followed so closely for 3 years, the man he confessed to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God," and yet this is also the man that he denied following. Here is the man to whom he said, "Lord, I will lay down my life for you." And yet, when the hour came, he denied being a follower, and he was not even present to watch him lay down his life.

Encountering the resurrected Jesus is a bit of a mixed bag for us too, as we recognize that this is who we've committed to follow through our baptism, this is the one we've said we love, and yet, we see the ways in which we have, by our words, actions or inactions, denied being followers of Jesus; we recognize the ways in which we have removed or distanced ourselves from Christ's suffering; we see the imperfections of our love for Jesus.

The beauty of Jesus' 3 questions to Peter is the redemption and grace that fills them; the deep love of Jesus for Peter that undergirds them; it's the second chance they offer to Peter. The first 2 times Jesus asks the question, he uses the verb, *agape*: Peter, do you love me unconditionally, with a self-offering love? And Peter replies with the verb, *philio*: Jesus, I love you as my friend. The third time Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me as a friend?" and Peter replies, "Yes, you know I love you as a friend." When I first discovered that 2 different verbs for love were used in the passage, I was saddened, irritated with Peter, intrigued, confused and amazed at what it might mean that Jesus used one form of love (the higher form, in my mind) and Peter used another (lesser) form. And I didn't know what to make of the fact that then on the 3rd question, Jesus used Peter's verb for love. Did Jesus give in to Peter? Did he stoop to Peter's level of love? Or was Jesus' love for Peter so great that he met him where he was?

Now in the gospel of John, the distinction between these 2 verbs isn't quite as important or pronounced. In fact, in John, the greatest form of love is the love we have for our friends that leads us to lay down our lives for them. Peter has declared his love for Jesus in the best way he knows how, which is the love of a disciple for his beloved teacher and friend. And ultimately, he has made the most profound profession of love. This is the love that Jesus affirms and the love that Jesus desires. What Peter has to offer Jesus, the love Peter has to offer Jesus, is enough; he is loved and accepted for who he is in all of his impulsiveness and misunderstanding; he is loved in spite of and in the midst of his imperfections and denials. The encounter with Jesus by the Sea of Galilee changed his life; the encounter with the risen Christ at the Sea of Tiberias freed him to live as a beloved and forgiven follower of Christ and shepherd of Christ's flock. And this encounter led him to ultimately lay down his life for his friend. In response to Peter's answer, Jesus once again says to him, "Follow me." Peter is a worthy disciple, called once again to follow Jesus wherever it may lead him.

Jesus' questions to Peter are also his questions to us: do you love me? How do you love me? Do you love me with your whole heart? Do you love me as a friend? Do you love me enough to give your life for me? And he stands ready to feed us; ready to receive us however feebly or strongly we proclaim our love for him. For whatever we bring to the table is enough; the love we have for Jesus is enough; we are enough. The love we bring joins the love of Jesus already at the table and

it becomes abundant. The good news of Easter is that Christ appears to us and invites us again to be his friends, to love him with the same love we have for one another; to love one another with the same love we have for him. These questions aren't a test, but an invitation to come as we are, to bring what we have. At Christ's table, even our inadequacies are turned into abundant love and grace.

At the table of the risen Christ, there is love in abundance for all who come. It is a table of new life and second chances, a table of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a table where there is enough, and where it is enough for us to come as we are. We can come to the table of the risen Christ in our brokenness, our imperfections and failings, our doubts and misgivings; we can come to the table of the risen Christ in our strength, our confidence and our joy. It is here, at this table, where we can proclaim our love for the One who loves us in the best way we know how, in the way that reflects who we are and where we are on our journey of faith. Jesus receives what we bring because it is enough and we are enough.

Communion follows.