

## ***Two Charcoal Fires***

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June 25, 2006

John 18:15-18, 25-27

John 21:1-19

Apparently, charcoal fires were not big in biblical times. Nowhere else in all of scripture is a charcoal fire mentioned than in these two critical episodes in the life of Peter, recounted in John's gospel. Perhaps that's because John was an eyewitness to the gospel who had an eye for detail. It is John, more than any of the others, who added particular visual imagery that set the scene more fully and brought the event into clearer focus. John is the one who told us about *the bowl full of vinegar* at the foot of the cross. He described Jesus walking into the temple *in the winter* and in the *portico of Solomon*. With the woman caught in adultery, John's Jesus *bent down and wrote or doodled with his finger*. And when the Roman centurion took his sword and thrust it into Jesus' side, John made sure we knew that *blood and water spurted out*. In both of our passages this morning, there was not just a fire to warm by or cook on—there was a *charcoal* fire, and two to be exact.

With the first charcoal fire, in John 18, Peter and John follow Jesus, arrested and bound, as the police take him to Annas, father-in-law of the high priest Caiaphas, for questioning. John knew Annas and he was allowed in the court yard, but Peter was not let in. Noticing Peter was outside, John went to the woman guarding the gate and asked her let to let Peter in. She complied with his request and brought Peter inside the gate. The woman immediately asked Peter this question: "*You are not also one of this man's disciples, are you?*" The English translation accurately reflects the written Greek in that her question assumed a negative answer and Peter quickly denied he was one of Jesus' disciples. The words spoken in Peter's denial, "*I am not,*" are the antithesis of Jesus' words of self-identification leading up to his arrest. When the police arrived at the garden carrying their weapons, Jesus came forward and asked them who they were looking for. One of them

replied, "*Jesus of Nazareth.*" Jesus affirmed, "*I am he.*" Where Jesus freely and boldly proclaimed who he was, Peter could not even claim discipleship. "*I am not [a disciple].*"

After this first denial, Peter walked over to a charcoal fire, built by the police who arrested Jesus, and their slaves, in order to warm himself. Meanwhile, Jesus was inside with Annas, being questioned and beaten and then sent onto Caiaphas for more questioning. As Peter stood by the charcoal fire, no doubt warming not only his chilly flesh but also the coldness of fear he felt inside, he is again asked about his association with Jesus as one of his disciples. Again, the question assumed a negative response and Peter again answered, "*I am not.*" But then Peter is questioned a third time, this time without the negative assumption. Someone apparently present at the arrest asked Peter, "*Didn't I see you up there in the garden with him?*" And Peter denied it again, this time with added poignancy because the questioner had witnessed him there. Peter's lie is exposed. As we all know, right then and there the cock crowed, proving Jesus' prediction and giving a painful glimpse into the limits of Peter's ability, albeit due to fear, to stand by Jesus. Peter will carry in his heart the heaviness of his cowardice for quite some time. Whatever confidence he had in his own ability to remain faithful no matter the cost, expressed so certainly just hours earlier in that upper room, was probably entirely lost that night by that first charcoal fire.

The second charcoal fire appears in John 21. Weeks after Jesus' execution and resurrection, seven of the male disciples had made their way eighty miles north of Jerusalem to the Sea of Tiberius. Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are the only ones named. In John's gospel, Jesus made only two post-resurrection appearances up to this point: to Mary Magdalene at the tomb that first Easter morning and to the gathered disciples later that same day. We are not told why they were so far away. Eighty miles is no small distance when you travel on foot. It's about the same distance as walking from here to the Maryland/Pennsylvania border. Minimally, they didn't have a clue as to what they should be doing now. Probably they felt the discouragement of Jesus' absence after the brief

excitement of his appearance to them three days after he was put to death. Possibly they were thinking of returning to their prior vocation of fishing. Whatever the backdrop, here they were, out in a boat big enough to comfortably fit all seven of them, fishing all night with no luck.

With the darkness beginning to fade into dawn, someone yelled at them from the shore, someone who they could not make out clearly. The voice asked them if they had caught anything and they replied that they had not. Then the voice commanded them to cast the net on the right side of the boat, with the added comment that they will find some there. Some indeed—their net bulged almost to the breaking point. For John, a light bulb immediately lit up: "*It is the Lord*" is all he could say. For Peter, impulsive as ever, the reality was too much. He couldn't wait for the boat to make it to shore, slowed down as it was by the heavy catch. He leapt into the sea and swam as hard as he could to the shore.

When Peter and the others reached the shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it as well as some bread. It was, of course, Jesus who built the charcoal fire and now knelt by it. He told them to bring some of the fish they had just caught and Peter bounded aboard and returned with the net full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three of them, John tells us. One hundred and fifty-three—how odd? Why one hundred and fifty-three? What does the number "153" mean or symbolize? Exegetical scholars have tried to find some reasonable, symbolic explanation for the number, but no one has ever come up with an answer. Most conclude that the detail of one hundred and fifty-three fish can only mean that there were exactly one hundred and fifty-three fish in the net, no more and no less. Someone had actually counted them and wrote the number down. It must be that John again, the eye witness with an eye for detail.

We aren't privy to what they talked about around that second charcoal fire, but when they had finished, Jesus took Peter aside with a purpose. Jesus was direct and to the point: "*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these*"? The phrasing of the question was deliberate and Peter certainly did not miss the irony. "*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than*

*these*"? Jesus was, of course, referring to the other disciples present. Remember Peter's boast that last night of Jesus' life, that he would never abandon Jesus even if all the other disciples did, that he would give his life for Jesus. Peter, of course, did abandon Jesus and the phrasing of Jesus' question no doubt brought Peter's persistent pain right up to the surface. But Jesus wasn't trying to rub it in or make Peter feel bad. He had healing and reconciliation in mind and, I think we all know, that healing and reconciliation cannot occur without honest acknowledgment of that which caused the break in the first place. "*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these*"? Peter simply replied, no doubt with heavy heart, "*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.*" Jesus' response must have startled Peter: "*Feed my lambs.*"

Jesus was expressing confidence in Peter's fidelity and in what he wanted Peter to do for the sake of the gospel. But Jesus also knew the depth of Peter's self-doubt and sense of failure, so he asked Peter the question two more times, but without reference to Peter's earlier boast: "*Simon, son of John, do you love me*"? Both times Peter replied affirmatively and Jesus responded similarly as before, "*Tend my sheep,*" and "*Feed my sheep.*" The third time he continued by predicting that Peter would indeed face death as a martyr for the sake of the gospel, that he would give his life for Jesus. Then, as if to say that all is forgiven, Jesus finished their conversation with the same command that he gave to Peter the first day that they met: "*Follow me.*" Follow me through your failures, follow me through your pain, follow me into my purposes for you for the sake of the gospel, even though you will meet death because of it. Come and follow me.

Two charcoal fires: one a place of denial, failure and betrayal; the other a place of reconciliation, healing and forgiveness. Not far apart in scriptural text but miles apart in what they meant to Peter. Three times Jesus asked Peter to speak the words that overcome all others, even words of betrayal and failure, words strong enough to heal: "*Lord, you know that I love you.*"

I think most of us can identify with Peter. Not necessarily Peter's personality, but with a sense, from time to time, of failure in living in God's way, of betrayal in consistent faithfulness to our call to discipleship, of hearing the words, "follow me," and taking only timid and cautious steps along that path. Few, if any of us, will ever face death, as Peter and others did, or serious persecution, as John and others did, for obeying Jesus' words, "follow me." In our context, far removed from theirs, the temptation to deny our place beside Jesus nonetheless remains real and perhaps even more insidious. Under what social and personal pressure might we equivocate about our discipleship or turn our backs on Jesus' love? Under what circumstances might compromise and acquiescence to personal expediency or self-protection or fear cause us, by our actions or lack of action, to explicitly or implicitly deny Jesus and our identity as his follower?

For me those times usually come in what might be considered small ways that probably no one else will notice: passing by someone on the street who asks for money or expressing unjustified anger at a motorist for some perceived breach of vehicular courtesy or thinking something ugly and unfair about another person that I would never state publicly or failing to take visible stand in support of someone who has suffered an injustice or when some clear wrong has been done. Of course, there are more things I could name than those and I'm sure we each have our own lists to name or confess.

None of us are free from some degree of denial, betrayal and failure in faithfully following Jesus. All of us have stood, in one way or another, by that first charcoal fire, trying to take away the chill we feel inside for our lack of faithfulness. The question for us, like it was for Peter, is how do we get from the first charcoal fire to the second one, where forgiveness, healing and a resurgence of discipleship and call comes? I think our texts this morning point to a two-part answer.

First, we need community. We can't carry the weight of failure or denial or betrayal alone. I don't mean that weight always bears heavily on our shoulders or that we are drenched with guilt. But if we are aware

internally, it is still there, at least from time to time. We know when we have failed. And whenever that happens, we need each other. Peter had Mary Magdalene, overcome with wonder at seeing Jesus outside the empty tomb. He had other sisters and brothers who hid with him in Jerusalem. And he had these six brothers who accompanied him on that fateful fishing trip. Even with their own struggles with faithfulness, they cared for him and loved him from the first charcoal fire right to the second one. And we need each other in the same way, not just in and through our strengths and accomplishments, but in our failures and fears as well.

Second, we need to let Jesus embrace us and encourage us and to push us forward, just as he did Peter. I love the line in "O, Holy Night,"—"he knows our needs; to our weaknesses no stranger." Jesus is not a harsh taskmaster, but someone who knows our weaknesses, our failures, our fears—perhaps that's the human side of Jesus showing through. Love, healing and reconciliation are always there, waiting for us, if we will be honest about our need. But more than that, Jesus will also encourage us and challenge us to deeper faithfulness. He will always say to us, again and again, "Follow me."

Two charcoal fires. Moving from the first to the second is never easy, but it is possible. To walk that path, we need each other and the ability to accept Jesus' loving embrace. "*Do you love me,*" Jesus asks. If we can respond like Peter, we will hear his healing words, "*Feed my sheep. Come and follow me.*"