

Practicing Hospitality: Both Host and Guest
John 21: 9-17
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Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

Sometimes I feel like I live more than one life; ever feel like that? This sense has been particularly keen to me these last few weeks as the end of my semester of teaching at Temple coincided with Holy Week and Easter. One day I was “Prof Bailey” and the next I was “Pastor Bailey” and at home, of course, I am “Mom” no matter how old my kids get. I generally roll between these identities without much effort but with these two “high stakes” weeks rolled into one, I found myself juggling multiple responsibilities, wearing more than one “hat’ and struggling to stay intentionally focused on each. Even though my students, combined, had submitted over 250 assignments for me to grade, I found it difficult to do anything with them during Holy Week, when my heart and mind were on things of the spirit, shall we say, rather than the things of academia.

Knowing who we are at any given point in time can be challenging; are we the “parent” or the “child? Are we the “employee” of XYZ company or organization or are we the baseball coach, the grandparent, the church member, which might be the same or different from being the “Christian!” Our marital, working, economic and academic status all contribute to our sense of identity, and that’s in *addition* to our personality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, race, class, ability and anything else. *Who we are*, who we know ourselves to be as God’s people, matters; our identity represents our unique contribution to the world and to the lives of all we encounter.

You might be wondering what identity has to do with the text we read this morning. It is the recollection of the third appearance of the Risen Christ to the disciples, recorded here in John's Gospel as Jesus makes the disciples breakfast and they eat together by the Sea of Galilee. Afterwards, there transpires this interesting conversation between Jesus and Peter. Much is made over this: Peter had denied Jesus three times and coincidentally, three times, Jesus asks him here if he love him and to "feed by sheep." Most see this as an exchange in which Peter receives Jesus' forgiveness and is reinstated into the intimate group of followers once again.

Except, Jesus says *nothing* here about forgiveness at all! There is no talk about the past, about who said or did what, about all that had transpired. I imagine that could have made for awkward conversation, especially so early in the morning; only a handful of them saw Jesus through to the very end, and half of those were the women. No one is saying much, I suspect, as they wonder about this Risen Jesus. After breakfast is over, Jesus turns to Peter, and saying nothing at all about forgiveness he asks him, "do you love me more than these?"

Now I've always wondered who or what "these" were, haven't you?! I mean, what's Jesus referring to here? Is he pointing to the other disciples; is he asking Peter to gauge his love against that of his friends? That doesn't seem fair, or likely. I wonder if Jesus is pointing to the boat and nets, the surrounding hillsides and the sparkling water; I wonder if Jesus is taking all that in and asking Peter: "Do you love me more than all this--- your very livelihood, your very life?" And Peter responds, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

It's kind of a strange response; it doesn't actually match the question, directly. Peter doesn't say, "Yes, I love you more than all this stuff." But he does confirm his love for Jesus. So, Jesus asks him more directly, "Simon son of John, do you love me?", not once but twice! Both times

Peter answers affirmatively, almost begging Jesus not to doubt him: “You know that I love you.” And each time, Jesus instructs him to do the same thing: “feed my sheep.”

Notice that there’s nothing here about forgiveness; but rather what I hear and see here is Jesus coaxing Peter to confirm his identity: “*Who are you, Peter? You are a lover of all things of the world, or are you a lover of me? And if you really are a lover of me, then you will forever be known by what you do for me, how you love and care for others?*” This is about identity! This is about asking Peter to step up, take responsibility and ultimately *be* who he knows himself to be: a disciple of Jesus.

Those times Peter was asked if he was with Jesus and Peter said, “I am not”? Maybe instead of a denial that was a *confession*. Maybe Peter was saying out loud what he knew in his heart to be true: he *couldn’t* be counted among Jesus’ disciples because he did *not* have the courage to face what Jesus faced. Maybe Peter was admitting to himself and to others that while he had *tried* to be a follower, in reality, he had failed; he was not “one of them”, one of the faithful who could walk with Jesus both in life and in death.

So, this morning the question for us is, who are *we*? Who does God call *us* to be, as individuals and as representatives of God’s faithfulness in this place? How do *we* understand ourselves in relationship to the Resurrected Christ and to the world God loves? Jesus was host and the disciples’ guests at the beachside campfire but when the meal was over, he charged Peter with being host in the same likeness with which he had been welcomed and served. In the same manner, we come to communion as guests of the generous, welcoming God who puts no limits on love and invitation. At Christ’s table we are served with reminders of God’s mercy and welcome to all. We come as guests, but we are commissioned to leave as *hosts* to offer

others the same invitation we've received, without judgement, without distinctions, without prejudice. The question "Do you love me more than these?" is *our* question; it is the question of whether or not we can receive as guests and serve as hosts in the same spirit of love with which we have been served.

This passage isn't about forgiveness; there wasn't need for that. It's about identity, about who we are in the light of the resurrection. May we come to the table as guests and leave as hosts, responsibility for welcoming and serving all God's creation in the radical, transforming, liberating reign of God.