

Third Sunday of Easter – Year C
(Apr. 25, 2004)

Our readings today move between earth and heaven. The Gospel finds the apostles back in Galilee in their ordinary occupation. They are fishing, but now this action becomes symbolic of their whole mission from the Lord. More about that in a minute. The first reading from Acts shows us these same apostles hauled before the court for doing what Jesus told them to do. They were catching people. Revelation carries us to a higher realm where both heavenly and earthly voices praise the lamb who was slain, the Christ who is displaying his wounds.

Let's look at one of those passages and see if we can find ourselves there, the Gospel passage.

They have been out all night and they have caught nothing. Suddenly there is someone on the shore telling them to cast their nets on the right side for a catch of fish. Does this sound familiar? Luke has a variation of this scene in his gospel. But they don't recognize him, except one, the disciple Jesus loved. He looks and he says, "It is the Lord!" This unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved must have loved Jesus in return. Perhaps he represents the authentic and faithful believer. He is the one who remained close to Jesus at the Last Supper; he rested his head on Jesus' breast. He stood faithfully at the cross; he was the first to believe in the resurrection; here his faith and love enable him to see through the morning mist and recognize the stranger on the shore as the Lord.

When they get to shore they find Jesus cooking breakfast for them. There is bread on the fire. He is making the morning toast. He tells them to bring some of the fish they have caught and he puts that on the fire as well. He feeds them with bread and fish. That is something that has happened before, too. Then he takes Peter aside and we have that marvelously poignant scene. "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, I love you." "Do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Do you really love me?" "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep."

Three times Peter denied that he even knew him. Three times Jesus asks him to avow his love. Peter really does love him. But he remains a

weak and sinful person, perhaps like ourselves. But that does not make any difference to Jesus. He puts him in charge anyway.

But what does he tell him to do? Feed my lambs, feed my sheep. Do for others what I have done for you. Nurture them, support them, guide them. Be their leader. But above all, be their shepherd, tending them with the same love and compassion and understanding that I have shown you.

We cannot ignore the other great image that is here: the image of Peter's net. Remember when this incident occurs in Luke's Gospel, the net breaks. But now it is after the resurrection. And Peter's net holds all the fish that are in it. How many are there? There is that very curious detail that John gives us. He tells us there were 153 fish. Well, who do you suppose was counting? Now this is John's Gospel and you can be sure that there is more going on here than meets the eye. The scholars who study the scriptures and write about things like this give a number of interpretations of that 153. Here is just one: at the time John wrote his Gospel the biologists or ichthyologists or fishologists or whoever was doing this sort of thing counted 153 species of fish in the sea. So what is John telling us? Peter's net is big enough and strong enough to hold all the fish in the sea. But on another and more significant level, Peter's net is big enough and strong enough to hold all the people in the world. It's another image of the mission Jesus gives Peter and the others. Remember last week we heard him mission them to his own mission: to forgive, to reconcile, to bring people together, indeed to go out and preach the good news to the whole world, excluding no one.

Peter cannot do it by himself. Just as there were others in that boat with him helping him to bring in the fish, so, too, in Acts we see others with him beginning the work of evangelization. It's a community effort. And it still is. It begins with faith and love, like the disciple Jesus loved, recognizing him through morning mist; like Mary Magdalene recognizing him through tears; like all of them recognizing him as they share his sufferings; like all of us as we greet one another with the peace of Christ. What we must do now is find our place in that whole process. Some of us will cast the nets and bring in the catch. Others will cook the meals and still others will distribute the bread. It's important to realize that what we do is done because God has first loved us and given us a fantastic gift. We must

not hoard the gift selfishly to ourselves, we must share it with others. We are all part of the apostolic mission whether in the boat or on the shore; whether distributing the bread or receiving it; whether proclaiming the word or hearing it; whether visiting the sick and consoling the lonely and the suffering or being visited and consoled. It's all God's work but it's ours as well.