

John 21:1-19

1After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.2Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.3Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."6 He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.7 That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.8 But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. 9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."16 A second time, he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.18 Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."19(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this, he said to him, "Follow me."

The big news this week is the election of a new Pope, Leo 14th. His election fills people with joy and hope as a new vicar of Christ is chosen for the Catholic Church. He stands in a line of over

250 pontiffs. Today's Scripture deals with the restoration of Peter, who is traditionally the first Pope, the Rock on whom Jesus will build the church. But for this to happen, Peter's feelings of shame must be overcome.

Indeed, scholars believe that this is the reason the chapter was added to John's Gospel, which has a natural ending at chapter twenty. It focuses on the reclamation of Peter, who, not too long ago, swore that he did not know Jesus. For this denial, he believes there is no redemption.

This story tells how Jesus came to heal Peter's heart and reaffirm his choice of Peter as the Rock, the foundation on which he would build the church. To do this, he must restore Peter and help him overcome the deep-seated shame he feels.

The story begins with at least seven disciples appearing somewhat lost, pondering what's next. Sure, Jesus had risen, but what now?

So, Peter, still despondent and filled with shame over his denial of Jesus, decides to do what he knows: go fishing. He is on autopilot. Six of his fellow disciples decided to go with him. If they couldn't do anything else, at least they could return to fishing, something they knew. But even that seems futile as they fish all night with nothing to show for it. But standing on the shore is an unrecognized Jesus who calls to them, "Hey, lads, catch anything?" They shrug, and the still unrecognized Jesus says, "Try over there," and they do, and boom, the nets are full. John cries out, "It's the Lord." So Peter puts on his outer garment, leaves the boat, and races to shore.

When they reach shore, they see a charcoal fire, and Jesus asks them to bring some of the fish over, making them breakfast of fish and bread.

A charcoal fire is not just a minor detail; it is a testament to John's artistry, inviting us to recall that it was not too long ago that Peter stood by another charcoal fire, denying that he had ever heard of Jesus. Now, filled with shame for his action, he is by another fire, and here is the Lord. Peter despairs. What must he think of me? I have committed the unforgivable sin. And thus I am unforgivable.

Then John notes they caught 153 fish, and scholars have for centuries tried to decide what to make of that number. There are many theories, some quite inventive, but if it meant anything more than a lot of fish, the meaning is lost in history.

I think it just means a vast quantity of fish. It creates an ideal bookend to the gospel, recalling the first miraculous sign, as John calls miracles, turning water into over a hundred gallons of the finest wine as a symbol of the abundant gifts God seeks to give us to fill our lives with joy.

Abundant love given us by God is symbolized at the beginning and the end of the gospel. Jesus also pours out on us abundant forgiveness. And as Neil Young and Nicolette Larson sing, “It’s gonna take a lotta love to change the way things are”, and that is what Jesus has for Peter and for us, a lotta love. With love, he changes the way he feels, his sense of shame.

So, Peter is summoned by Jesus for a private conversation. Jesus knows him and knows he feels deep shame, a feeling that many of us experience. We are not enough, we don’t do enough, we don’t have enough, we don’t believe enough, and we believe there is something wrong with us. We are broken.

So, what’s it like for Peter?

The information on shame comes from Brene Brown's *Atlas of the Heart* (pp 132ff). She lists many instances of the kinds of things we don’t talk about and keep secret, and condemn ourselves for. These she lists are just to spur our thinking, not necessarily our areas of shame. There are as many here as there are people.

- I am in recovery
- Raging at my children
- Bankruptcy
- Getting laid off and having to tell my pregnant wife
- My boss calling me an idiot in front of a client
- Not making partner
- My spouse leaving me for the next-door neighbor
- My spouse asking for a divorce and saying I want children, but not with you
- A DUI
- Infertility
- Telling my fiancé that my dad lives in France when he is in prison
- Internet Porn
- Flunking out of School Twice
- Hearing my parents fight through the walls and wondering if I’m the only one who feels this afraid.
- To which we could add our deep secrets.

Most of us have them.

Remember, this is not normal guilt, such as “I have done something wrong.” Guilt can be a good thing, as it can prompt change and growth. But not shame, which is the soul-sickness that shouts in our heads, “I am bad, flawed.”

If we fail a test, shame tells us we are stupid, while guilt says we should have studied. Get the difference? Guilt is related to actions we take, while shame is tied to our sense of self. Shame says we are unlovable because there is something wrong with us. Brene Brown defines it this way: “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.” She also notes that we all have it to a degree; the only ones who don’t are those who lack the capacity for empathy and human connection.

That’s Peter’s heart. Peter feels he is broken and beyond redemption. He feels worthless and hopeless. He thinks he is beyond the reach of Jesus’ love. How could someone, even Jesus, love him? Many of us have felt that way or still feel that way.

Shame thrives on secrecy, silence, and judgment. It hides. We need to uncover it. We need to speak to God, and we can enlist someone to talk to—someone who will refrain from judging us. This might be a trusted friend or a counselor who listens to us with acceptance and empathy, reminding us that we are not alone.

Peter remains silent and refrains from discussing his feelings, continuing to judge himself as he distances himself from his identity as the leader of the band and the one responsible for guiding them in feeding and tending to God’s people.

This is the condition of Peter’s heart, and Jesus knows that if Peter is to be what Jesus knows he is, he must come to grips with this shame. He must overcome his focus on himself. In the three parallel “Do you love me?” questions that correspond with Peter’s, three declarations are made that he doesn’t know who Jesus is: “I don’t know him.” Jesus breaks the silence and involves him in a deep conversation, asking him:

Do you love me?

Peter says, “Yes.”

Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.”

Jesus asks again, “Do you love me?”

And Peter says, “Yes, I do.”

“Tend my sheep.”

And one more time, Jesus asks, “Do you love me?”

Peter, coming to grips with his shame, cries, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!”

Jesus replies, “Feed my sheep.”

Jesus not only mirrors the three denials, not saying they don’t matter, but letting Peter know they are not enough to break the bonds of love Jesus has for him. He is saying, “I still believe in you. You are enough, you are good enough, you are faithful enough. You are now and always have been. Be who you are, who I know you can be.”

And to emphasize, this gives Peter something to do, saying feed my sheep.

Jesus connects with him in love and reminds him that he belongs not only to Jesus but also to the disciples, giving something for him to do and focus on beyond himself. He must care for others with empathy. He gives him purpose. It moves him beyond worrying about what Jesus thinks of him and enables him to focus on the needs of others. This outward focus, combined with love and belonging, is the arch enemy of shame.

He receives love, belonging, and acceptance, and is placed in a larger group to belong to, the band of disciples. Jesus is moving Peter from isolation back into community and giving him a purpose or mission, something we all need and which is absolutely essential to overcome feelings of shame. He has disciples to care for and sheep and lambs to feed and, indeed, beyond any limited circle, he has the people of God, everyone to care for.

For Peter and for you and me, Jesus declares we are enough, good enough, faithful enough, loved enough.

He follows this with a resounding, “Follow me.” And we follow him as we care for his sheep, all his people. Who are these sheep? There are more sheep than we usually realize, as Jesus reminds us in John 10:16:

16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. The flock we are to care for is bigger than we can imagine.

Jesus calls to us with the verse on Amanda’s bench, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest Matthew 11:28” or as Peter Mayer sings it “All that you carry is welcome here.”

Let’s bring those burdens to the table.

As we move to Jesus' table, let us begin to let ourselves be restored and our brokenness be repaired as Jesus feeds us and reminds us that we are enough, we are loved, we belong to Him and to one another, and we have a calling to feed His sheep.