

Today's Gospel is, without a doubt, one of my favorite Bible passages. It speaks to our fallen human nature yet it also provides us with a sense of joy and hope. It reassures us that our sinfulness will not stand in the way of receiving God's forgiveness and being used to build up the Kingdom. It's the ultimate story of redemption.

I love Saint Peter. He's so relatable and human. He's not some standard to which we can't live up to. We can see a lot of ourselves in him. He means well but he's impulsive and makes mistakes. He has moments when he shines brightly like when he boldly professes Jesus to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God", but then he has moments when it looks like he couldn't mess things up more like when minutes later Jesus says to him, "Get behind me, Satan." He's not a theologian like Saint John or a prolific writer like Saint Paul. He's just an ordinary fisherman that goes on to accomplish extraordinary things with the help of God.

Think back to when Peter first meets Jesus. Peter has been fishing all night without catching a single fish. Jesus instructs him to lower his nets for a catch, but Peter complains before finally relenting. After the miraculous haul of fish, Peter tells Jesus, "Go away from me, for I am a sinful man."

In today's story, Peter has returned to the familiar and gone back to his old way of life as a fisherman, but this time his response is quite different when Jesus tells him to cast his net after an unsuccessful night of fishing. He silently obeys then, instead of attempting to send Jesus away, he yearns to be near Jesus. He doesn't wait with the others for the boat to travel the mere 100 yards to the shore. He hastily jumps in the water and swims to be in Jesus' presence as quickly as possible.

Once ashore, it's no coincidence that there's a fire there. We heard during Holy Week how Peter denied knowing Jesus next to a fire in the courtyard. Jesus warned him that it was

going to happen but Peter vehemently disagreed. He proudly proclaimed that he was prepared to go to prison and die for Jesus. Yet, when push came to shove, Peter denied being a follower of Jesus three times before the cock crowed that night.

In direct contrast, we just heard how Jesus lights a fire on the shoreline and gives Peter three chances to confess his love for Him. This time, Peter passes the test. Jesus asks, “Do you love me more than these?” Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus responds, “Feed my lambs.” These must have been comforting words to Peter’s ears. He was repairing his relationship with Jesus, but then Jesus asks again, “Do you love me?” Peter answers again, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus responds, “Tend my sheep.” Peter is being forgiven for his past transgressions but then Jesus asks a third time, “Do you love me?” Peter, in all his humanness, gets perturbed at the repeated questioning. I imagine him being exasperated as he replies, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus responds, “Feed my sheep.” Peter’s three-fold denial is neutralized by his three-fold confession of love for Jesus. Jesus loves him and forgets everything else except His love for Peter. He wants him to continue to be the one to lead His Church.

Peter is given the task of caring for the vulnerable lambs and sheep. He’s sent to nurture them, support them, and guide them - to be their leader. But more than that, to be their shepherd, tending them with the same love and compassion and understanding that Jesus showed him. Peter, as a forgiven sinner, is chosen because of the quality of his love for a mission that will ultimately lead to his martyrdom.

After this act of mercy and forgiveness, Peter finally gives up his old way of life as a fisherman and leaves behind the familiar. He assumes his intended position as shepherd of the early Church. We know this because, in our first reading, Peter finds himself standing before the

Sanhedrin in the very place where he previously denied Jesus. This time, things are quite different. He refuses to stop preaching in Jesus' name.

Now, it's easy to single out Peter but it's not just Peter that gets another chance. Look at the other disciples in the boat that day. There was Thomas who doubted that Jesus had risen. There was Nathaniel from Cana who, when told by Philip that they had found the Messiah from Nazareth, questioned, "Can anything decent or good ever come out of Nazareth?" The sons of Zebedee, John and his brother James, were also there. They once put their own mother up to asking Jesus to put them in charge of everybody. They desired to be number one and number two in Heaven. But Jesus was patient with them and forgave them. He showed them mercy and sent them out on a mission.

Brothers and sisters, we're loved by a God of second chances, and third chances, and fourth chances. There's no limit to His love and forgiveness. He's always willing to forgive us and use us just as we are. Like those disciples, we have our shortcomings. There are moments when we shine brightly like when we come to Mass every Sunday and there are moments when it looks like we couldn't mess things up more like when we give in to the temptation to sin. Despite our sinfulness, Jesus forgives us and has confidence in us. Jesus doesn't lock us into our mistakes of the past or present. We're given room to outgrow our mistakes.

The redemption experienced by Peter and the other disciples can also happen to us if we have the faith to accept God's love and forgiveness. Jesus forgives us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and loves us even after we've denied him, even after we've disbelieved, even after we've given up, even after we've sinned. It takes an act of faith to believe in God, and it takes an act of faith to believe that God forgives us and loves us after we repent of our sin. Sometimes faith is the courage to accept God's love, the courage to accept God's forgiveness

and acceptance of ourselves in all of our imperfection. Peter recovered his faith after his despair. He was able to say, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Peter is our model for repentance and reforming ourselves and allowing the Lord to put us to work for Him again.

Jesus is motioning for all of us to come to the shoreline. He reaches out to each one of us in the deepest part of our hearts. He stays with us no matter how many sins, no matter how many betrayals, no matter what we do. And just like Peter and the other disciples, Jesus sends us out on a mission of evangelization just as we are. We don’t have to be theologians or prolific writers or even fisherman. We can be just ordinary people that accomplish extraordinary things with the help of God. The redemption story can be ours.

But, in order to accomplish this, we can’t return to the familiar with all of its temptation to deny Jesus. After encountering Christ today at Mass, we’re called to leave our old way of life behind us and have the courage to witness to God’s faithfulness and mercy to everyone we meet and in everything we do. It may cost us popularity, friends, family, a job, or even our life like Peter. But we’re called to love God above all else and trust in His providence. Because there’ll come a time in each of our lives when Jesus will ask us, “Do you love me more than these?” When that happens, what will your honest answer be?