

Sermon for April 10, 2016 – Another Day’s Grace

3rd Sunday of Easter, Year C – Texts: John 21:1-19

Anyone remember the ad campaign by Nationwide Insurance Company that said: “Sometimes life comes at you fast”? One of the ads showed a lady, learning that she has won the lottery, runs into the back of a truck filled with dirt. Another showed a man getting in his car to start it, only to have it fall apart. It’s true that sometimes life is more than we can deal with. There are those times we would like to step aside from the push of living and just be comfortable.

The disciples had been on an emotional rollercoaster with the events of Good Friday and Easter and I’m sure they were at the point of exhaustion when they returned to what they knew best--fishing. The very fact that you’re here today shows that you have some interest in how God fits into this world. But be honest, many of us hope that God will be doing whatever God does without involving us too deeply. At times, like those disciples in our lesson, we just want to step aside. But we’re not called to live in safe harbors. We’re called through the grace of another day to grow towards being the person God created us to be. No matter who we are, no matter how old we are, God’s not finished with us yet. God pursues us as Jesus did the disciples at the Sea of Galilee, calling for us to be about what He would have us to do in life. The Sea of Galilee represented a safe harbor for the disciples. For the ones who went fishing, it was what they knew. It was what they’d done before Jesus came and called them to follow Him. After all, it was by catching fish that they had made a living. And now that Jesus was gone, they returned to their safe harbor of fishing.

Earlier Jesus had given Simon and the others another day’s grace when He called them to drop their nets and follow Him. They’d been witnesses to miracles as the lame walked, the blind saw, the deaf heard, and the hungry were filled. They had the scriptures opened to them through the teachings of Jesus. And speaking of another day, they’d seen Jesus come back from the grave. They’d seen the marks in His hands and side. Jesus had given Simon a great new vision when He called him the rock on which He was going to build the church. But Simon had demonstrated he was anything **but** a rock when he denied Jesus three times. Now, here in today’s reading from what is known as the “epilogue of John’s gospel”, Simon is being given the gracious gift of another day. This gift would mean another day to start to be that rock, to fulfill the vision, to claim another day’s grace. It’s not enough merely to say what we’ll do, we have to begin to live in such a way as to be molded by our faith! We have to live in such a way that shows the world that the resurrection has made a difference in our lives! It’s not enough for Simon to declare his love for Jesus, he was told to feed the lambs and tend the sheep of Jesus.

We’re given the grace of another day so that God’s expectation for our lives can be met. We’re given the grace of another day so that we can start anew to live out our hopes. The grace of another day is repeated over and over again in scriptures.

When Abraham and Sarah were beyond the age of bearing children, Isaac was born. Moses on the run from murder was called to go back and confront Pharaoh. Elijah, at the point of suicide, was challenged by God and Paul was confronted as he was on the way to Damascus to persecute the church and transformed into a church planter.

Our Gospel today is a story of being given another day’s grace. When life comes at us too fast, maybe we need to pause. Maybe we need to pray for, and then to seek, the grace of another day. We need to have the courage that when the gift is given to use it as best we can to do the will of God for our lives. There’s no limit to when the gift can be given.

I repeat – there is **no** limit to when the gift can be given.

One of the shifts in the church in the last few decades is the age of persons responding to the call to the ministry. The norm in the past has been for young people of college age to be in the majority of those called. Today, the average age of people attending seminary is over 40. I was 43 when I started and I graduated with a woman who was in her late 60's. So God's gift of a new day can come at any point in our lives. There's a book on retirement titled "I Never Found the Rocking Chair." It talks about the fact that as more and more active boomers are entering retirement, what retirement looks like is changing. We're seeing second careers, active volunteers, and people involved in their communities and churches. The point of the book is that the years that follow retirement are being seen as the gift of another day. They're being seen not as a time to withdraw but as a time to be open to where God might lead.

When God interrupts lives, as Jesus did the lives of the disciples early that morning by the Sea of Galilee, something happens and what happens is that we're brought face to face with what we **should** be about. Too often we're like the man in a cartoon with hair frizzed, legs trembling, and shirttail out, saying, "Doctor, I'd like to see things a little less clearly." We like to be comfortable in our safe harbors. We like to retreat into the comfort of what we know and do so well, as opposed to being challenged to grow and to follow. We like to look back instead of looking forward.

Peter might've protested, "Let somebody else feed your lambs. I'll be satisfied with the sentiment of saying, 'I love you.'" The gift of another day is the opportunity to put our deeds where our creeds are. The gift of another day is the opportunity to change.

I'm reminded of the story of a wife who put a little plaque in the kitchen that said "Prayer Changes Things". Twenty-four hours later it was gone and she suspected her husband. She went to him and asked, "What's wrong? Don't you like prayer?" The husband replied "Oh, I like prayer. I don't like change."

When we come face to face with what we're running from, it changes us, it changes how we see ourselves, how we see others. It changes how we see the potential of the ways in which God might work through us. Mark Twain once wrote, "You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus." When we become overwhelmed by life we can't depend on what **we** want, instead, we must seek what **God** wants. Just as Jesus was waiting on the shore for Peter and the others, He's waiting to help refocus us. To paraphrase Mark Twain, "You can't depend on your eyes when your faith is out of focus." The grace of another day brings with it the challenge to change.

Peter could no longer be comfortable to ease back into fishing. He now knew the journey he'd set out on wasn't over. He was being given the gift of another opportunity to become what Jesus had envisioned for him. All of us on our faith journeys will need this gift of another chance. We need to stay committed until we become what God created us to be. It's not simply the task of a day or even of a certain period of our lives....No, it is a task for all our days, our entire lives. Now, to be sure, being faithful's not easy. It's not merely wishing, or even praying for a better world, it's being ready to work for it every day. It's realizing that with each new day we're being given the gift of new opportunity. That's in part what is meant by the passage in scripture that tells us that God's mercies are new every morning. What this all means is that at some point we just have to let go and **try**.

I'd heard a story of a pitcher in a tight game facing a great hitter. The pitcher shakes off all the pitches the catcher called for. The catcher became very frustrated, finally calls time and trots out to the mound. He says to the pitcher, "I've called on every pitch in the world. What do you want?" The pitcher replied, "I just want to hold on to the ball as long as I can."

Peter, if you really, really love Jesus, you're going to walk away from the safe harbor of that boat and tend his flock. We cannot retreat forever. Of course, to claim the gift of another day doesn't mean that we're always prepared to charge full speed ahead. Nor does it mean that we'll end up being taken where we wish to go but at some point you have to let go and let God be in charge. Many days we feel as Peter and the others did when they retreated back to fishing; like a comfortable favorite chair or pair of well broken-in slippers, or pair of jeans. Oh yeah, we like the familiar, alright but if we want the full benefit of another opportunity we're going to need to push ourselves to go on. We cannot just say we love; show it by our actions.

Sydney Harris was a newspaper columnist in Chicago from the mid-forties until his death in 1986. He once told about a talk on creative writing that he gave to a group of amateur writers. Afterwards, someone asked, "Mr. Harris, what do you do when you don't feel like writing?" "I write," he answered. "That's the difference between an amateur and a professional. I write even when I don't feel like writing." Commitment to the task – that's the difference between a nominal follower of Jesus and a truly dedicated disciple. You can see the word discipline in disciple. The disciple's call isn't to retreat to safe harbors, our comfort zones, but rather to use the gift of another day to be about the agenda that God has for each of us. Can you imagine for a moment as Jesus stood by the lake and looked out at Peter and the others fishing what He must have felt? Those on the boat were the heart of the team He had spent His ministry preparing to go to all the world with the Good News. Tears must have run down His face as He looked at them. He'd taught them and formed them to be His messengers, they were His plan to spread the word. But look at what was happening. Here they were, spending their night fishing! Hadn't they heard anything? Hadn't they been listening at all? Was it to all end here? If we take a head count, seven of the original twelve were fishing. Of course, Judas was gone, but four others had gone their separate way as well. Jesus had to be worried. So, as the disciples came near Jesus asks if they'd caught anything. They answered that they had not. So He told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. They do and were successful. Then they saw it was Jesus. And so Peter, in his excitement, jumped into the sea to get to Jesus while the others brought the net filled with fish ashore. Jesus had prepared a fire to cook some of the fish for breakfast. After they'd eaten, Jesus confronts Peter. Jesus asks him: "Do you love Me more than these?" Of course Peter replied that he did. He asks Peter again, then a third time. Each time Peter replies that he does. Each time Jesus replies to Peter "then show it." He called Peter to feed the lambs and tend His sheep. Jesus challenged Peter to go and to be about the work that He envisioned when Jesus saw in Peter the potential to be the foundation of the church. Peter had retreated to what was a safe harbor but now Jesus was giving him the gift of another day to be faithful. There was still time for Peter to become the fiery preacher of Pentecost, still time to confront the high priest, the elders and the scribes as they assembled, still time to reach out to Cornelius, to be delivered from prison, and finally according to tradition, still time to be martyred in Rome. We, too, are being challenged to believe that not only can we have the grace of another day. But in that day we can change. And in changing ourselves, change the world around us.

William Griffith Wilson was a drunk. In the middle of the depression in November 1934, he found himself in a hospital in New York drying out. A friend by the name of Ebby Thacher had visited and tried to persuade him to turn himself over to God's care. According to Wilson, while lying in bed depressed and despairing, he cried out: "If there is a God, let him show himself. I'm ready to do anything, anything!" Wilson went on to become a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. As "Bill W.", he took the gift of another day that he'd been given and helped others to find it themselves.

Jesus makes it clear that the gift of another day is not to be taken lightly. There will come a day when there are no more days. Jesus says, “But then you grow old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you to where you do not wish to go.” He’s saying to Peter now is your opportunity to get on with the mission I’ve given you. Now is your opportunity to take the grace of another day. Jesus challenges Peter by saying, “Follow me.” Jesus could’ve added, “I did not choose the safe way. I marched to Jerusalem knowing what awaited me. I took on the form of a servant, one obedient unto death, even death on a cross. So drop those nets. Leave those boats. Get out of your comfort zone and follow Me.” This is God’s gracious gift of another day’s grace. So, what are we waiting for? Let’s get to it!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.