

Found by God

A sermon preached by Canon Rick Cross
Third Sunday of Easter, April 22, 2007
Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio
Text: John 21.1-19

God takes the initiative in our relationship. God acts first. Whatever the strategy, God created us in the image of love. God initiates a loving relationship with us. God comes to us and shows God's self to us. It is love's preemptive strike. Relating to God is not about us. We are not bright enough, or skilled enough, or spiritually sophisticated enough to find God. God finds us.

Back when I was in college, and was accumulating knowledge at an alarming pace, I remember the "death of God" controversy. Well, I can imagine that phrase may describe the mood among the disciples after Jesus' death. I do not think that as soon as they heard the rumors about the tomb being empty, they rushed off to write "*Jesus Christ is risen today, alleluia!*" Like any of us, they experienced a process of grieving... denial, anger, bargaining and all the other stages. And it had to have taken time. Healing does.

Today's story begins, "*Jesus showed himself...*" In the depths of their earth-shattering loss, tragic experience of death and utterly chaotic life transition, God came to the disciples. When it seemed that God had been killed and was dead, Love pierced the darkness of the night and came to them at daybreak. They did not find God. God found them right where they were, in their boat, with empty nets. Does this image ring a bell? Have you ever felt like you were floating in a boat holding an empty net?

Imagine the scene. Have you ever been fishing, for pleasure, mind you, and not for food to eat, and not caught anything? This was not a joyful Easter spring break fishing trip! These were sad, angry, depressed, confused, abandoned, hungry, young Middle Eastern men. I wonder if they were toying with the possibility of going back to fishing for a living.

Frustration was in their voices as they were arguing about whose fault it was that the net was empty. Thomas chided Nathaniel, "I didn't think you knew the right place to make a catch. I doubted your directions all along."

Peter, who was hot and sweaty and had ripped off his clothes after pulling up the heavy net one last time, snapped at James, "I could use a little help here. Maybe we'd have had better luck if everyone had been pulling his weight."

Andrew joined the harangue. "I don't want any more advice from any one. I'm the only one who really knows anything about fishing, and I didn't think this was a good night for it

from the beginning.”

As they all slumped down in the boat looking away from each other toward the shore, calm settled over the conflicted atmosphere, like the morning dew. And then he spoke. His voice carried clearly over the water to the men, and his words were like salt, rubbed in an open wound. “Children, you have no fish, have you?”

“No,” Peter answered sarcastically.

“Cast the net to the right side of the boat and you will find some,” he suggested in a calm and friendly voice.

“Yeah, right,” Peter retorted, snarling under his breath so only the others could hear him. “Just what we need is more bad advice from a stranger who doesn’t even know who we are or what we’re doing!”

John: “C’mon guys, it’s worth one last try.”

Grumbling with every pull, Peter grabbed onto one side of the net, and they cast it. It wasn’t long before they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. They couldn’t believe their eyes, and as the mood began to change from despondency to elation, Peter glanced toward the dim figure of the one on the beach and shouted, “Hey you! You’re right on. Got any more good advice for us?”

John turned quickly, trying to put his hand over Peter’s mouth to no avail. “It’s the Lord!” he announced.

Shocked by this realization, sudden waves of guilt and emotion swept over Peter, feeling raw and vulnerable, as if he had been found out, discovered, caught without his clothes on. He grabbed his clothes, and with one wild shriek, leapt over the gunnels of the boat into the water.

After they had rowed the boat ashore with their bumper catch, they received an invitation to reconciliation, healing, and communion: “Come and have breakfast.”

After swimming ashore, and taking off his wet clothes, Peter was shaking nervously as he sheepishly made his way to the outside of the circle of men gathered around the fire. The smell of fresh fish grilled over the open fire was hanging in the air. Quietly, and without words, as a reprise of the Passover meal they had celebrated together before his killing, Jesus gave each one a piece of pita bread, wrapped around a generous chunk of steaming fish. They began to eat, while keeping their eyes peeled on the one serving them, as if they were watching a ghost.

Peter's mind was racing and his heart was pounding as he reached between two of his friends to receive the mysterious food. He was preoccupied and ashamed with the recent memory of having denied three times that he ever knew this man, just before the killing. As Jesus passed him his serving, Peter would not look up to meet his piercing gaze. He clumsily dropped the fish on the ground and before he could retrieve it, Jesus picked it up, passed it to him with one hand, and with the other lifted Simon Peter's face toward his.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

The words went straight to Peter's heart, and he began to weep as he choked out the answer, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” But once was not enough. As absolution for each of the denials, Jesus asked him over and again, “Do you love me?”

“Yes, yes, I love you,” Peter sobbed.

Jesus: “As I love you and have come to you and fed you, in this same spirit of love, go feed and care for others in my name. Follow me.”

Once the media had established the facts surrounding last week's tragic events at Virginia Tech, the harder question that was in all our minds began to surface. What was the motive? Why? There is seldom one easy answer that can explain insane and senseless violence of that dimension. There can be no guarantee of preventing crimes like these in the future. But I believe there is a Christian response, drawing from our resources of faith and commitment to Jesus. Just as he invited Peter and the disciples to follow him, the invitation is ours.

Seung-Hui Cho was a child of God. All those killed were children of God. All criminals whom Jesus referred to as his sheep and lambs are children of God. Every life that was taken is precious. Every killing, whether in war, in Darfur, or on the streets of Cincinnati, grieves the heart of God, and we join God in that grief. Violence and killing overwhelm us, and may leave us feeling powerless.

Whatever the circumstances, Cho became separated from God, and in the darkness, he did not feel loved. When we feel loved and accepted, we are not likely to hurt ourselves or others. Some people may be impossible to reach, but many are not. Every one of us has the capacity for hurting others. Our lives and our world are moving fast, and it is easy for interpersonal relationships to get lost in the dust of the race. Jesus calls us to feed and care for one another, especially the lost.

My son-in-law DuHahn was born in Korea and moved to this country with his family at about the same age Cho did. I have learned from him and his family that it is not easy for immigrants to be accepted in this country. We must do what we can to figuratively feed and care for people, especially those who are different. Become more aware of those struggling with depression, alienation, or lack of friends or nurturing families. There are signs and

symptoms we can learn to watch for in our friends, families, neighbors, or in the greater challenge of strangers. Notice someone who doesn't seem to fit, or one who seems lonely, or agitated.

In the Focus groups conducted by the Public Relations Committee last year, one of the strongest learnings was that people want to be "connected." So I think Jesus is asking us to become aware of people who are disconnected. The Undercroft is filled with many of them on Tuesday nights, and it is amazing what calling our guests by name and a simple conversation does to light up an empty dark face.

I began this sermon by stating that God comes to us, and many times it is through connections with other people. Jesus is the Christian's unique connection, and Jesus came to the disciples and particularly Peter, when they needed it most.

I have an assignment for you this week. Ask God to lead you to one new person who needs to be connected to God's love. Take some initiative to establish a connection. Write a note, make a phone call, make a visit, send an email, and give an invitation for tea or coffee. Pray for that person, and then give the gift of listening

"Come, have breakfast."

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: make yourself known to us as we break bread together, and to those whom you bring to us to love. Amen.