

Show of Faith

In the name of him who was slain, and by his blood ransomed a people for God, dear friends in Christ: As they say in the entertainment industry, the show must go on. And in the entertainment industry, that's a good thing. It means they are devoted to their craft and to pleasing their audiences. In other walks of life, though, and especially in the Church among the faithful, putting on a show is not a good thing at all – as we can see quite clearly in today's Gospel lesson.

It's the third appearance of the resurrected Lord Jesus to his disciples, this time in Galilee. They had been told to come here and wait for Jesus who, when he arrived, would be able to spend time with them away from the crowds and hubbub at Jerusalem. And so they came, very much looking forward to seeing him again. But the way the story unfolds, it's clear that there are some unresolved issues for the disciple named Simon Peter. They spring from his denial of the Lord the night of his arrest. You recall that while eating the Passover meal together earlier that evening, Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times. Peter said that there was no way, that nothing could ever get him to disown his master. No doubt when he said it, he meant it, perhaps envisioning being held at sword point and threatened with death by the enemies of Jesus. But, as we all know, when his faithfulness was put to the test, he surrendered not to an angry lynch mob, but rather to the high priest's kitchen help and a teenaged girl who answered the gate. This failure on Peter's part is a source of deep personal shame. And seeing the resurrected Lord the couple times he has, as great as that has been, has not made his shame go away. Instead it's festering in his soul and destroying him.

On the other hand, Peter has an image to maintain. He knows that the other disciples look to him for leadership. He's the Simon the Rock. The last thing he's going to do is confess his shortcomings to them. So he's a man torn: inside he's dying in secret shame, but on the outside he keeps putting on the show of being the good and faithful disciple. And notice how he deals with it. First we've got him waiting with the others for Jesus to come; but waiting means having time to think – and that's the last thing a guilty souls wants: time for introspection. So he resorts to a tried and true method of avoidance, and that's staying busy. It's the old diversion tactic. "I'm going fishing", he announces to the others. You can almost feel his impatience: "I just can't bear sitting here waiting". That much is true: he really can't bear it. The others readily agree to join him. But no surprise – they don't catch a thing that night. There's a lesson for us: when doing something for the sake putting on a show, rarely is anything worthwhile accomplished.

At daybreak Jesus stands on the shore of the lake looking out at his weary and frustrated disciples. What follows is practically a replay of the miraculous catch of fish that took place on the day that Peter was called to be a disciple three years earlier. Jesus calls out, "You boys didn't catch anything, did you?" "No" comes back the grumpy reply. "Well, give it another try on the other side of the boat." And of course when they do, the nets are filled with whoppers. But what's even more remarkable than the catch is Peter's amazing lack of insight. This same thing happened once before with Jesus telling them to let down the nets after a long night of fruitless toil; and they are here, after all, for the express purpose of waiting for Jesus to arrive. You'd think the realization that it was Jesus on the shore would be a no-brainer; but Peter doesn't see it on his own. He has to be told it's Jesus. Why is that? It's because a person who works to put on a show of some kind is actively engaged in suppressing the truth. He is

deliberately clouding his mind in a spiritual sense, and clouds that are put up to conceal what's inside also block the light from coming in.

Upon hearing that it's Jesus, it makes sense to Peter – and this is where he really begins to put on a show. Recall that the first time there was a miraculous catch of fish, Peter was so astonished and humbled that he fell down at Jesus' feet and confessed his sin and unworthiness to be in his presence, but not this time. This time he is trying to hide what's ailing him, so he makes a great show of proving his devotion and loyalty to Jesus. He attempts to hide his past failure by overcompensating in the other direction. He launches into this "I've got to get to you Jesus, and I can't wait for the boat to get to the shore" theatric. And it's very revealing how he does it. Peter, with the rest of the guys in the boat, has stripped down to what was essentially his underwear: the wrap around loincloth that men wore under their tunics in the first century. It was not unusual or immodest for workingmen to dress this way. But now, before leaping into the water and swimming the hundred yards or so to the shore, he puts on his heavy mantle: a thick wool garment that did double duty as a sleeping bag. Ask yourself, if you were going for a hundred yard swim, would you be inclined to first put on a big hooded poncho, or is that more like something you'd take off before swimming? What's Peter thinking? Let me suggest that he's reaching for the proverbial fig leaf. As he prepares to go to the Lord, he's covering up – which is a precise picture of what he's doing in a spiritual sense by his zealous display of devotion. But what a difficult way to go: that must have been one hard swim – which is one of my points: putting on a show is a lot of hard and unnecessary work.

It doesn't end there. When the boat dragging the net reaches the shore, Jesus asks them to bring some of the fish they've just caught. We read that it's Peter who takes the net from the guys in the boat, and that he singlehandedly pulls it up onto the beach. Again, let me suggest that it's more of Peter's attempt to prove his undying faithfulness and loyalty, as if he were trying to make up for his past mistakes – cleanse himself of his failures by ... well ... by going "overboard" now. It's still part of the show he's putting on. "See Jesus, I know I let you down in the past – but you just watch: I'll prove my worth to you now."

But that burden of constantly putting on the show of faithfulness and devotion is an awful cross to bear. How many times do you have to prove yourself loyal to cancel out one act of disloyalty? And how can you ever know if you've done enough? You know, Benedict Arnold was one of the greatest generals in American history. He won many stunning victories for this country; but hardly anyone remembers them. No, now his name is a synonym for traitor because of just one act – and Peter denied the Lord *three* times. By putting on a show like he is, Peter is attempting to do the impossible: to atone for his own sin. And not only is that not possible, it's so unnecessary. Strangely enough, what Peter is doing by all his effort to prove himself loyal is a just another way to deny the Lord Jesus. By trying to make up for his own guilt he's denying the atonement that Jesus made on the cross to take away his sin.

But here we see the great love of the Lord Jesus in taking Peter aside to lift the impossible burden he's trying to carry. He wants to get Peter to stop denying him by refusing the forgiveness he died to achieve. And to do it, he has to strip away the devoted appearance Peter is working so hard to keep up. He gets directly to the point by asking the question Peter thinks he's been answering by his efforts. "Simon, do you love me?" Put yourself in Peter's shoes: "What do you think I've been trying to show you? Yes Jesus, of course I love you." Jesus responds with words of pure grace: "Feed my lambs". It means, "All is forgiven and forgotten, Peter. Now I've got work for you to do – namely to share my word and forgiveness with others." But that isn't the way Peter takes it at first. It sounds to him like more work he can do to prove his loyalty – and he's more than willing to do it. So Jesus asks him again – and gets

pretty much the same response; but this time Peter is wondering “Why is he asking me the same question again?”

The third time the question comes there can be no doubt about what Jesus is getting at: three questions to match three denials. There it is right out in the open. No more ways to hide it or try to cover it up. No need to keep putting on a show. It cuts Peter to the core to be so exposed – but what Jesus has actually done is to point to the problem so that he can take the burden away from Peter. Peter’s words, “You know everything” speak volumes. It means, “You know exactly how weak and miserable I am – and how I’ve been putting on a show for you now.” But this time, Jesus’ response gets through to him. “You’re right, Peter, I know your sin and the game you’ve been playing – and what I’ve been telling you is that it’s all been forgiven. And I know that you love me. So, Peter, stop wasting so much effort trying to impress me, because I’ve got real work for you to do. Feed my sheep.”

For Peter it meant no more of putting on a show of faith and the freedom to serve the Lord in the full confidence of his love and forgiveness. The question is: what does it mean for you? It’s a question for all of us to consider, not just today but every day. But I want to ask it specifically of the nine young candidates for Confirmation who are sitting here before us. You’ve got on the white robes that represent the righteousness of Christ with which you were clothed in Baptism. You’ve got on red stoles, the red representing the blood the Lord Jesus shed to save you and the fire of the Holy Spirit he breathed upon you. It’s all very nice. You look good.

And you are about to stand before this congregation and publically confess your Christian faith and in particular your devotion to Jesus your Savior. And then you will be asked three questions. First, “Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully” – that is to say often and regularly. Second: “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?” And third: “Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?” I know how you are going to answer these questions; but the real question is this: do you mean it, or are you just putting on a show of faith?

That question will be answered not today, but in all the days to come – as many as the Lord grants you in this life. And I’ve got to say, I’ve been at this for a while now. I’ve got some experience. And I’ve found that there’s a lot of truth in the story about the veteran pastor who was called to serve a country church. At the first council meeting he attended there was a long discussion about the how the church building was infested with bats, and how they’d tried a dozen different ways to remove them but nothing was working. After a while the old pastor spoke up. He said, “I’ll get rid of the bats for you. I have a tried and true method. I guarantee they’ll be gone by Sunday, and it won’t cost the church a dime.” Sure enough, come Sunday the bats were all gone. The astonished members asked, “How did you do it?” The pastor replied, “Simple. I confirmed them. They’ll never be seen in the church again.”

Sadly, that’s all too often the case. And it’s not because those confirmed didn’t mean their promises when they made them. Like Peter on the night of Jesus’ arrest, those who made the promise to stick with Jesus even to death meant it. What they found, however, was that the promises they made were hard to keep – not because someone was holding a gun to their head and threatening to kill them unless they denied Christ. No, it was their own sinful flesh that betrayed them. They became spiritually lazy. They told themselves they didn’t need to hear the Word of God or to receive the Lord’s Supper. They let their faith slowly starve to death. Or they

wanted to live in ways they knew weren't right according to the Word of God, and so it made them uncomfortable to be in church. They stayed away from the means of grace – with the same result.

Look, Jesus knows everyone of us better than we know ourselves. He knows exactly how sinful, weak, and miserable we are. And yet he calls us to discipleship, to follow him, to learn from him, and to imitate him in our behavior. And he provides us with the means of grace, his Word and Sacrament, so that by the Spirit we are enabled to do what he asks – to fulfill the mission he has for us. He called Peter to feed his lambs. For the time being, he's called you to be a lamb that gets fed, fed so that your faith remains strong and grows and matures; fed so that one day if he gives you your own lambs to feed, you'll be able to do that for him too.

My young friends, you are about to make a show of your faith. My prayer, the prayer of the whole Church, and the earnest desire of the Lord Jesus is that the show you make is not merely a show. God give you the grace to keep your promises, remain faithful unto death, and receive the crown of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!