

Friday of the Octave of Easter

Atonement is a path toward healing. If somebody we love and respect hurts us, it changes our view of them; it challenges our assumptions about the society that put them in their position; and it makes us question our own abilities to judge wisely. The consequences of abuse can be especially severe. If after the injury we want to heal, the person who committed the offense has a sure way to assist the process. They can say, "I'm sorry." The atonement of one is a path toward the healing of another.

Christianity has attracted some outstanding leaders, yet the misbehavior of some of them has surfaced in every generation of Church history. Even the gospels are not shy about admitting the disturbing actions of some of the men Jesus chose to spread his word. They quarreled among themselves, they misunderstood his teachings, they fled when he was arrested; Judas betrayed him, and Peter, warming himself at a charcoal fire, denied he even knew Jesus.

Many commentators read Peter's opening statement in today's gospel as a declaration of irresponsibility: "I am going fishing," he says. He says this after the risen Jesus has sent him on mission. It sounds as though he's saying, "I'll get right on that, but do you mind if I first go out for something to eat?" The other disciples in this story are no different. They say, "We also will come with you." They board their boats, push off from shore, lower their nets and catch nothing. These are the very disciples Jesus said would become fishers of people. In this passage, they can't even fish fish.

Reading their futile attempt resonates with us who have watched church leaders in our generation walk away from their responsibilities to protect children in order to pursue more pleasant activities that ultimately bear no fruit.

In this gospel the disciples find no food until they do what Jesus commands. Then they succeed beyond their wildest dreams. When they bring the fish to shore, the risen Jesus is there at a charcoal fire, which must have given Peter pause. But Jesus offered them all bread and fish, the same menu he once offered a hungry crowd, with the same actions he performed at the Last Supper: he took and he gave. He creates a scene where atonement can lead to healing.

This gospel proclaims that when things are darkest, you may forget how bright they can still become. When you're hungry, and there is no food; when you're lost because someone crucified your messiah; when your leaders don't lead where they should - you may be tempted to despair. But there is plenty of food; the crucified messiah lives again; and our leaders are finally listening to his voice. Now at the command of Christ when they lower their nets into the sea of humanity, they may catch the fish Christ has summoned, even those who once swam away.

Atonement and healing will take a long time, but it begins when people admit the mistakes of the past and place their hope in the risen Jesus - when we set aside more pleasant activities to obey what he commands.

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