

1

There's something about gathering around a campfire that I always enjoy. Maybe it's singing with children and a guitar at church camp. Maybe it's the telling of stories. Maybe it's the glow of the fire on a cool evening. Maybe it's the crackle of the twigs as they burn. Maybe it's the smell of burning leaves on a cool, fall evening. Or maybe it's the roasting of marshmallows to place between graham crackers and a chocolate bar. It could be all of these things, but somehow they all mix together to create a memorable experience in my mind, though I imagine Peter might have had mixed emotions of his campfire experiences with Jesus.

You may recall the first campfire mentioned in John's Gospel, which occurred shortly after Jesus was captured by the soldiers. Jesus' followers had scattered, running in fear as Jesus was led out of the Garden of Gethsemane.

Peter, however, followed Jesus to a courtyard, waiting outside while religious authorities inside questioned Jesus. While Peter was standing next to a charcoal fire, a woman noticed him and asked,

"Hey, you are also one of Jesus' followers!" Peter quickly replied, "No I'm not!"

A bit later, someone else proclaimed, "Aren't you one of Jesus' disciples?" Peter replied, "No, not me."

This questioning and negative response happened a third time, with Peter then hearing a rooster crow, reminding him that Jesus had predicted that Peter would deny knowing him three times before the morning rooster crowed.

Peter went silent in the later stories in John's Gospel. Even when Peter runs to the tomb and finds it empty, he says nothing. The announcement of that news is left to Mary Magdalene. Even when Jesus appeared to his friends, Peter remained silent as Thomas asked to see the wounds in Jesus' hands and side.

When Peter finally speaks again at the very end of John's Gospel, all he says is, "I am going fishing."

Wait a minute, Peter. After hearing Jesus teach, observing all those miraculous healings, and encountering Jesus several times after the

resurrection, all you have to say is *I'm going fishing?*

It feels as though Peter is returning to his former life before meeting Jesus—back to fishing, using nets thrown over the side of a boat, as though the past several years hadn't changed his life at all.

Sometimes we may even feel the same way. We journeyed through Lent together, focused on certain spiritual practices for six weeks, heard the stories of Jesus, and struggled through Holy Week and Jesus' death. We arrived on Easter Sunday, celebrating the wonderful news of the resurrection of Jesus, and then life may feel a bit like a letdown as we go back to our previous habits. Summer days arrive, and the events of Easter become a blur as we settle into our old routines.

When Peter announced that he was planning to go fishing, several others said, "OK. We'll go with you," and they clambered into the boat and fished all night without catching one single fish.

I've had days like that. Maybe you have too. You work hard, and at the end of the day, you wonder if it was all worth it. After years of working hard in the

church to keep it going, some may ask, "Did we make a difference?"

As the disciples began dragging in their nets, calling it quits for another day, they saw someone on the shore who asked, "Did you catch anything for breakfast?"

I can almost hear the discouragement in their voices as they answered, "Nooo."

The stranger on the shore replied, "Well, try throwing your nets over the other side of the boat."

I would have probably responded, "What difference does that make? Left side? Right side? The fish don't care what side of the boat they're on. I'm tired."

But instead, they complied and had so many fish they could barely pull it inside the boat!

And suddenly, the Beloved Disciple recognized who was on the shore, who invited them to again cast their nets, and he said, "It's Jesus." Peter jumped into water and headed toward the beach.

When Jesus' disciples all arrived on the sandy shore, he invited them to have breakfast using the fish they had caught. Did you notice where they

3

gathered? Once again John indicated they met around a charcoal fire, reminiscent of the previous time Peter had gathered around a charcoal fire in the courtyard while Jesus was imprisoned. These are the only two instances where the Bible refers to gathering around a charcoal fire, though the book of Romans uses the imagery of coals when referring to an old proverbial expression, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” The writer of Romans then explained the expression by concluding, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (12:20).

I wonder if John had this old saying in mind as he referred to charcoal fires. Jesus could have been upset with Peter since he denied him at the first fire, but rather than reprimanding him, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. Each time Peter said he did love him, Jesus replied, “Feed my sheep,” referring to those followers who may need

help—even those enemies who could be overcome with goodness. Jesus modeled God’s loving acceptance of even those who make mistakes and hide in fear.

Maybe John invites us to also gather around the charcoal fire with Peter, recalling that this follower of Jesus messed up from time to time, and that Jesus could still offer reconciliation while gathered around another fire. So...there’s even room for us. Those of us who mess up our own lives. Those who struggle to follow God’s ways. Those who feel tired.

Jesus invited Peter to feed his sheep, to care for those lost in the world, just as he continues to invite us to do today. So the next time you gather around a fire, invite someone searching for warmth to sit next to you, and as you enjoy a melted marshmallow and chocolate on a graham cracker, extend an invitation to those who hunger for not only food, but for those who long to gather around the fire and be included and welcomed.