

St Peter's Primacy - Tabgha

Jesus brings Peter full circle

Jesus' ministry centered around a relatively small area of Galilee, so it is no coincidence that it was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee that Jesus called most of His disciples. The first four, Peter (also called Simon) and his brother Andrew, as well as James and John were fishermen, and they knew the best fishing was in Tabgha, an area dotted with 7 warm water springs. At least 153 types of fish inhabited the sea, and every good fisherman knew how and when the fish were biting!



One particular day as the fishermen were on shore washing their nets, Jesus got into Peter's boat and asked him to push away from shore. Jesus then sat down and taught from the boat. He was different from the rabbis, scribes and Pharisees because He had such authority when He spoke. John 1 says that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh. When Jesus spoke, it was the living Word of God teaching the life-giving Word of God! There was authority in His words because even the sea obeyed Him! (Mark 4:41)

Things got more interesting, though, when Jesus began to teach. Notice this exchange with Simon Peter:

⁴ When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ But Simon answered and said to Him, "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net." (Luke 5:4-5)

Can you imagine Peter's thoughts? "This guy is crazy! This is my livelihood and I know full well this is the wrong time to be fishing! Nothing out here will bite at this hour!" Yet, because Jesus spoke with authority, Peter acquiesced and let down his net.

Did you catch the nuance? Jesus instructed Peter to let down the NETS (plural) for a catch, but Peter responded, as if not to embarrass Jesus who probably didn't know any better, by letting down a single net. Though Jesus speaks with authority, Peter, like us at times, did not have the faith Jesus required of him at that moment. Thus, at the moment of the blessing, Peter found his net breaking! Often, we can't accommodate all God has for us because our little faith can't contain the blessings He sends our way!

It was here the "Aha" moment struck Peter!

⁷ So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:7-8)

The blessing was more than could be contained and it caused Peter to fall before Jesus to acknowledge his sinfulness. This is a beautiful example for us. Stubborn and proud, Peter often did his own thing rather than follow carefully the One who spoke with authority. Luke 5:8 tells us that, in that moment, Peter recognized Jesus' authority and fell to his knees. "Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

What a beautiful picture of Peter who started stubborn and proud, yet Jesus handled him in a way that gently broke him. In great faith early on, Peter left his livelihood and followed Jesus physically. Yet, he didn't quite get the essence of the message.

It would take another three years for Peter and his fellow disciples to more fully understand. Jesus spent those years telling them He would be taken away, crucified, buried and would rise again, but the power of the resurrection was simply not understood. Thus, as Jesus was led away to be tried, Peter denied Him three times.

Following Jesus' crucifixion, Peter's previous confession of sinfulness was now a crushing weight. He watched as His master was crucified and Peter's brokenness found new depths. In grief he returned to Tabgha and the only thing he knew: his old profession.

Sad and dejected, Peter declared, "I'm going fishing," and those with him said, "We are going with you also." Hope was lost and there was no joy. They fished that night but caught nothing. (John 21:1-3)

Why had seasoned fishermen failed to catch fish during prime time? God has unique ways of bringing things full circle, and Jesus was about to demonstrate that to Peter. Standing on shore, Jesus called out to Peter and his fishing buddies, "Children, have you any food?" (John 21:5) When they answered in the negative, Jesus told them to cast their net on the right side of the boat.

I wonder if Peter had flashbacks to that day three years ago. Once again, Jesus was speaking with authority, but this time, Peter didn't mistake Him for a man who knew nothing about fishing! He obediently cast his net on the right side and brought up 153 fish without breaking the net! (John 21:11)

⁷ Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. (John 21:7)

Until that moment, Peter was filled with shame and guilt at his denial of Jesus. He was broken hearted and empty. Now, recognizing his master, he couldn't wait to get to shore where Jesus was preparing breakfast for them. Jesus didn't need anything from the fishermen, but He was about to change Peter forever.

That breakfast marked the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples following His resurrection, and now Jesus had a question for Simon Peter. "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"

Why "Simon, son of Jonah?" Jonah was a prophet who tried to flee from God's call on his life. Jesus was about to restore Peter to his calling. Perhaps Peter's father's name was Jonah...we don't know. Or perhaps it was a subtle exhortation to Peter not to be like Jonah!

Interestingly, it was from Joppa that Jonah fled. It was in Joppa that Peter resisted eating what was unclean until Jesus told Peter not to call unclean what God declares clean. Perhaps the message to Peter and to us is this: don't forsake your calling, go where He sends you, and live in the grace He intends you to live!

But, back to Jesus' question to Peter...

Three times Jesus asked, "Peter, do you love Me?" Once for each of Peter's denials of Him that night at Caiaphas' house. Peter's response was the same the first two times: "Yes Lord, I *phileo* You." ("I love you as a brother.") But finally, in response to Jesus' third question, Peter's response was, "I *agape* You!" ("I love you unconditionally.")

In goodness and grace, the Lord brought Peter full circle. Peter got it and was commissioned by His Lord, right there on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He was commanded to show his agape love by feeding and serving others.

What about you? What has God called you to? Do you need a recommissioning? Have you encountered that moment between you and your Lord where He asks, "Do you agape Me?"

What is your response?