

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

During the next few months, lots of people are going to be wishing and hoping for some warm and sunny days. That’s because hundreds of thousands of young people, and some not so young, are going to be graduating from universities, and many of those commencement ceremonies are held outdoors.

But imagine that you are present for such a commencement ceremony, and you see all the graduates milling around in their caps and gowns, surrounded by adoring family members.

It’s a moment for photos and heartfelt words of congratulations. But for the graduates, it’s likely a bittersweet time: there’s the joy of achievement, but also the sorrow that comes with the end of an endeavor, and the parting of friends going in different directions.

In more than one family grouping, an older relative – a parent, or maybe an uncle or aunt, or a grandparent – will walk up to a graduate and extend a hand, or a hug.

Then, with tear-filled eyes – and, holding that graduate a few moments longer than necessary – that relative will say, “You may not realize it now, but these years you’ve just completed are the best years of your life.”

Now those are words kindly meant and heartfelt, to be sure, but they may also be among the most dangerous words one human being can offer to another. Consider the implications of telling a bright-eyed young graduate, “Those were the best years of your life.”

That older relative, that supposed “wise guide,” is saying, “You may think you’re on the threshold of something new, but don’t fool yourself, kid: It’s all downhill from here.” Well, thank you, O great one with the voice of wisdom!

In today’s Gospel text, Peter may be feeling something similar as he says to some of his fellow disciples, “I’m going fishing,” and they reply, “We will go with you.” What a wild, emotionally-draining ride it has been!

For several of those disciples, it all began on a narrow strip of beach beside the Sea of Galilee. They had just hauled their boat up onto the shore, and they were cleaning their fishing nets when this bold character walked up to them and said, “Come with me, and I will show you how to fish for people.”

Why they followed him, they couldn’t have explained at the time, although later on, they discovered God was in it. God was in it all – in their walking the length and breadth of Galilee and Judea, in the teachings, in the healings, even in the times they had to flee some village a few steps ahead of the “righteous ones” who got so angry, so fast.

God was in that triumphal entry into Jerusalem; God was in the sharing of bread and wine in the Upper Room; and yes, God was even in the blood and despair and pain of the cross. God was in it all – but especially in those surprising, reality-bursting moments when they saw the risen Lord, and touched his nail-scarred hands and feet.

After all this, what could possibly come next? Peter, for one, is sure these have been the best years of his life. What is there to do now, but go back to the boat and the fishing nets?

Maybe Peter thinks he will enjoy, one day, balancing a grandchild on his knee, and asking with a wink, “Did I ever tell you about the time Jesus invited me, the fisherman, to go fishing?” And maybe then a little voice will pipe up, “Oh, Grandpa, you’ve only told me about it a hundred times!”

But that, as we all know, is not the way it will happen. Peter will have little time for fishing, ever again. He will devote the rest of his years to spreading the word about this man named Jesus, this man he has come to know as “Messiah.”

And when the sun finally rises on the last day of Peter’s life, he will know that day for what it is. He will know, that morning, that a cross awaits him, an upside-down cross, as he has requested of his Roman persecutors, according to tradition.

For who is he to share the same mode of dying as the one he is proud to call, “Lord”?

There was one experience that turned Peter around, one that convinced him that the best years of his life lay not behind him, but ahead. It’s the story in today’s Gospel.

Peter and his companions are in their boat, after a long night of fishing. And a stranger on the beach, one who turns out to be Jesus, tells them where to cast their nets, and they haul them in, full to bursting. Then he invites them to join him for a breakfast of grilled fish on the beach.

After they’ve eaten their fill, Jesus turns abruptly to Peter and asks, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Peter stares back, uncomprehending. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

And Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.” This is not unlike a question the Master once asked, a question that seems, now, centuries old: “Who do people say that I am?” Peter had replied instantly, on that occasion, saying, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!”

The memory stings, like sand in the eyes on a windy day. How naïve Peter had been back then, in his childlike enthusiasm! Would he have spoken out with such eagerness, had he known then what he knows now – had he known about the cross? Surely not!

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Tend my sheep.” If only it would dawn on Peter what Jesus is doing, why he stops on his way to eternity to grill fish, of all things, with these down-on-their-luck fishermen.

Jesus is turning back the clock. He’s allowing Peter the rare privilege of traveling back through time, to undo the biggest mistake of his life – remember Peter’s three-fold denial of even knowing Jesus?

“Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Feed my sheep.” John tells us that Peter feels hurt because Jesus asks him the same question three times, as though Jesus doesn’t believe him. But I think that’s not it at all.

Jesus knows this disciple’s strong heart, and he knows that his heart is broken. Three times the shepherd commands the fisherman to care for his sheep, this flock he is now entrusting to him. On that third invitation, the fisherman’s broken heart is mended.

It only remains for Jesus to hint about the martyrdom that is in Peter’s future. Once he has done that, the risen Lord concludes by saying once again, “Follow me.”

And now they have come full circle: from one Galilean beach to another. “Follow me, and I will show you how to catch people.” Catch people, indeed!

Some years ago, I read about a movie producer who was making a short, documentary film entitled, “Circus.” The stars in that film were not actors; they were young people who were actual circus trapeze artists.

During a break in the filming, one of these performers went up to the producer, pointed up to the trapeze, and said, “Why don’t you try it?” It took some further prodding, but, eventually he did try it, even though the thought of climbing one of those high towers terrified him.

Fully fifty feet above the sawdust of the circus ring floor, that producer crawled out onto the tiny metal platform, looked down, and noticed that from that height the safety net was all but invisible. He almost scrambled back down the ladder, but the shouted encouragement of the young circus performers convinced him to go ahead.

He reached out and grabbed the swing bar and launched out into space, grabbed the second bar in mid-air, and almost before he knew it, he had landed on his feet on the opposite platform. The young actors let out a great cheer.

Remembering that experience later, the producer said that he made three important discoveries that day: First, you can’t hold onto the old bar while you reach out for the other. Second, you don’t have forever to make up your mind. Third, it is a frightening experience to make that kind of commitment.

The commitment we make, in resolving to follow Jesus Christ, may be equally risky. Today Jesus turns to each one of us, and asks, “Do you love me?” Hopefully, we reply, without hesitation, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Then he tells each one of us how to show our love: “Feed my sheep.” We have, each of us, different callings, based on the various gifts the Holy Spirit has given, but every person’s calling can be summed up in those three words of our Savior: “Feed my sheep.”

Your life’s journey, in faith, largely means discovering what, specifically, Christ’s call means to you. Imagine Jesus, walking the narrow strip of sand, that borderline between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God.

Imagine him, calling to you, inviting you to join him on an adventure of discipleship. Whether you can imagine that, or not, you are his catch – but no sooner will he catch you, than he will release you into the world, to witness and to serve. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

Alan Goertemiller, Pastor  
Pilgrim Lutheran Church of Indianapolis, Inc.