

Breakfast on the Beach

“You are restored.”

John 21:15-17

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Stories in the Ashes

There is a place along the shoreline of Lake Michigan near my mother's hometown where we used to have family reunions. We'd eat in a picnic area along the beach where a little stream finds its way to the lake. The view from the picnic tables and the charcoal grills looks out onto the Lake; the scene framed by secondary sand dunes on each side. You can climb them: over the secondary dunes, wooded on the leeward side, covered with sparse, tall grasses along the top ridge. The dunes give way to a steep slope of pure sand as they face the winds from the Lake; then bottom out into protected little bowls of sand before they rise to the steep slope of the primary dunes.

It's in these bowls with sandy walls on every side and protected from all but the fiercest winds that night visitors, (mostly young people I suppose) gather in groups. They bring their firewood to the natural den to sit around the campfire singing and swapping stories and doing who-knows-what else for who-knows-how long. And in the morning they're gone. The fire is out and all that is left are the remains of the fire: the charred logs yet-unconsumed with bits of ashes and extinguished coals left like a monument or a grave on those white sands.

Dozens of times I have walked over those dunes. Dozens of times I passed by the remnants of campfires with barely a thought. Once, though, I stopped and I wondered what story those ashes could tell.

Did they mark the place where new love began? Was their burning the time that a relationship came to an end; or when new plans were made; or an argument spilled between friends over some issue of politics or religion? Would they, if they could, report the sound of laughter and song? Or would they bear testimony that this was the time that something was done to make someone cry?

What stories would be told by cooled embers on the beach, if embers could talk?

There is a shore on a lake in Galilee. If it somehow could have withstood the effects of time, it would also hold the coals of a fire that once burned there. And what story would they tell? Perhaps it would be about a sad and lost group of friends who returned to their fishing after a pilgrim's life with Jesus.

Restoration

Aboard the boats on which they fished were individuals, each who broke bread and shared a cup as they asked Jesus, "Are you saying that *I'm* going to betray you?" each who then scattered like the wind when they came to arrest him; each who watched from a distance when they put him on trial and hurt him and shamed him and put him to death. They each had that story to share: in some way they all had betrayed him.

There was Thomas with his persistent doubting. There were James and John with the truth that they, too, had grabbed for power. Each of them bore some guilt. Each of them felt their distance from the teacher they had lost – and felt the distance between themselves and God that went along with that. And then there was Peter, who'd been asked three times if he was Jesus' friend; and three times he swore he wasn't.

Maybe his distance felt the worst.

I don't know. Maybe feelings of distance are hard to compare. All of us feel it one time or another, I suppose. Some might think they feel it all the time. The distances we feel might also come from betrayals –sins once committed or obligations not met. Like an old man who can't quite get over memories of a friend he failed to defend way back in days of youth. Like one who refused to take a stand in the face of others' bigotry. Like anyone who becomes aware of not caring for the sick or feeding the hungry because they were out of sight and out of mind or were, just for that moment, too greedy.

We had quite a conversation about that in Confirmation class last week, short as it was. "How can you say that someone who is a good person and even believes in God should be allowed to go to Heaven if they haven't been faithful in church attendance and prayers and all the things we're taught that Christians should do?" Good question, because even terms of commitment left ignored can be grounds for feeling distance from God.

So can things that are beyond your control. Isn't there distance when you get really sick or really hurt and you can't figure out what you did to deserve it? Isn't there distance when someone, out-of-the-blue has attacked you or disappointed you? Isn't there distance sometimes when someone you love is lost in death; and then it happens again and then again before you have a chance to get used to the first loss? Whether it's right or wrong you want to be like Job and shout it: "Why me?" Whether it's right or wrong you feel like God has been unfair.

And there's distance. There's a wall.

If cold embers could speak. They would tell how the sad group of disciples fished all night and came up with nothing. No fish stories to even embellish. And when skies lightened and morning dawned on them there was a lone figure of a man on the beach where he already had the campfire burning in wait for cooking. "Children!" he cried, "Have you had any luck?" "Nothing!" they called back. "Then throw the nets over the right side of the boat," he says, perhaps in an obvious tone as if to mean they should try to fish off the lucky side of the boat. So they did and they filled the nets with such a weight so the boats listed to starboard; and you can imagine their wet, bare feet scrambling to stay aboard the leaning hull.

Ha! A crisis you could enjoy!

And one of the disciples puts two-and-two together in the space of their laughter and says, "It's the Lord!"

Reconnection.

And Peter, who has maybe felt the worst can't wait. He jumps in and swims to shore to be with Jesus, face-to-face.

If you've been keeping track better than apparently I've kept track, you might want to tell me that I just preached on this passage in September. You would be right. And in that message, what I tried to get across was that Jesus' questions and Simon Peter's answers would undo the divorce in relationship that had happened in Peter's betrayal. The message today is no different.

However, then the emphasis was on Peter's response. If he loved Jesus it will be played out in the way he served. He'd take care of Jesus lambs; he'd lead Jesus' sheep.

There's another side to the conversation, though. It's one that shouldn't be missed.

Because the distance between Peter and Jesus was *not* removed *that* day: and it wasn't Peter that restored their friendship. The distance had already been removed before then; and the one who removed it was Jesus.

Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, England a thousand years ago, wrote a book called *Cur Deus Homo*, which is Latin for "Why God became human." He said in this book that God became human because there was a debt that we can't pay off. On our own, we can do everything we can do and still only come up short. Only God can accomplish that which is necessary to bridge the gap and bring us into the embrace of God and true, everlasting life. We cannot save ourselves. But God can and does, in the crucified and resurrected Christ.¹

No matter whether you put the distance there or you think God did – you are restored to God by what happened on the cross of Jesus. There the perpetual power of sin, the finality of death, the perversion of love by evil: are all overcome by Jesus. He came to give us something, and he was determined to give it if even crucifixion tried to get in the way. When it tried, the Cross became the way he gave it.

If the embers could talk they would tell the story: the distance between Peter wasn't removed that morning when they talked on the beach. It was already done. And the certainty of Easter says to you: *No more distance*.

What is left for you is simple, then. Believe and live in light of this.

Life in Christ

If the embers could talk. Across the big lake the son of a church I served was lost in the big city. He had graduated from University of Michigan with a Master's degree and you'd think that he was about to go places in the world. But he was already showing signs of trouble when he was in school; and it was right after graduation that alcoholism and a bipolar disorder combined to devastate his life. In-and-out of trouble; in-and-out

of jail: it was hard for him. Whether you'd want to blame his situation on disease or poor choices, his distance from God and all of us was great.

I received a call from him while we were having a weekend retreat at church. Chuck was in Chicago and I thought we were about to lose him. He was in trouble and without money. Though it was evident he'd been binge-drinking, he hadn't had anything to eat in a few days and I could tell by what he said and the way that he said it that he was very much in danger of taking his own life. I was over 300 miles away and, except for the ability to pray and talk to him on the phone as long and as often as he would permit, I was without means to be in direct control. I stayed on the phone with him; and after we talked I called some friends in Chicago who were able to connect with him, give him immediate care and means to jump on a train and a bus and make it back home.

This was the beginning of restoration. I will always remember Sunday.

Just as the big meal of the weekend retreat was being served, Chuck walked in. He was tattered and smelly and had a very vacant look in his eyes. But he was home: the very image of the Prodigal son. I took him to my office where he, too, was served dinner: prime rib and corn on the cob, baked potatoes and salad; cheesecake for dessert.

He ate one helping and was on a second. He might have been given a third. He was still eating when the rest of us gathered in the sanctuary for worship and in its course we sang a song that made even more sense and took on even more powerful meaning to me than it ever had before:

I the Lord of wind and flame
I will tend the poor and lame
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
'til their hearts be satisfied
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?
Here I am Lord...²

If the embers could speak... Easter means that the distance has been closed.
Chuck, you, all of us are restored to God's embrace.

All you have to do is want it.

¹ St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*. Reprinted from, St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*; translated from the Latin by Sidney Norton Dean, B.A., Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1903 edition, first printing. Fort Worth, Texas: RDMc Publishers. © 2005.

² Don Schutte, *Here I Am, Lord*. 1981. *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House. © 1989.