

A Cover Up

In the name of our crucified and risen Lord, dear friends in Christ: Sometimes it seems that hardly a week goes by without yet another political scandal coming to the light of day. We're forever hearing about elected leaders taking bribes, acquiring illegal campaign contributions, thwarting justice in one way or another, or getting themselves involved in inappropriate sexual affairs. And whenever such a scandal is exposed, you can be sure of this: until the crime was revealed, the culprit thought he or she was safe. You see, not only had they done something wrong or illegal, they had also done what they thought was necessary to cover it up and keep it that way. I mean, that's the thing about being in a public office: you have to project the image of being good, honest, upright, and law-abiding. So if you do something wrong, you have to cover it up. But – and here's the rub – these things have a way of being uncovered. As our British friends say, "The truth will out". No matter how well these folks think they've covered their tracks, their efforts usually fail. Somebody who knows about it talks, supposedly erased Emails are found, an investigative reporter pursues a lead, whatever; eventually the whole sordid story comes out. It almost always happens that even the best attempts to do a cover up come unraveled. And if that's the way it is before the world, how much more so when we try to do a cover up before the Lord? That's what's going on in today's Gospel: an attempted cover up is being undone.

The episode takes place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee at the third appearance of the resurrected Lord Jesus to his disciples. They had been told to come here and wait for Jesus who, when he came, would be able to spend some time with them away from the crowds and hectic hubbub at Jerusalem. And so they went and are here waiting for Jesus to show up. But the way the story unfolds, it's clear that there are some unresolved issues for the disciple named Simon Peter. These issues concern his denial of Jesus the night of his arrest. You recall that while eating the Passover meal together that night, Jesus told Peter point blank that he would deny him three times. Peter said that there was no way; that nothing could ever get him to disown his master. And doubtless when he said it, he meant it. Perhaps he envisioned being held at sword point and threatened with death by the enemies of Jesus. But, as we all know, when his faithfulness was put to the test, he surrendered all not to an angry lynch mob or a company of soldiers, but rather to the high priest's kitchen help and the teenage girl who answered the gate. This failure on Peter's part is a source of deep personal shame. And just seeing the resurrected Lord the couple times he has, as wonderful as that has been, has not made his shame go away. Instead, it's festering in his soul and consuming him. The personal knowledge of his treachery is bad enough; but what makes it even worse is that Peter knows that Jesus knows that he betrayed him. The look that Jesus gave him at the trial when he heard the cock crow – it's an image of hurt and disappointment Peter can't erase from his mind.

But on the other hand, Peter has an image to maintain. He knows that he's the one the other disciples look to for leadership. He's the Simon the Rock. The last thing he's going to do is confess his shortcomings to any them. So he's a man torn: inside he's dying in secret shame, but on the outside he keeps up the appearance of the good and faithful disciple. And notice how he deals with it. First we've got him waiting with the others for Jesus to come; but waiting means having time to think – and that's the last thing a guilty souls wants: time for introspection. So he resorts to a tried and true method of maintaining a cover up, and that's keeping busy. It's the old diversion tactic. "I'm going fishing", he announces to the others; and you can almost feel his impatience: "I just can't stand sitting here waiting". And that much is probably true: he really can't stand it. The others readily agree to join him. But no surprise –

they don't catch a thing that night. And there's a lesson for us: when doing something merely for the sake of maintaining an image rarely is anything worthwhile accomplished.

At dawn the next morning Jesus stands on the shore of the lake looking out at his weary and frustrated disciples. And what follows is practically a replay of the miraculous catch of fish that took place on the day that Peter was called to be a disciple some three years earlier. Jesus calls out, "You boys didn't catch anything, did you?" "No" comes back the grumpy reply. "Well, give it another try then on the right side of the boat." And of course when they do, the nets are filled with whoppers. But what's even more remarkable than the catch is Peter's amazing lack of insight. This same thing happened once before with Jesus telling them to let down the nets after a long night of fruitless toil; and they are here, after all, for the express purpose of waiting for Jesus to arrive. You'd think the realization that it was Jesus on the shore would have been a no-brainer; but Peter didn't see it on his own. He had to be told that it was Jesus. Why is that? It's because a person who's doing a cover up is actively engaged in suppressing the truth. He is deliberately clouding his mind in a spiritual sense, and clouds that are put up to conceal what's inside also block the light from entering.

Upon hearing that it was Jesus, it makes sense to Peter – and this is where he really begins to put on a cover. Recall that the first time there was a miraculous catch of fish, Peter was so astonished and humbled that he fell down at Jesus' feet and confessed his sin and unworthiness to be in his presence; but not this time. This time he is trying to hide what's ailing him, so he makes a great show of proving his devotion and loyalty to Jesus. He attempts to hide his past failure by overcompensating in the other direction. He launches into this theatric of "I've got to get to you Jesus, and I can't wait for the boat to get to the shore". But it's very revealing how he does it. Peter, with the rest of the guys in the boat, has stripped down to what was essentially his underwear: the wrap around loincloth that men wore under their tunics in the first century. And it was not unusual or immodest for workingmen to dress this way. But now, before leaping into the water and swimming a hundred yards to the shore, he puts on his heavy mantle: a thick woolen garment that did double duty as a sleeping bag. Now ask yourself, if you were going for a hundred yard swim, would you be inclined to first put on a big, thick, hooded poncho, or is that more like something you'd take off before swimming? What's Peter thinking? Let me suggest that he's reaching for the proverbial fig leaf. As he prepares to go to the Lord, he's covering up – which is a precise picture of what he's doing in a spiritual sense by his zealous display of devotion. But what a difficult way to go: that must have been one hard swim – which is one of my points this morning: maintaining a cover up before the Lord is a lot of hard and unnecessary work.

But it doesn't end there. When Peter gets ashore, Jesus asks him to bring some of the fish they were in the process of catching. Our text tells us that it's Peter who takes the net from the guys in the boat who have just arrived at the shore, and that he manhandles it onto the beach all by himself. And again, let me suggest that it's still more of Peter's attempt to prove his undying faithfulness and loyalty, as if he were trying to make up for his past mistakes – cleanse himself of his failures by ... well ... by going "overboard" now. It's still part of his cover up. "See Jesus, I know I let you down in the past – but just watch: I'll prove my worth to you now."

But that burden of constantly keeping up the appearance of faithfulness and devotion is an awfully heavy cross to try to bear. How many times do you have to prove yourself loyal to cancel out one act of disloyalty? How could you ever know if you've done enough? You know, Benedict Arnold was one of the greatest generals in American history. He won many stunning victories for this country. At one point he practically saved the Revolution; but hardly anyone remembers that. His name is now a synonym for traitor because of just one act – and Peter denied the Lord *three* times. By maintaining his cover up, Peter is attempting to do the

impossible: to atone for his own sin. And not only is it impossible, it's so unnecessary. Strangely enough, what Peter is doing by all his effort to prove himself loyal is a just another way to deny the Lord Jesus. By trying to make up for his own guilt he's denying the atonement – the covering – which Jesus made on the cross for the sin of us all.

But here we see the great love of the Lord Jesus in taking Peter aside to lift the impossible burden he's trying to carry. He wants to get Peter to stop denying him by refusing the forgiveness he died to achieve. And to do it, he has to strip away the devoted appearance Peter is working so hard to keep up. He gets directly to the point by asking the question Peter thinks he's been answering by his heroic efforts. "Simon, do you love me?" Put yourself in Peter's shoes: "What do you think I've been trying to show you? Yes Jesus, of course I love you." Jesus responds with words of pure grace: "Feed my lambs. It means, "All is forgiven and forgotten, Peter. Now I've got work for you to do; namely to share my forgiveness with others." But that isn't the way Peter takes it at first. It sounds to him like more work he can do to prove his loyalty. And he's more than willing to do it. So Jesus asks him again – and gets pretty much the same response; but this time Peter is wondering "Why is he asking me the same question again?"

The third time the question comes there can be no doubt about what Jesus is getting at: three questions to match three denials. There it is right out in the open. No more ways to hide it or try to cover it up. No need to keep putting up an appearance. It cuts Peter to the core to be so exposed. But what Jesus has actually done is to point out the obvious so that he can take the burden away from Peter. Peter's comment, "You know everything" speaks volumes. It means, "You know exactly how weak and miserable I am, and how I've been putting on a show for you now." But this time, Jesus' response gets through to him. "You're right, Peter, I know your sin and the game you've been playing; and what I've been telling you is that it's all been forgiven. I know that you love me. So, Peter, stop wasting so much effort trying to impress me, because I've got real work for you to do. Feed my sheep."

For Peter it meant no longer having to work so hard to maintain his cover up and release from the guilt that was festering in his soul. It also meant the freedom to serve the Lord in the full confidence of his love and forgiveness. What does it mean for you? What kind of cover up are you trying to maintain before the Lord or before his people? What secret shame is festering in your soul? What would Jesus say to you if he pulled you aside for a private conversation this morning? What sin or sins would he put his finger on while he asked you, "Do you love me?" Don't try to cover it up. Own it. Confess it. Repent of it. And receive his blood bought forgiveness. Let Jesus set you free. He will. That's why he came. And it's why he continues to come to you through the ministry of his church: to set you free; free from guilt, free from the burden of having to work to keep up your cover, and free to serve him in love. May the Lord in his mercy grant it to each and every one of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!