

**Fan or Team Member?** Reading: John 21:1-19 Easter 3/C

By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero CA 5/4/25

When you woke up this morning, did you remember it was the third Sunday of Easter, that joyful season of the year when we celebrate resurrection, new life, and a renewed hope for the future? If so, perhaps you pulled back the covers, placed your feet on the floor and exclaimed, "Alleluia, Christ is risen" or quietly murmured, "Today is a good day to have a great day!" Maybe as you made your way to the kitchen, you recalled your many blessings such as living on the Central Coast of CA, where you have access to the ocean, the abundance of vineyards, and the warm summer sun that grows beautiful flowers in your yard. Maybe you smiled at your loved ones and felt gratitude for your friends and family. Maybe you gave thanks for being part of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, a community of faith that encourages compassionate living by reaching out to others with loving kindness. The season of Easter reminds us "that even when the world does its worst, Love still rises. Not quietly, but with defiant tenderness. Every act of healing, every refusal to hate, every choice to hope, is resurrection." (Ester Joy Goetz)

Well, if you forgot about the resurrection and the fact that the Easter season lasts 50 days, don't worry about it. What is important is that you are here today, praying, hearing the gospel, and partaking in the sacrament, all of which will help strengthen your commitment to love. It is this vocation of *love* that today's gospel addresses. Let's take a closer look.

According to the gospel of John, Jesus shows himself once again to the disciples who are out fishing. At first, they don't recognize him, perhaps because his post-resurrection body is quite different from before. However, after they experience a big haul of fish, they become convinced that this is in fact the resurrected Christ. Once they finish breakfast, the gospel story then spells out a dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Now as you may recall, following the arrest of Jesus, Peter denied his association with Jesus three times before the cock crowed. Under stress, Peter's courage had failed him and he denied the very person for whom he had previously promised to lay down his life.

So the Q&A goes something like this: Jesus asks Peter: Do you love me? Peter affirms his love for Jesus. This same question is asked three times, the same number of times Peter denied Jesus before his crucifixion. Each time he is questioned, Peter declares his love. And after each declaration of love, Jesus tells Peter to translate that love into action by feeding his sheep, tending his lambs, and following him in the way of compassion and sacrifice. Jesus is trying to determine if Peter is just a fan or a committed member of the team. What do you think?

In ancient agrarian society, shepherding was a common occupation and shepherds were responsible for the well-being of their sheep. This included leading them into green pastures for eating, protecting them from predators, and ensuring their overall health. This kind of love for their animals may or may not have any emotion attached to it. It is based on responsibility, ethical principles, and commitment rather than the affections of the heart. This is the kind of love required of all Christians.

Like Jesus the Good Shepherd, Peter is being asked to love as Jesus loved. This kind of love is action oriented, not some devotional piety based on feeling. It is a love that reaches beyond the individual, beyond the family, beyond the community, extending out to all of God's people, including the lost, the lonely, and the left behind. I recently read a Facebook post that asked the same three questions of our country that Jesus asked Peter in today's gospel.

*Jesus asks:* America, do you love me?

*America:* Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

*Jesus:* Then care for the poor, the sick, and the marginalized.

*Jesus:* America, do you love me?

*America:* Lord, you know that I love you.

*Jesus:* Then seek justice, show mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

*Jesus:* America, do you love me?

*America (frustrated):* Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.

*Jesus:* Then welcome the stranger, love your neighbor, and remember that whatever you do to the least of these, you do for me.

This is what it means to be a team member of Christ and not just a fan!

I think for myself, it is a lot easier to be a fan than a committed team member. For instance, growing up in Boston, I became a fan of the Boston Patriots simply because I had a student teacher who was once a football player on that team. When the Boston Patriots changed its name to the New England Patriots, I remained a fan although I was rather tepid during those times when they lost more games than they won. But when Tom Brady became the quarterback, I was back to cheering enthusiastically for the team. I would wear the red, white, and blue colors during the playoffs and while celebrating the six Superbowls that they won under his tutelage. However, when Tom Brady transferred to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Patriots lost many games, my commitment to the Patriots began to wane. It was then that I transferred my loyalty to the Buccaneers as Brady led this team to another Superbowl.

You see, being just a fan does not require much commitment. Being a fan doesn't necessarily sustain your enthusiasm over the long haul, especially when times get tough. However, being a dedicated team member can sustain one's commitment through good times and bad times. Such is the case of a typical baptized Christian. It is a lot easier to be a fan of Jesus than a committed life-long team member. For instance, it doesn't take much effort to recite the baptismal covenant as a congregation. But it is very difficult to follow one's baptismal promises day after day. It is a lot more fun to sing "Lift high the Cross" during a processional hymn, than it is to live a life of sacrifice, forgoing our own comforts and standard of living for the good of others. We are often eager to ask God to "forgive us our sins" but more hesitant to let go of our resentments and rebuild broken relationships. No wonder Jesus puts Peter through the test in order to discern his level of commitment before passing on the keys!

Two weeks ago, the world mourned the death of Pope Francis, a beloved example of Jesus' way of love. What mattered to him most as a Christian, was to care for the poor, the immigrant, the victims of war, and the outcasts. Il Papa Francesco consistently encouraged people to choose love over indifference and he showed us how to put that love into action.

For instance, Pope Francis visited Myanmar and helped them feel seen and not forgotten amid their civil war. He washed and kissed the feet of prisoners on Maundy Thursday, including those of women and Muslims. He held the hand of a girl with Down's Syndrome who wandered up to him while he preached. He met with a group of transgender Latin-American former sex workers, making sure they got their COVID shots at the Vatican's health facility. He held listening sessions with members of the LGBTQ+ community, and with others considered outcasts and below the standards of polite society. He even phoned a tiny Roman Catholic church in Gaza every night at 7:00 p.m. to check in on them and lift their spirits."

Today's gospel is a call to love. It asks each one of us, "Are you just a fan of Jesus or are you a committed team member?" What is your answer?

Beloved, "let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 Jn. 4)