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Rehabilitating Peter, praising women

by Ross Beaudoin

Examining the Crisis

A homily for the Third Sunday of Easter

The gospel reading [for April 18] is a double-header. We get two stories in one. Both stories are about the apostle Peter, and they take up most of Chapter 21 of the Gospel of John.

Scholars tell us that Chapter 21 was added to the Gospel, which originally ended with Chapter 20, and that this "postscript" material probably dates around 60 years after the death of Jesus. These added stories must have been very important to the early Christian community. The question becomes: Why did the Johannine community feel the need to add these stories to the Gospel?

I believe that John's community added these stories because there was a need to rehabilitate the image of Peter and reaffirm Peter's role in the Christian community.

At the same time that we reflect on Peter, we are also being invited by the gospel readings to a better understanding of the role of women in the early church.

Consider what the four Gospels actually tell us about Peter. What would we know about him if there had been no addendum to John's Gospel?

First of all, the story of Peter's triple denial of Jesus is recorded in all four Gospels. After that, in two of the gospels (Matthew and Luke), Peter is never mentioned again. In the other two gospels (Mark and John), Peter is mentioned only as going to the empty tomb or it is recorded that Jesus "also" appeared to Peter. That's it.

How strange it seems to us that Peter, the apostle Jesus chose to be the leader of the emerging church, gets

such scant coverage -- especially in the all-important story of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. Peter is highlighted only as the one who denied even knowing Jesus.

Perhaps at the turn of the first century, John's community was wondering what new converts might think about Peter and his role when they read these gospels?

We might also consider these interesting facts from the gospels: Except for three references to John (the disciple whom Jesus loved), and Peter's denial, not only is Peter hardly mentioned, but no other disciple is mentioned by name in any of the accounts of Jesus' passion and death.

After Jesus' resurrection, Peter runs to the tomb, but there is only one reference by name to Peter as seeing the Lord. For sure, there are appearances to "the eleven" and in one case also Thomas is mentioned. But, for prospective new believers, there is not much about the apostles and Peter to go on when it comes to the climactic events of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection.

On the other hand, all four Gospels tell of women being at the cross when Jesus died. And all four Gospels record multiple accounts of Jesus appearing to women after his resurrection. Some of these women witnesses are important enough that they are mentioned by name.

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What does this add up to?

Other than the Beloved Disciple, the rest of the apostles, including Peter, are absent when it comes to the pivotal events of salvation: Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. The women are the real witnesses and the first evangelists to the rest of the community.

Did John's community, therefore, see a need to add these final stories about Peter to the already-finished Gospel of John in order to correct a possible misunderstanding about Peter's actual relationship with Jesus?

The first story is about Peter and six other disciples out in a boat fishing. We are told that they fished all night long and caught nothing.

They were frustrated ... and perhaps angry as well. What were they and their families going to eat? What were they going to be able to sell or barter for other necessities? Nothing. They had caught nothing.

Jesus comes on the scene very gently, in an almost hidden way. He calls to them from the shore and tells them to lower their net on the right side of the boat. They did not know it was Jesus. When they follow his suggestion, their net is filled almost to the breaking point. The Beloved Disciple says, "It is the Lord." They struggle to get their boat and the net to shore. And then their eyes are opened to recognize Jesus, who is cooking breakfast for them!

The story, written for the early church, emphasizes that it was Peter who had decided to go fishing. It was Peter who jumped into the water to go to Jesus. And it was Peter who went back to the boat and pulled the net to shore.

For the early church, the story reminds them of the time Jesus had told Peter and the others, "From now on you will be fishers of people." They would remember the feeding of the multitudes with the loaves and fish. This was all connected for them.

The second story is about Jesus asking Peter three times if he loved him.

Peter was an impetuous person. He often acted and spoke before he thought. This always got him in trouble. Peter was also perhaps somewhat fearful? not always sure of himself.

Peter's heart was in the right place, even though he did not always consider the consequences of his actions and words. Despite his impetuosity, Peter was not like Judas. Peter did not plot to do bad, as Judas had done. Peter acted out of impulsiveness and sometimes perhaps fear.

Peter's worst episode occurred the night before Jesus died. At that critical time for Jesus, Peter had straight-out said that he did not even know Jesus, let alone that he was one of his disciples! That was a terrible denial of Jesus? and one that all four evangelists recorded.

The record of Peter's denials was very clear. But there was no reconciliation recorded. Would converts to the church know of Peter's reconciliation with Jesus? If not, would they have a difficult time thinking of Peter as the leader of the disciples and the church?

So here in Chapter 21 we find the story of Peter's reconciliation -- and more.

Just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, so Jesus gives Peter the chance to express his love for him three times. And, Jesus makes clear that Peter is to 'tend' and 'feed' the lambs and sheep: 'shepherd' the company of believers.

What are we to make of these stories now, in our 21st century church? I think we need to consider the whole picture presented by the Gospels.

First of all, Jesus apparently did choose Peter to be the leader of the disciples and the growing early church. And as part of the apostolic tradition we accept, Peter's successors continue in that role.

We are told just how human Peter was, and how flawed. Nevertheless, Jesus chose Peter and worked with him and through his leadership (though this was not an easy thing, as the disputes in the early church showed, including Peter's disputes with Paul).

Now, the truth of the matter is that all of us are human and flawed. We can take comfort from the assurance that Jesus knows that and is willing to work with and through us? and with and through all the human, flawed people in the church. No matter who they are or what role people have -- even leaders, clergy, bishops and the pope -- all are in need of the support and mercy of God.

Secondly, the testimony is clear in the Gospels: It was the women who stuck with Jesus in his darkest hour, and it was to the women that Jesus made his first appearances when he rose from the dead. It was the women that Jesus sent to bring the news to the other disciples.

In our church today, it is the women who do most of the direct ministry in parishes, schools, hospitals, social service agencies and elsewhere.

In our day Jesus is still sending the women to bring the news to the disciples/ to the leaders of the Church. The question is: Is the Church listening to the news that Jesus is sending through the women?

The disciples of John felt that it was necessary to add a chapter to the stories that had been written so that their contemporaries would have the full story.

In the same way, perhaps what we need most today is for the whole church to stop and re-read the last chapters of all the Gospels and get the full story -- so that we can better deal with the issues of our contemporary church.

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