

OK, first your RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter joke. These are actual sentences found in patients' charts. They come from Doctor Greg Juliano.

Patient has chest pain if she lies on her left side for over a year.

On the second day the knee was better, and on the third day, it disappeared.

The patient refused autopsy.

Patient had waffles for breakfast and anorexia for lunch.

The patient has no previous history of suicides.

Patient has 2 teenage children – but no other abnormalities. (internet)

Frederick Buechner refers to this gospel as “The Christ and the chowder, the Messiah and the mackerel. The Word and the flesh. The first voice and the second voice. It is what this great text is all about, of course, this mystery, this tension and scandal; and the text itself, with this antiphony of voices, is its own illustration. (SECRETS IN THE DARK: A LIFE IN SERMONS)

First some biblical background. We need to always remember that the opening line of the Bible, in the Book of Genesis is: IN THE BEGINNING. I'm currently reading a book on the Alphabet – where I found out that the word 'alphabet' combines the first 2 Greek letters – alpha and beta. Even though I suffered through Greek -- I had never put that together! Some days I'm just three fries short of a HAPPY MEAL! But I also read this: “In Jewish lore, Hebrew ALEF enjoys a philosophical glory greater even than of our letter A. According to mystical writings such as the Kabbalah (Hebrew for 'Tradition'), ALEF symbolizes the divine energy that preceded and initiated Creation. This seeding power existed before any other form could be realized, which is why the opening word of the Bible – BERESHITH (IN THE BEGINNING) – starts with the Hebrew alphabet's second letter, not the first. (LETTER PERFECT, David Sacks, p. 52-53) You get all of that free of charge! And the opening line of John's Gospel is IN THE BEGINNING. This is John's way of telling us that he will be seeing Jesus through the lens of the Old Testament, and referencing a great deal of Old Testament material to unfold his rich understanding of Jesus as Son of God, the promised Messiah and Savior.

Also the Old Testament begins with darkness, and John, the last of the Gospels, ends with it. “Darkness was upon the face of the deep,” Genesis says. Darkness was where it all started. Before darkness, there had never been anything other than darkness, void and without form. At the end of John, the disciples go out fishing on the Sea of Tiberias. *It is night*. They have no luck. Their nets are empty. Then they spot someone standing on the beach. At first, they don't see who it is in the darkness. It is Jesus.

The darkness of Genesis is broken by God in great majesty speaking the word of creation: “Let there be light!” That's all it took.

The darkness of John's gospel passage is broken by the flicker of a charcoal fire on the sand. Jesus has made it. He cooks some fish on it for His old friends' breakfast. On the horizon there are the first pale traces of the sun getting ready to rise.

All the genius and glory of God are somehow represented by these two scenes, not to mention what St. Paul calls God's foolishness.

The original creation of light itself is almost too extraordinary to take in. The little cook-out on the beach is almost too ordinary to take seriously. Yet if Scripture is to be believed, enormous stakes were involved in them both – and still are. Only a saint or a visionary could begin to understand God setting the very sun on fire in the heavens, so God apparently takes another tack. By sheltering a spark with a pair of cupped hands and blowing on it, the Light of the World gets enough of a fire going to make breakfast. It's not apt to be our interest in cosmology or even in theology that draws us to it so much as it's the empty feeling in our stomach. We don't have to understand anything very complicated. All we're asked is to take a step or 2 forward through the darkness – and start digging in. (Frederick Buechner, LISTENING TO YOUR LIFE, p. 153-154, slightly adapted)

Second, this conversation between Jesus and Peter is one of the most beautiful – and most painful – episodes in all of the scriptures. It is reminiscent of David's lament over the death of his son Absalom, who had rebelled against David. We note the setting – a charcoal fire – and remember that it was around a charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard that Peter had denied Jesus three times. The detail is not accidental, as nothing in John's Gospel is accidental. We can sense Peter's distress as Jesus asks him to repeat his expression of love three times, paralleling Peter's 3 betrayals the night before Jesus' crucifixion. A lot of the richness of this text is lost in our English translation.

Jesus asks Peter if he LOVES Him with the love of AGAPE, the self-giving love that Jesus embodied in giving His life on the cross. Literally, the question and answer sound like this: "Do you love me (AGAPAS ME?)" "You know I am your friend." (PHILO SE – from where we get the name of Philadelphia – the city of brotherly/friendship love)"

A second time and the same exchange: "Do you LOVE -- AGAPAS me?" "I am your friend – PHILOS SE."

And then Jesus changes HIS question, "PHILEIS ME – are you my friend?" "I am your friend." Jesus wanted Peter's lay-down-his life-for Jesus kind of love – but finally comes down to Peter's level. For now, that's as much as Peter can say – and do.

The point is that the resurrected Christ comes to Peter *as he is. With what he is capable of.*

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world comes to Peter with forgiveness and new life. Jesus wants Peter's love, but accepts his lesser offer of friendship. And each time Peter answers Jesus' question, he is given another chance -- a renewed calling to share in Jesus' own life. "Feed my sheep." This is the task given to every one of us at our baptism – to feed and care for our brothers and sisters throughout the world. No exceptions.

Whether we have let Jesus down 3 times or 300, when we have failed to respond to Jesus' agape love with self-giving love of our own, the Lamb of God comes to us with forgiveness and a fresh commission to live for others as He has lived for us. (adapted from an unknown publication) This text is great encouragement for us in our stumbling attempts to follow Christ into lay-down-our-life kind of love with our often half-hearted sort-of-friendship love that we offer in return.

Third, an application of the forgiveness that Jesus models in this text. Marriages fall apart for many different reasons, but one of the most common and challenging to overcome is the discovery that one partner has cheated on the other. It can be a fatal blow to most marriages – but not always. Marriage counselors and

therapists are finding that more and more couples are choosing to remain together, that couples who choose to work through issues of trust often end up with a stronger, more loving and mutually understanding relationship than they had previously.

Many spouses care deeply for the well-being of their partners even while lying to them, and just as many of those betrayed continue to love the ones who lied to them. They find a way to stay together. Betrayal cuts to the bone, but the wound can be healed.

Writing in THE NEW YORK TIMES (Jan 23, 2018), health columnist Jane E. Brody recounts the experience of a friend who found herself in that position when she discovered her husband's affair.

"At first I wanted to kick him out, but I realized that I didn't want to get divorced. My mother did that and she ended up raising 3 children alone. I didn't want a repeat of my childhood. I wanted my son, who was then 2 years old, to have a father in his life. But I also knew that if we were going to stay together, we had to go to couples counseling."

About a dozen sessions later, the woman came away from the experience with life-changing insights: "I know I'm not perfect. I was very focused on taking care of my son, and my husband wasn't getting from me whatever he needed. Everybody should be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them. We learned how to talk to each other and really listen. I love him and respect him, I'm so happy we didn't split apart. He's a wonderful father, a stimulating partner, and while our marriage isn't perfect – whose is? – we are supportive and nurturing of each other. Working through the affair made us stronger."

It's hard work – to forgive – and to seek forgiveness, to restore trust and rebuild a shattered relationship – whether it be in marriage or in friendship -- to recognize the brokenness that led to estrangement and to commit together to mending the cracks. But Jesus gives us a wonderful model of such reconciliation in today's Gospel. Jesus' lifting up of Peter's betrayed love and incomplete commitment transforms Peter's utter failure into understanding and wisdom that enables Peter to take on his role in the post-Resurrection story. It is the same movement from brokenness to healing, from betrayal to trust that couples in crisis undertake, and all of us who have suffered through broken relationships. The Easter Christ calls Peter and those first disciples – and now all of us – to take on His hard work of reconciliation: to possess – despite our doubts and disappointments – the heart of the Risen Christ to forgive and seek forgiveness, to be the means of enabling God's mercy to be realized in our families, neighborhoods, and world. So may it be for you and for me. Amen. (story from CONNECTIONS, May 2019, p. 1-2)