

"A CHARCOAL FIRE"
JOHN 21: 1-19

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University Church of Chicago
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The inimitable Kinky Friedman, who used to have a country-and-western band called "Kinky Friedman and His Texas Jewboys," but lately has become a mystery writer and even ran for Governor of Texas, has written a book, *Jesus, Elvis and Coca-Cola*. The book is not worth reading but the title has intrigued me for several years, because it brings together the three most widely used proper names in the English language.

Moreover, the three name a trinity of powerful urges. Elvis represents our entertainment culture. More popular and probably long-lasting than Michael Jordan. The King of Rock and Roll, the most popular recording artist in history, he has sold over a billion records, more than anyone in the history of music. The only three albums for which Elvis received Grammy awards were for gospel music. He was, after all, from Tupelo, Mississippi, and was raised as a fundamentalist Christian.

Elvis's home, Graceland, is the most visited home in America after the White House. Over 700,000 people per year go to Memphis, shop big time in the Graceland souvenir shop and spend time in its "Meditation Garden," a place the King himself never visited.

There's a culture issue at stake here. It may be best explained by a list our son Jim faxed me: "Thirty-six Things You Will Never Hear a Southerner Say." As tempted as I am and as much as you need to hear the whole list, I will give you only a selection:

"I'll take Shakespeare for 1000, Alex."
"Duct tape won't fix that."
"You can't feed that to the dog."
"Honey, did you mail that donation to Greenpeace?"
"The tires on that truck are too big."
"She's too old to be wearing that bikini."
and, "I thought Graceland was tacky."

Coca-Cola started out as a Southern product, the long-hidden recipe manufactured by the brother of a despotic Methodist bishop. In a wonderful book I read several years ago, **For God, Country and Coca-Cola**, Mark Pendergast maintains that Coke has "entered the lives of more people...than any other product or ideology, including the Christian religion." "Coke is the holy grail, it's magic," one of the company's executives declared to Mr. Pendergast. "Wherever I go, when people find out I work for Coke, it's like being a representative from the Vatican, like you've touched God. I'm always amazed. There's such a reverence toward the product."

Forty thousand Cokes are consumed per second. Coca-Cola is sold in every major league stadium except Wrigley Field. Is that perhaps why the Cubs have not been in the World Series since 1945 and haven't won the Series since 1907?

Mr. Pendergast maintains that "Coke has achieved the status of a substitute modern religion which promotes a particular, satisfying, all-inclusive world view espousing perennial values such as love, peace and universal brotherhood. It provides a panacea whenever daily life seems too difficult, harried, fragmented or confused. As a sacred symbol, Coca-Cola induces varying 'worshipful' moods, ranging from exaltation to pensive solitude, from near-orgasmic togetherness to playful games of chase."

What Coca-Cola represents is the apogee of a consumer culture. Who among us doesn't want to feel good, to experience pleasure? Preachers like to blame the advertising industry for consumerism, because preachers like simple, easy, moralistic answers to difficult problems. But consumerism is not just the result of outside forces which convince us to buy. In fact, many in-depth studies have revealed the cynicism of the American public about commercials.

One way anthropologists study a culture is to look at its taboos. What will the people not discuss? What is out of bounds for conversation? In our culture, it used to be sex. McAuley, the great nineteenth century British historian said that there are three things you never discuss in polite company: sex, politics, and religion. Well, we talk about nothing but the first two in modern North American culture. But the one subject we don't talk about is money.

Because money is the most taboo subject, the hidden part of our lives, we harbor all kinds of fantasies about its power and it assumes incredible proportions in our imagination. So, we buy because we think money will open us to life's hidden secrets, will reveal meaning to us.

We seek meaning in our lives. I am convinced that more people go to church on a Sunday because they are bothered by God's absence in the world than because they have experienced God's presence. All those sightings of Elvis in our time are evidence of our search for meaning, a quest for something beyond the ordinary so that we can find meaning in the mundane. But the resurrection stories in the New Testament are not just sightings. They are stories of the power of the Risen Christ to change lives.

Such a sighting is what occurs in John 21. Jesus had called his first disciples from a life of fishing up in the Galilee, a semi-pagan area north of Jerusalem. After the crucifixion of Jesus and all the confusing experiences of appearances, sightings, arguments, mysteries and miraculous words and assurances, they returned to Galilee to do what they knew best: to fish not for people but for those wonderful, tasty little fish that populate so fully Lake Gennesaret, commonly called the Sea of Galilee.

"The return to fishing," says Fred Craddock, "implies the disciples were unable to sustain Easter beyond resurrection appearances. Belief in the resurrection was an item of faith but it had not

been translated into life and mission in the world. The radical decline in church attendance and activity after Easter Sunday indicates the problem is still with us."

When Jesus appears to them again (verse 4), it is as though the disciples had not seen the risen Christ before, even though this is his third appearance (verse 14). Recognizing the presence of the Risen One was not merely a matter of objective "seeing." Peter is again the first on the scene but again it is the Beloved Disciple who understands. "It is the Lord!"

The Risen One is standing there on the beach warming his hands in front of a charcoal fire. With this deft literary touch, the Gospel writer reminds us of the scene in which Peter denied Jesus three times as he, Peter, stood in front of a charcoal fire in the courtyard of Caiaphas on the last night of his Lord's life.

The most powerful moment in the story of the Galilean breakfast occurs when Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Each time the bewildered former fisherman answers plaintively, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And Peter is three times commissioned to shepherd God's flock.

After these moments of questioning and answering, Jesus said to him, "Follow me." This terse command echoes the language of Jesus' initial call to discipleship found in all four Gospels. And it is the good news for us: every one of us who has responded to the call and then has betrayed or denied Jesus hears the good news that the risen Christ repeatedly restores his disciples and renews their commission to serve Him.

We can say that the story of the Resurrection means simply that the teachings of Jesus are immortal like the plays of Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven. Or we can say that the Resurrection means that the spirit of Jesus is undying, that he lives among us by the good he left behind him, by the church that goes on in his name, in the lives of all those who seek to follow his example.

Or we can say that the language which the Gospel writers use is poetical or mythological or even legendary but it is not to be taken literally. Now there is no doubt that some of the Bible is written in such a fashion. One can point to some of the birth narratives as an example. But in the case of the Resurrection, this simply does not apply because there is no story about the Resurrection in the New Testament. Except in the most fragmentary way, the Gospel writers don't give us any details.

There is no poetry, no myth about the Resurrection. It is simply proclaimed. **Christ is risen!** It is a fact. In fact, the very existence of the New Testament, the existence of the church itself proclaims that Christ is risen. Unless something very real took place on that Easter morning and in the appearances of Jesus that followed, there would be no Church, no Christianity.

The breakfast by the lake not only confirms that the risen Lord is the historical Jesus (he eats bread and fish), but recalls some of the most meaningful moments the disciples had shared

with him during his earthly ministry. What Dominick Crossan calls "consensual table fellowship" is at the heart of their experience. Early in the thinking and practice of the early church, eating together was an occasion for experiencing the presence of Christ. Fish and bread quickly came to have symbolic significance far beyond their value as staples of the common diet. Eating together confirmed and encouraged faith for living in the face of immense obstacles.

One distinguishing mark of University Church is our potluck suppers. Potluck, covered dish, by whatever name, the food is ancillary to the wonderful fellowship. Most churches no longer have that kind of supper; they are too sophisticated for such gatherings. They even have meals catered, some of them do. We have found ways to eat together, because we know inchoately that when you sit down at a meal with someone, you share a special experience.

We do that when we go out to eat in restaurants. It's a secular way of experiencing something spiritual. In a culture in which most of us eat at least half our meals outside the home, we understand the shared intimacy of talking and laughing and sharing dreams and disappointments, hopes and hurts. We're seeking something. Just as Peter and the others who ate with Jesus on the seashore that early morning.

I don't often read Stephen King's books, but I did read **The Shawshank Redemption**, and I saw the movie because our son, Chris, maintains it is one of the best of all time. He has seen it perhaps thirty times. Let me recap it for you.

Andy Dufrense is sentenced to two back-to-back life terms for crimes he did not commit, and he is imprisoned in Shawshank, the most vile and evil penitentiary of its time. Andy becomes the prison librarian and petitions the state legislature for books and records so that Shawshank's inmates can read and learn and enjoy some of life's beauty.

When a huge shipment of used books and records arrives one day, Andy becomes intoxicated by Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro." He locks the warden and the guards out of the warden's office and plays the Duetto-Sull Aria over the prison loudspeaker system. He is put in solitary and systematically tortured, but he later explains to his friends, "I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company." He points to his head and heart as he continues, "It's in here. That's the beauty of music...so you don't forget that there are places in the world not made out of stone, that there's something inside that they can't get to, that they can't touch. It's yours."

"Do you love me?" Faith is a personal relationship with Christ (Jn. 15:1-8), and this relationship has its expression not only in words but in obedience (14:15). One particular form of this obedience is caring for others as Christ did (10:1-17; 20:21). For some, like Peter, this caring will result in death by martyrdom (16:2); but to all of us, wherever discipleship may lead, the word with which we began our relationship with Jesus is still the final word: "Follow me."