

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
May 1, 2022
John 21: 1-19

Knowing what you know now, would you still follow? I don't know when the journey of faith began for you or when you decided to follow Jesus. For me, it began young, growing up in the church, and deepened when I went to college intending to go into youth ministry. I was full of intention, idealism, and a willingness to sacrifice. How about you? When did it begin? With what idealism and abandon did you come to follow? But knowing what you know now, would you still follow?

Our gospel reading evokes the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he called his new disciples to leave their nets, leave their families' businesses and follow him. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the other gospel writers, all include that early call to leave their nets and follow. And Luke has a longer story of Jesus going out in the boat with Peter after Peter had a fishless night. And it has some starkly similar elements and phrasing as John's story – such as the miraculous catch of fish so big they struggled to get it in. But John tells his story not at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, but after the cross.

Now this is the third Sunday of Easter, celebrating that Jesus has risen. And in the hours and days after the resurrection, we find Jesus going to his disciples repeatedly and showing himself and trying to restore their hope and renew their faith. In chapter 20, Jesus came to the disciples as they were locked in a room out of fear. And then Jesus did it again a week later for Thomas' benefit. And in our passage this morning, Jesus seeks out Peter. Peter is not locked in a room out of fear at this point, however. And he has seen the risen Christ. But now he has gone back to Galilee. He has gone back to fishing.

I tend to go back to fishing this time of year as well. I went on Friday for the first time since November. My five-month hiatus from fishing was due to ski season with the kids, busyness, and building a boat in my free time. Though a winter hiatus is a familiar rhythm for me, coming from back east where fishing season opens on April 1st. I would always start fishing right around my birthday, right around or just after Easter.

And so it is for this minister, that after the long winter and Lent and Holy Week, fishing brings rest. For me, a day on the stream, tuned into the sounds of water, the movements of life around it, the insects hatching at the surface, the rhythm of the

fly rod moving the line over the water, all climaxing as a trout takes my fly, it is therapeutic and restoring. A night out fishing likely had a different feel for Peter and these others. Fishing for them was their families' businesses. They grew up and worked in it. When they grabbed those old nets, the waft of seasoned fishing gear hit their noses, the scent of the water and the humidity of the evening air, and their muscle memories took over. I imagine they took to their roles without conversation or question. After the long emotional ordeal they had just endured, the boat's rocking in Galilean moonlight lulled them into a comfort and familiarity that they had once given up.

They were fishermen first. They knew it, knew it well; could make a livelihood of it. Their night on the water was unlike my spring escapes to the river; it was a temptation to the comfort of the hard and fast, the temptation to resort to what you know, to retreat back to what feels safe.

So it is interesting that it is here that John places his story of the fishermen in their boats, of the miraculous catch of fish that nearly breaks the nets, and the call to follow.

They began their following of Jesus with great energy and idealism. Peter said he would follow Jesus to the end. Thomas said let's go die with him. They each left things in order to follow Jesus those three years full of hope in what Jesus was going to do and what they would do while following.

But over time, the friction of human relationships crept in. They would argue over who was higher in status and, therefore, who got to sit where at meals, that is, who got to sit closer to the head of the table, and who at the far end. James and John's mother even got in there to try to work a deal where her sons would get the honored seats. They would complain about Judas always holding the money, about Peter always having the first and last word. Yet though they had their spats, they were still carried along by the energy of hope, that Jesus was truly the messiah, that something remarkable was about to happen in God's long-awaited plan. They still felt like a tight-knit community with purpose and hope.

But the night Jesus was hauled off in chains by soldiers, the energy of hope dissipated quickly, and their human instincts and weaknesses came in. Judas took things into his own hands betraying Jesus to the authorities. Peter claimed he would follow to the end, even against Jesus' prediction that he would deny ever knowing Jesus. In the end, Peter did deny knowing Jesus when put on the spot by a young servant girl by a charcoal fire. He was scared. They all were. They thought they would go to the end with Jesus. Instead, he went it alone.

What happened? And what do you do now? Peter says to the others, “I’m going fishing.”

They go fishing, and even though it all comes back comfortably, every seasoned fisherman get skunked once in a while. A voice from the shore, as the sun was coming up. What’s the report? They echo back their dismal results across the lake for every early riser to hear. “Try the other side” was the odd advice they heard. Odd as fishing advice, but reminiscent of that story Luke tells of when Jesus first called Peter.

As the nets are stretching and the boat is leaning, the impulsive Peter we have come to know and love returns. In that moment of realizing it is Jesus and of seeing the miraculous unfold before him once again, right in his hands, he leaps from the boat into the water. Once again, he is propelled from fishing to following, leaping to be near Jesus.

Jesus has prepared breakfast, and John describes the fire again, the same way he did the fire in the courtyard when Peter denied Jesus, a charcoal fire. A charcoal fire, a clear link tying this morning meal to that evening.

And as they sit, Jesus asks Peter a question that likely touches that sense of disappointment and failure that Peter experienced, that deeply human response of himself and the others. “Do you love me more than these?” Peter had boasted that even if all fell away, he would not. Peter’s fervency and love was such that all the gospel writers tell of it. Jesus’ question is either a mean jab at what Peter knew he failed at, or a penetrating question of a friend, seeking to restore Peter. Do you love me more than these? Peter’s response is not full of the confidence he once had – yes Jesus you know I love you.

Three times Jesus asks the question to match the three times Peter denied knowing him. Each time Jesus issues the call, feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Notice Jesus does not offer any platitudes of encouragement – such as, it was one time, we all make mistakes, I’m sure it won’t happen again. Don’t worry about it Peter, it’s no big deal. I’m sure you will all do better next time. Jesus does not base anything in such shallow assertions. He asks only, do you love me. And he issues the call, feed my lambs.

It is a sober moment there in the quiet of the morning, by the crackling of the fire. A moment when they both were fully aware of the frailties of human commitment,

and human community. Even when drawn together by a magnet like Jesus, people are still likely to be themselves, and all our efforts might reveal such.

And so the call comes, and perhaps moreso – will you tend my lambs when you know what is in your own heart and the hearts of others. When you realize you are not perfect, nor are others... When you have to forgive yourself, have to forgive your closest friends, and forgive even your enemies, those who cast the blows and those in the crowd that cheered “crucify him.” When you come to see a glimpse of what Jesus had already seen, when he prayed, “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing,” will you follow still?

I love the image from the poem by Larkin, of each time the tree does its thing of becoming new, it is “written down in rings of grain.” Do our bodies or our hearts have a similar memory, registering each time of having to start anew, to let something go again and to be renewed, to be called anew.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

The call to begin afresh comes in the question, do you love me? As we see ourselves and others more clearly, the question comes to us. This morning, it comes to us with what we know of our own weaknesses and what we know of others’ weaknesses, and with the cynicisms we have acquired along the way... “do you love me?” That is the only real question. If so, then join again in the work of loving others, of reaching out to the hurting, of caring for the church. Tend my lambs, feed my sheep. Do you love me? – one question for every time you think you have fallen short. “Do you love me?”- one question for every time you said I’ve had it with people. Jesus knows, but Jesus still asks – do you love me? And will you follow?

Kind of like the question I opened with, knowing what you know now, would you still follow?

In these final verses of John’s gospel, passed down by, and for, the early generations of the church, the clear call is to love and to serve. The future is unknown, as it certainly proved to be for the early church, many of whom suffered and were killed. Our humanity is in full swing, the world full of great injustice, and the church full of flawed people. And we stand in the same tension that Peter and those other disciples did – the tension where on one hand, Jesus is risen, hope is

alive, miracles are possible and the gospel still goes forth. And on the other hand, we are who we are, human and flawed and still in process. We are driven by mixed motivations. We are imperfect. We have stumbled and will stumble again.

And yet, the lone question still echoes to us in the morning air... now that you have experienced such a tension, and know your own limitations and those of others... “do you love me?” Will you leave those nets once again, leave that hard and fast world, leave what you know, and continue to follow Christ into the things you don’t? Do you love me? Then feed my sheep.

And when Peter responds for the third time, Jesus offers a little forecast of what it will mean, a little metaphor for what it will mean to follow, of the journey towards trusting and relying not on our own power, but on Christ’s power, and on the community of his emerging church.

He says: “ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this, he said to him, ‘Follow me.’”

We know how Peter responded. How about you? And all God’s people said... Amen.

John 21 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ² Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin,^a Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³ Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶ He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards^b off.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus and Peter

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

^a Gk *Didymus*

^b Gk *two hundred cubits*

Poem: "Trees"

Philip Larkin

By

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.
Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too,
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.
Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.