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John 21: 1-11

### “Follow Me” a Re-Calling Story

It's after Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus has already appeared to the disciples previously when this story begins. We don't really know how much time has gone by, but Peter and some of the other disciples are together and Peter says to the gang: Hey, I'm going to go out fishing and they decide to join him. It seems like an ordinary day and that's because fishing was an ordinary practice for many of these guys. That's what they did *before* Jesus called them become his disciples. So, they're going back to what was familiar. What some might say they knew best. We don't really know why. Maybe the excitement of Jesus' resurrection and the hope it had put in them was fading away. Maybe it seemed far from their reality and they didn't know what to do next. Maybe it wasn't anything as profound as that. Sometimes, we do things because they are familiar and comforting. But, on this day, they got no comfort. They caught no fish. Not a single one.

Then, Jesus appears on the shore and at first, they don't recognize him. But then he speaks to them and suggests they change where they are casting their nets for fish and if they do, they'll get some. So, they take his advice and immediately their nets are overflowing. The nets are so heavy they've not even able to haul it into the boat. It's in this moment that Jesus is seen. It's in this miraculous moment that they KNOW that Jesus is with them. One of the disciples says, "It is the Lord!" and when Peter hears this, he jumps into the sea to get to Jesus faster. He is so excited to be with Jesus again! An ordinary day, transformed into a miraculous day. It's in this next part—this heart to heart between Jesus and Peter where Peter is reminded of his purpose. Jesus has made a charcoal fire and invites them to breakfast: to indulge in this feast they've brought in. After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter a question three times, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And, there's no getting around the parallels between this day and that sad day before Jesus died when Peter denied him three times. Peter must have been sweating, just as he was at that previous charcoal fire. Peter's answer all three times, was "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." On the third time, Peter feels hurt by the repeated questions and almost in exasperation says, "Lord, you know *everything*; you know that I love you." His frustration is palpable—you can almost hear his inner monologue—"Jesus, why do you keep asking me this same question?!" You would think by the line of questioning that Jesus' response would sound something like, "Whew, thank goodness. I'm so glad to hear it. I just wasn't sure after those previous denials." Or, "Okay, Peter, great, but I'm going to ask you JUST a few more times, just to be sure." But, he says nothing like this. If the point was that Jesus was testing Peter or needed reconciliation between them, you'd think it his response would have sounded like that. But that is clearly not the point. The Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary points out a key distinction between these parallel stories (Peter's denial of Jesus in the courtyard and his affirmation of love for Jesus in this story on the seaside) in John and how they are different in the other Gospel narratives in Matthew, Mark or Luke. In John, when Peter denies Jesus he is asked "Aren't you one of his disciples?" and his answer is, "I am not." In the other Gospel accounts it's a slightly different question and answer—more along the lines of, "Isn't he with Jesus?" and Peter's answer is "I don't know the man." In John, he's denying his own identity as a disciple of Jesus. In the others, he denies even knowing Jesus. So, it follows that in

this story from John what Peter had denied previously---that he was a disciple of Jesus is what Jesus is affirming in him. <sup>1</sup>Just like Peter said, Jesus knows that Peter loves him. Each time Peter responds in affirmation, “You know I love you, Lord” Jesus says, “Feed my lambs,” “Tend my sheep,” “Feed my sheep.” Jesus knows, but Peter needs to be reminded of his love for Jesus and what that means for him and for others. He needs to be reminded that following in the way of Jesus is not simply affirming our love by saying it out loud—it is by loving and serving our neighbor. Peter, the rock on whom the church would be built. Peter, the enthusiastic disciple who is so “all-in” that he asks for Jesus to wash his whole body, not just his hands and feet. One of the ones who saw the resurrected Jesus’ hands and feet. He needed to be reminded of his purpose. Needed to be reminded of his identity. Jesus says to him, “Follow me” and this isn’t the first time he’s heard this. He heard this the first time he was called into discipleship, on another day when he was fishing. Only this time, there isn’t a literal following. Jesus is calling him into leadership and discipleship into a time when he wasn’t there to physically lead the way. He’s calling Peter to this task, to take on this mantle. Jesus is preparing him—telling him—before you could do whatever you wanted, but now you’re being called into difficult, hard places, but you can and will do this not only because you love me, but because you’ll follow me and care for my people.

In this story threes abound—as they do in many parts of the Bible. At the beginning we hear that this is the third time that Jesus has appeared to his disciples since being resurrected, three times he asks Peter if he loves him, three times Peter affirms this and three times Jesus asks him to feed his sheep. Three is a representation of completeness, wholeness, perfection. This was a time of fulfillment for Peter. Many times we read this story and feel bad for Peter (Jesus really won’t give this guy a break with the repeated questions---making him feel guilty all over again), but what this represents is the complete and sure affirmation from Jesus that he knows Peter, loves Peter and is calling him to be his true self. Peter doesn’t get to decide his identity. He’s been claimed by Jesus—long ago and he’s being reminded of that claim on his life today.

What does Christian identity mean for us today? Recently, with the shooting at Chabad of Poway, a synagogue in CA, I’ve been thinking about this. The shooter who killed one and injured three others, made it clear in a manifesto that he had been steeped in antisemitic and white nationalist rhetoric, but in this same manifesto he spoke about his own salvation and used Christian theology intertwined with his antisemitic hatred. In a Washington Post article <sup>2</sup>I read recently, leaders from his church and denomination denounced his words and said it had no place in their doctrine. This is important and needed. We must denounce these acts of hatred and violence. But, it was disturbing to the leaders from his church, as it was to me, to see Christian theology intermingled. One quote from the article was that, “It wasn’t the white supremacist drivel from internet chat rooms that was totally foreign to the church that chilled them most, but it was the familiar theology that showed he believed what he’d been hearing in the pews.” It is certainly not the first time Christianity and Christian teaching has been used for violence and hatred. There is a clear history that’s crept into the church and that is why it is so important, any time this happens, that as Christians, we are called upon to recognize it and denounce it. The shooter also mentioned Martin Luther as someone he was following. In a Lutheran Church we lift up theology taught and preached by Luther and know how it has brought people closer to Christ, but we must also acknowledge and not diminish or hide from how evil and wrong Luther

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<sup>1</sup> [“Dear Working Preacher, Do You Love Me?, April 28, 2019”](#) by Karoline Lewis

<sup>2</sup> [“The alleged shooter was a churchgoer who talked Christian theology, raising tough questions for evangelical pastors,”](#) The Washington Post, May 1, 2019 by Julie Zauzmer

was in his demonization of Jewish people. It is hard to understand, even baffling, how deep hatred of others and love of Jesus can live side by side. Our instinct is to distance ourselves so much from this that we deny our association or shove those hard realities into the darkness. We have the instinct to say, “They’re crazy.” Or, “Martin Luther was from another time.” Those things may be true and they are also not an excuse. We must own and lament the reality like Rev. Duke Kwon did, a leader in the Presbyterian Church that said “it is possible to teach people in the church about personal, individual salvation in Jesus Christ and fail to instruct them regarding ethical implications of their faith.”<sup>3</sup> While this shooting in CA and Martin Luther’s writings on hatred of Jews are both dramatic and extreme examples of people who believed they loved Jesus, but did not bear that out in their actions we can hear the more every day, living out of this dissonance in the story of Peter. Peter is asked and affirms his love of Jesus and he, like all of us, is called to more. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

Just this week one of our grantee partners in St. Louis shared a story of their work that was such a deep demonstration of identity in Christ and following in his way. So, while we lament how Christ’s words and the words of his followers have been twisted and abused, I also want to lift up a story that exemplifies how Jesus calls us back, like Peter, and reminds us of our identity in him and what that looks like.

Our partner, Intersect Arts Center, engages youth, adults, elderly, artists, congregants, educators and activists to connect art and community, creating a collective expression of identity and belonging between a diverse intersection of people. They do this through a variety of programs, but our grant supported Sarah Bernhardt, their Executive Director, in expanding their program, Camp Resolve, which helps youth learn and practice conflict resolution skills through arts programming. Many of these youth live in poverty and need productive avenues for dealing with trauma and violence. Last summer, Sarah shared the story of D., an 8<sup>th</sup> grade boy who participated in Camp Resolve and their project of creating a music video called, “Walk Away.” Since camp he continued to stop by Intersect and Holy Cross Church, which is a partner with Intersect and right next door, to talk with Pastor Bob and debrief his day. On one of those days, he said, “Hey, I want to say Thanks! Remember that camp we did and that video we made? Well, today there was a guy at my school who kept messing with me. He kept getting in my face and saying terrible things to try to start something. I wanted to punch him so bad! But, then I remembered Walk Away and I did! Thank you! Thank you! I didn’t get suspended today.” Recently, Sarah told us the continuation of D.’s story. “He stayed with us. He worshipped with us. He made art with us. Talked and laughed and cried with us. He was remarkable and we all thought ‘He has a chance to defy the odds.’ We all encouraged him and surrounded him and loved him. Some time later we noticed him starting to look a bit unkempt and tired. One morning we found him sleeping on the porch of our offices. He’d been kicked out of home a few weeks prior because his mom didn’t want him attending church. He was participating in our teen apprenticeship program and was struggling to keep up with his weekly hours. The brakes went out on his bike and he couldn’t get to class or work. He was hungry and he was tired. Soon we got a phone call from the city department of corrections. He had been arrested with a group of boys for an armed carjacking. We were all reeling and so very sad. We thought, ‘Even with all our efforts, with all our energy, with all of our love.’ Pastor Bob visited him relentlessly in jail for the next five months. He reminded him that God had not walked away from him, and neither had we. This was a fight, a non-violent fight for his life, and we were all-in. Artists sent him sketchbooks and assignments to keep him busy. Church members sent him letters and prayers of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

encouragement. He spent most of his time in solitary, for his safety, as a witness in the case. He felt so alone. Then, on the day of his bond hearing, 25 people showed up. Artists and congregants. People you could never imagine fighting side by side for a unified cause. The judge said he'd never seen so much support for young black man. The day he got out he asked to be confirmed in the congregation. What a beautiful party. 200 people from all walks of life eating and sharing and supporting one another. This is what relationship looks like. What community looks like. What conflict resolution looks like, commitment looks like. This is what failure and success looks like. This is what love looks like."

Yes, I'll echo Sarah in saying, "this is what love looks like" and acts like as well. I'll add to Sarah's words, "This is what church looks like. What discipleship looks like." This is what we're called to do. Who we are called to be.

Jesus calls to us again and again. Reminds us who we are. Follow me. For us who do the work of justice, advocating for rights, caring for their community and are tired and burned out. For us who proclaim the love of Jesus in our hearts and in our words, but are dulled by the everyday tasks of life. For us who are beaten down by oppression, who are hungry and traumatized and waiting and wondering for a word of hope. For all of us. Jesus knows us, claims us and calls us out. In our baptism we are joined in God's mission for the life of the world. In communion, we are fed with God's grace. In confirmation, like in D.'s story, we affirm our faith and commitment to what love looks like in the world. In the work of building understanding across divisions, we embrace Christ in our midst. We know we'll have times of feeling lost, of not knowing our next steps or feeling overburdened with pain, but we know that as the Psalmist proclaims, "joy comes in the morning." That in those brief moments when the shroud is lifted and we can see Jesus in our midst, we'll jump into the sea like Peter, ready to be by his side. We'll say with Peter three times and as many more to make it complete, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." We'll stretch out our hands and let Jesus take us where we know it is hard to go. Jesus says to us all, "Follow me" and we know that our true purpose is found in him and following in his way.