

Back to Normal?

John 21:1-19

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (May 3) 2020

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*Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

- James Baldwin

Sooner or later we reach the place where we want to return to normal. Too much change, too much different, too much topsy-turvy, and all too fast. It is exhausting paying attention to things that we used to never think about. What's safe? Do we really need to go out? And if we go out, how can we be safe? We get back behind closed doors and we're tired. At the same time, we miss our friends and we miss our old familiar routines. We want to return to normal.

That's what Peter and the other disciples were thinking. For three years they had dropped everything of their old lives and followed Jesus. They had followed him all over the place, worked hard to get him elected, and finally ran head-on with the big-time preachers and politicians in Jerusalem. The result was that Jesus was lynched, and the disciples were scattered.

The night Jesus was arrested Peter remembers that it was touch and go whether or not all of them would be arrested, and possibly tortured. He even had to do some fast talking and come up with a cover story to escape that night by a charcoal fire outside the gate. He played like he didn't know Jesus which allowed him to survive. But Jesus did not survive.

Peter thought, “But that’s all water under the bridge, because Jesus is alive. I had to do what I had to do. I didn’t have a choice but to deny him. And now that he’s alive ... well, that’s good. The election failed, the campaign is over, and I’ve got to make a living, so I’m going home to the fishing business. Truth is, I don’t know what got into me. I thought Jesus was going to change the world and I thought I was going to help. At least, I thought we could get some good legislation passed. But I was wrong. And I’m tired and I’m going back to normal.”

John tells us that Peter and some of the other disciples are back fishing. It is early morning. Still dark. (Which should tell us something in John.) and they don’t catch a thing. About daybreak, while the light is dawning, they notice someone on shore by a fire, who yells at them to try fishing on the other side of the boat. They do and they catch more fish than they’ve ever caught before. Peter realizes the figure on shore by the fire, is the Lord and so he just plunges into the water not waiting on the others. He finds Jesus grilling fish and Jesus invites Peter and the rest, when they get ashore, to join him in a meal. (Funny how Jesus keeps showing up every time a meal is involved.)

Sitting by the fire, sharing a meal, the excitement dies down and Peter begins to think. Here he is by another charcoal fire. The last charcoal fire he was beside was the night he had denied knowing Jesus. Here he is sharing a meal with Jesus. The last meal he had with Jesus was the night Jesus was betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, and abandoned by everyone else.

If that wasn’t enough, while the other disciples are busy counting their catch, Jesus starts talking directly to Peter, asking him three times, “Do you love me?” and three times saying, “Feed my sheep.”

Why can't Jesus leave well enough alone. We just want to be normal fishermen, doing our job, like it used to be. But Jesus keeps showing up. And why can't Jesus leave me alone? He keeps calling me, keeps challenging me, keeps confronting me. I thought his being alive was enough. I thought that meant everything worked out and I don't have to face my failures. I don't have to face my denials. I thought Jesus was just about giving me comfort when I face death, but this resurrected and living Lord means he won't leave me alone.

There is the story of Mother Theresa of Calcutta who went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, the legendary Washington criminal lawyer. He was a powerful lawyer, who at one time owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles and he was the lawyer for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, among others. Mother Theresa came to see him to ask for money for an AIDS hospice she was running.

Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." They agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no.

Well, Mother Theresa arrived. It was as if she was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no."

Mother Theresa said simply, “Let us pray.” Williams looked at Dietrich; they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice.

Again, Williams politely said no.

Mother Theresa said, “Let us pray.”

Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, “All right, all right, get me my checkbook!”

Mother Theresa was a follower of the living Jesus, from whom she had learned that God does not give up. Easter is the story of how God in Christ keeps seeking us, keeps calling us, keeps searching for us until finding us.

God in Christ is the Good Shepherd who does not sit back and wait for the lost sheep to eventually find their way back home. The Good Shepherd goes out, risks everything, beats the bushes night and day, who perseveres until that lost sheep is found.

And the living God doesn't just find us but calls us to face ourselves and face our failures, denials, and betrayals. As James Baldwin reminded us at the beginning of the service, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” The Living Christ searches for us, comes to us, so we might face the truth of who we are and what we do so change can begin to happen.

Much of White Christian America wants to go back to the way “it used to be” or, at least, the way they/we think it used to be. So we vote for nostalgia. We vote for normalcy. We build walls, suppress voting, and support politicians who promise us that we can be great again.

This is why we listen to one another. Because we believe that one of the ways the risen Christ speaks to us is through one another. We listen to our LGBTQ sisters and brothers in this church. Those of us who are white listen to our sister and brother church members who are people of color and why we will eventually return to our partnership and fellowship with Zion Hill First Baptist Church and Iron Wheel Baptist Church – so we can hear through them the resurrected Lord calling us to face who we are and who we are not, to face our racism and injustice. So we can hear Christ saying, “If you love me, feed my sheep. And come follow me.”

The Living Christ calls us to keep on following. Not backward to the good old days. Not back to normal. But following Him into the future he has for us.

For now, we stay safe in quarantine, we pray, we read Scripture, we deepen our lives in Christ. And we eat this meal the Living Christ has prepared for us. Eat heartily and drink deeply because we’re going to need the nourishment.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.