

## **Sunday May 4 2025 Sermon: John 21:1-19 – Feed My Sheep**

The gospel of John's story of Jesus addressing the disciples as they fish and later as they sit for breakfast is the third time Jesus appears to his disciples since his resurrection. Jesus appeared to the disciples three days after his death. He appeared to the disciples in the upper room when the disciples hid fearful for their own lives, and now Jesus appears on the beach.

If we take a closer look at our gospels what we like when Jesus meets the disciples at the Sea today, Jesus met the first disciples before his death also as they were fishing, and he provides many fish for them. They too dropped their catch and their nets accepting the invitation to "Follow Me. We will fish for people." The first call of the disciples took place from a seaside too. The disciples then followed Jesus faithfully watching him perform miracles and healing people. He told parables as the Teacher. The Son of Man became their hero. That is of course, to all but one. After Jesus proclaimed Peter to be the rock on which the future church would stand, Peter wanted nothing of it and rebuked Jesus. Jesus said get behind me Satan. Jesus was foreshadowing his upcoming persecution and death. We know Peter denies Jesus three times before Jesus is crucified. The disciples were confused. For their own fear of persecution, they began to part ways with Jesus. Jesus had predicted this, and Peter wanted to hear nothing of it. Jesus died and then rose again and THAT is where our story begins today.

As it turns out, the disciples are not much better at fishing than they were at discipleship. If you were here last Sunday, you heard of Jesus returning to his despondent, discouraged, frightened disciples as they cowered behind locked doors. He fully revealed his resurrected, triumphant self to them. Proof of the resurrection!

Well, not exactly. Here they are, even after that dramatic appearance, back to the ordinary, everyday tasks they were performing before they met Jesus. Their empty nets must have seemed to them like a symbol for just how they felt. Empty. Failures. Defeated.

The failures of Peter, lead disciple, can be taken as an image of all their failures. Peter had promised to remain steadfast and to stand with Jesus, even

when the going got rough. You know how long Peter's declaration of fidelity lasted. Peter denied Jesus three times and broke into tears because he couldn't make good on his declaration.

The disciples still don't get it, still fail to believe their eyes when the risen Christ stands before them, still fall away and resume their lives before they had met Jesus.

"I knew I was no good as a missionary," one of them must have mumbled.

"I told Jesus that I was an introvert and didn't like talking with others about spiritual matters."

"I wanted to stand up for Jesus, but when I saw those soldiers and their swords, well, who wouldn't have cut and run?" said another.

And how does Jesus respond to these discipleship failures? He returns to them. Goes to where they are. Shows up to them, not in a service at the Temple, but while they are fishing (not "catching," but "fishing").

Jesus speaks directly to Peter whose failure to live up to his commitments is most striking. And what does Jesus say to Peter?

"Let me apologize for calling you to follow me in the first place. I misjudged your capabilities. Sorry. Fishing is a better fit for you than discipleship."

No! Jesus goes to Peter and re-calls him. Even though Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus will not deny him. Three times Jesus calls him to love him and then Jesus gives Peter a job to do. Feed my beloved flock. Care for the ones I care for so much that I was willing to die for them.

Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" It's an appropriate question to put to a person who has publicly declared his love and yet three times, when the going got rough, failed to live up to his promise to love.

And yet, here on the beach, three times Peter answers, "Yes! Yes! Yes I love you!"

Is there anything these disciples can do to convince Jesus that they are not the most steadfast of followers, anything they can do to show that they just don't get it, fail to believe, fail to see Jesus right in front of them?

No. It appears there's no betrayal, no failure that they can commit that can keep Jesus from returning to them, speaking to them, revealing himself to them and assigning them work to do for him.

We began this journey with Jesus, with Jesus's command, or invitation, "Follow me!" We now see that we end this journey (or is it really a new beginning?) with Jesus hearing Jesus say to Peter, even amid all of his disappointments and failures to follow, "Follow me!"

Jesus, it appears, refuses to let us let our failures have the last word on our relationship with him. He comes to us.

The risen Christ appears. He not only appears to us, but he also calls to us. He assigns us his work to do. "Feed my sheep" could be interpreted in a number of ways. I think that's how Christ's vocation is. What he expects you to do varies with each of us but each of us is here under his invitation, his command, "Follow me!"

I hope that in your times of failure, when you aren't the follower of Jesus you intend to be. When believing in Jesus is difficult for you, or when you are disappointed by the results of your labors, or facing some failure in your own ministry, that you will remember this story, this post-Easter story and take heart.

Our failure does not negate his vocation. Even in our failures to follow, he keeps showing up to us in our ordinary lives, he keeps encouraging us, and keeps saying to us, even us, "Follow me!"

Therein is our hope. So, my sermon this Sunday is not for those of you who have had no trouble staying close to Christ, or those of you for whom sure and firm belief in Christ comes easily. I'm not sure that John's Gospel wants to reassure those of you for whom the idea of the resurrected Christ makes complete sense to you.

Today's word is for the stumblers, the bunglers, doubters and failures. And it's a word of good news. When you fail to live up to your intentions and expectations, when you feel you've disappointed yourself and the Lord, be especially vigilant. In the dark, just before dawn, that's when Jesus loves to show up to those who've had difficulty sticking with him. Amen.