

**What's Your Type:
Discipleship According to John's Gospel**

John 21:15-17, 19b-22

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“Feed my sheep...”

John 21:20

Prayer of Preparation

O God, may we receive your Word of life in Christ and so share that Word with others in the power of your Spirit. Amen.

Message

This summer I did something I normally don't do, I attended a high school reunion, my 40th High School Class Reunion, to be exact. I make that statement because I have not attended a reunion in over thirty years, and I have not found it necessary to do so. However, when I agreed to help plan it, I felt that I needed to be there.

It was a good experience. I didn't know what to expect. So much has happened over 40 years. In a class of 175, twenty-five people have now died. Still others have “made it” quite well in the world.

At the reunion, we inevitably talked about the good old days, of course. “Hey, do you remember when we did such and such in the cafeteria?” “Do you remember the time when we got caught doing such and such to Mr. Blubaum?”

I don't know if you attend reunions. Family reunions. Army reunions. College reunions. They remind us that history doesn't stop, and that, for whatever reason, we have shared a common experience with others.

Reunion on the Beach

If we want to understand our passage today, we will want to keep the notion of reunion in mind. We will want to see how followers of Jesus in John's Gospel are always on the way of reconnecting or reuniting with God.

In today's gospel lesson, for example, the disciples are on the side of the lake following the resurrection. They are returning to what they had done before Jesus had called them and so disrupted their lives – they're fishing! Even though Jesus had breathed on them the Holy Spirit and had sent them into the world to witness to the gospel (20:21-22), there is a disconnect: the response of these disciples to the cross and resurrection is one of disbelief, doubt, and a determination to get back to normal, or to life before Jesus.¹

Indeed, while they are on the beach, you can almost overhear them saying something like, "Well, it was a good campaign while it lasted. We didn't get Jesus elected Messiah, but the road trips were fun. The preaching, the healing, the exorcisms – they were good; now let's go fishing."

"Sure, let's go. Let's get together and remember the good old days."

"Yeah, like a reunion for Veterans of the Jesus Campaign."

But then a stranger calls out, "Caught any fish?"

"No."

Those who weren't good at discipling are not much better at fishing!

The stranger gives them some fishing advice, comes ashore, and then kindles a fire for breakfast. Peter is the first to figure out that the stranger is none other than Jesus himself. He's back, true to form. He has returned to the same group of people who so disappointed him in the first place. He is back, doing what he did before his death: he is inviting them to unite with him at the table, taking and blessing, and then breaking and giving bread. Communion. Reunion.²

¹ See William H. Willimon's sermon "Reunion Sunday" at Duke Chapel on April 18, 2010.

² Ibid.

But there is more: the Risen Christ doesn't just come back; as usual, he enlists, summons, and commands the disciples. He says, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." In fact, three times he tells them, especially Peter: "Love me by feeding my sheep." And like a grade schoolteacher reminding the kids of an important assignment, he repeats the point three times to make sure they "get it." After all, he's worked these folks before; he knows they are slow learners.³

Indeed, it was Peter who had denied Jesus three times (18:15-18); do you remember? Now Peter declares his love three times.

On the beach, on Monday morning, following the resurrection, there is reunion, unsought, unexpected, maybe even unwanted.⁴

John's Type of Disciple

Again, if you want to know what it means to follow Jesus in John's Gospel, keep that word *reunion* in mind. Keep the word communion in mind too, along with the words abide, glory, love, hour, cross, suffering, eternal life, bread of life, abundant life, vine, branches, sheep, good shepherd, resurrection. If you want to know what discipleship is about in John's Gospel, remember that it has to do with *intimacy*, or with *communion*, with *one-on-one* encounters with God's Son, with Jesus as teacher-mentor, provider, or helper.

Remember that it is in John's Gospel that we see Nicodemus at night, one on one with Jesus. We read of Jesus' one-on one meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well, and his encounter with a woman caught in adultery, and Jesus one on-one with Pontius Pilate before his crucifixion, and one on one with his beloved disciple. It is Jesus with his mother at Cana of Galilee. Of course, Jesus is with others, but notice how many times he is with people individually sharing what is important.

That is why when you read John's Gospel, you will want to note that this is not a Gospel for those who want to remain on the surface with their commitment to Christ. The love that Jesus and the Father share in the Spirit is intimate, real, deep; they abide in each other (15:4). It is the kind of relationship Christ has with his

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

disciples and with the people he meets – intimate, close; it is the kind of relationships the disciples are to have with each other as well (15:3-6).

After all, in John's Gospel, Jesus teaches a new commandment – to love one another, even to the point of taking off a towel and washing others' feet (13:1-15). How much more intimate and vulnerable does it get than that? Greater love has no one than this, that they would lay down their life for their friend (15:13). In John's Gospel, Jesus wants to see the church burning with love. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus speaks of love of God and neighbor. Here, Jesus is speaking to how the disciples are to love each other (13:13). There is overlap, of course, but we must not miss the point that Jesus creates a community of forgiveness among his disciples, among his friends, a community of reunion.

It all goes back to that word love, or in Greek, to *agape*. What's the verse? "For God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (3:16). God's love is all giving, for God is love (1 John 4:8). God is *agape*, or *self-giving love*.

Jesus is God's Word of *agape* made flesh, for the whole world, walking and teaching among us. As disciples in John's Gospel, we learn that Jesus is the *Great I Am*. He teaches us who he is as love in action – as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (1:37), as the bread of life (6:35), as the light of the world (8:12), as the gate of the sheep (10:7-9), as the way, the truth, and the life (14:6).

Indeed, Jesus is the resurrection and the life (11:25). When he goes to the tomb of Lazarus, for instance, we learn what Christianity is all about – death and resurrection. It is about eternal life, not just in the future but now in the present. We learn that whatever is keeping us entombed, Jesus can open it and raise it to new life. He always has ways of coming to us at the right time – maybe not when we thought, but always faithful.

Mary and Martha learn this when they grieve their brother Lazarus' death. They are distraught. They wanted Jesus to come immediately (11:1-44). But Jesus is too. He weeps (11:35). But he also raises Lazarus to new life. It is a story we have heard before in the Bible: just as God brought Israel back from the valley of dry bones in exile, God brings Lazarus back from death too (Ez. 37:1-8). This is

the promise of Jesus' presence with us. Even in this intense moment of separation, there is teaching, comforting, reconnecting.

Reflection

I know over the past two years we have had our moments of intensity in disruption and separation, haven't we?

No, the temple has not been destroyed, but what we knew as normal has shifted. We are learning to cast our nets differently now, which can be incredibly frustrating and confusing, sometimes overwhelming; this is especially true when we lose loved ones or feel isolated or exhausted.

I know on a personal level this loss. In October, two of my closest friends and mentors died within three weeks of each other. One, Billy Abraham, spoke here several years ago. The other, Andrew Walker, fought Parkinson's a long time. The loss to the church has been enormous. The personal ache lingers.

And yet, this matter of loss goes to the heart of John's Gospel: to death and resurrection. It goes to what Jesus says, "When a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it will bear much fruit" (12:24). Even in Jesus' death, there is the promise of more life to come! Even when we think all is lost, there is hope for abundant life (10:10).

It echoes what Jesus teaches about the vine and the branches: when God prunes the branches on the vine, there is an experience of pain and loss, even though there is fruit; God prunes the vine for there to be more fruit. But the branches that are not bearing fruit God throws out (15:1-11).⁵

Indeed, I can't help but wonder if God is now pruning the churches and that COVID has been the way God is doing it. I mean, from where I sit, I see healthy branches bearing more fruit than ever before, even when pruned; there is hope; but the branches not bearing fruit are no longer part of the Vine. A reminder that at the heart of being a disciple is the bearing of fruit (John 15:1-11).

Of course, one of the ways we bear fruit, as Jesus says in our passage, is to feed his sheep, to take time to relate to others in ways that are close and intimate; to teach, to love. In Jesus' day, of course, feeding sheep meant taking them from one place to the next often in dangerous terrain. There were no fences, and the

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 114.

sheep often wandered off. Feeding sheep involved risk, even danger, in making sure the flock stayed together.

Disciples in John's Gospel know such risk in following Jesus. It is why a Johannine type of disciple is always receptive to learning more from others, from a Matthean type or a Markan type, for example. All true disciples know they are sheep in need of a shepherd who can lead them and teach them. They know that all devotion goes back to the Good Shepherd anyway, to the One who called them by name in the first place (10:27) and who laid down their life for them (10:15).

I feel this is one of the reasons Jesus always finds ways of reuniting himself to us as his sheep. The One we deserted and denied and disappointed will always find ways of returning to forgive us, of bringing us together and reminding us of who we are – regardless of our type.

When Jesus does, we learn something: we learn the reason God has created us is for reunion, for communion, and we learn what those words always entail when Jesus says to us again, "Follow me." Amen.