

Communion Without Comparison

Easter Season Series on Discipleship Week 3

John 21:18-24

May 19, 2019

We've been talking the last two weeks about Peter, but I want to start out by asking you a question about John. What do you make of John calling himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved"??? Six times in the book of John the gospel writer refers to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loves, but this term isn't used in any of the other gospels at all. When John calls himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved", or "the beloved disciple", I'm sure John doesn't mean that Jesus didn't love the other disciples. But we get the sense reading John's gospel that he and Jesus had a special bond.

I wonder then, how it felt for John to have Jesus pay such special attention to Peter on the beach after the amazing catch of 153 fish and having breakfast together. Why was *Peter* being singled out for commissioning? Peter had denied knowing Jesus on the night Jesus was arrested. John had never denied Jesus. Peter wasn't there at Golgotha when Jesus was crucified. The only male disciple present was John. John was the one whom Jesus picked to be his mother's replacement son. It was John who took Mary into his home and took care of her. John was the beloved disciple! But it wasn't John who was specifically called to lead the Church. That job would go to Simon Peter. He would be the rock upon which the Christian church would be built.

If John had any questions about whether Peter was deserving of all this, hearing that Peter would die for his faith probably calmed him down. Jesus' words implied that John would at least get to live a long time—which led to rumors that John would not die until Christ came back, which the early church expected to happen relatively soon. As my friend Walter says, "Everyone gets a different deal." Some people get to live long, healthy lives; some people's lives end many years too soon.

Everyone gets a different deal. Some people are called to serve as clergy; some as laity. Some are called to serve nearby; some are called to go abroad. Peter was called to be a shepherd; John was called to be an evangelist and writer. We each have a unique calling and role in the body. The question, though, for all of us is: do we have what it takes to fulfill our individual callings? Do we have what it takes to obey Jesus' command to follow him every single day of our lives, no matter how long or short they may be? Do we have what it takes, in the words of Rocky, to "go the distance?"

I suppose in some ways that question doesn't matter at all. We walk by faith, not by sight, taking one faithful step at a time. If we concentrate on following Jesus one step at a time, we don't have to worry at all about whether or not we have what it takes to go the distance, to be faithful to the end. All we need is enough energy, courage and

commitment to follow one step at a time. Perhaps that is why this passage is not included in the Revised Common Lectionary, which is the 3-year cycle of scripture lessons endorsed by most Protestant churches in the English-speaking world. For most people in English speaking countries, there is little worry about persecution, let alone martyrdom. We might not get to live to be a hundred, but it is very unlikely we will die because of our faith in Jesus.

Not so, though, for people in the early church. Jesus predicted that Peter would die because of his faith. Jesus said he would be carried off to a place not of his own choosing, which most interpreters think was an indication that Peter would be crucified. In fact, we have non-scriptural accounts that Peter was indeed crucified, in or around the year 64, in Rome by the crazed Emperor Nero. There had been a great fire in Rome, which Nero blamed on the Christians, and in retaliation, he had them killed in all sorts of bizarre and brutal ways. There is evidence that Peter was crucified upside-down, perhaps because he did not count himself worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus.

In our scripture lesson today, Peter hears Jesus' prediction, that he will be carried to his death by his enemies—and right after that, Jesus says, "Follow me." I am amazed at Peter's response. He doesn't boast about being faithful like he did when Jesus predicted his own death. He also doesn't question whether or not he will be able to withstand the pressure. Perhaps because Jesus has restored and redeemed him, Peter no longer questions his ability to be loyal. He knows he will be, in the words of the old hymn, truehearted, wholehearted, faithful and loyal. What he does wonder about, though, is what will happen to John. He does not say, "Lord, are you crazy, telling me to follow you, right after telling me I am going to die if I do what you say? I can't do that!" Instead, Peter wants to know what is going to happen to John. Is the disciple "whom Jesus loved" going to die for his faith, too?

Jesus' answer to that question is, basically, Peter, it's none of your business what happens to John. In other words, "Mind your own beeswax." Or as my mother would say, "You just worry about yourself." But isn't it just like us to wonder and compare? If we're going to get something good, we'd like whatever we get to be better than whatever everyone else gets. And if we're going to get something bad, we don't want to be the only one suffering. Misery loves company!

But again, as my friend Walter says, "Everyone gets a different deal." The number of days allotted to us, the health with which we get to enjoy those days, the circumstances of our lives—much of that is out of our control, and varies widely from place to place and person to person. Instead of worrying about what someone else has or doesn't have, or more accurately, what we have relative to what others have or don't have, our primary concern should be on our own righteousness. Our task is to stay true to what Howard Thurman calls the genuine within ourselves. To walk by faith, the path that Jesus lays for us individually, in peace and joy and contentment. For Peter, that meant martyrdom. For John, that meant living a long, long time and getting to write a gospel about his experiences.

Can you imagine being Peter, and hearing that you are going to be crucified, and deciding to follow Jesus anyway? As I was thinking about that this week, I remembered something about my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Arnold. One day he wore a short sleeve shirt and I noticed a tattoo on his upper arm. I asked him about it at recess, and he explained that it was a tattoo of the emblem for being a paratrooper. I didn't know what a paratrooper was and couldn't believe it when he told me he jumped out of perfectly good airplanes behind enemy lines in Vietnam. "Weren't you scared?" I asked. He said he was, but he was willing to do it because it was a cause he believed in. My guess is Peter was scared, too. But he was willing to follow Jesus because the gospel was a mission he believed in.

Years later, I met another man who was a paratrooper in Vietnam. He too enlisted because the mission was important to him. What he didn't anticipate was how upset it would make his mom. When he came home from the recruiter, he thought she'd be proud. Instead, she was so angry she didn't talk to him for three weeks. She was afraid for him and herself. We can certainly see how that would be. I wonder how Mrs. Simon Peter reacted to the news that her husband was going to follow Jesus even though it was not going to end well.

If we could have our druthers, I think all of us would say that long life is important. Physical health is important. Relationships are important. But to disciples, nothing is as important as the *mission* that Christ calls us to. Nothing is as important to disciples as deepening their relationship with Jesus so we can faithfully follow where he leads. That's part of the reason Jesus told Peter not to worry about what was going to happen to John. It sounds harsh to hear Jesus say, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." But that is the essence of discipleship: orbiting our lives around Jesus, prioritizing our relationship with him, and following no matter what the cost.

This is not new information for any of us. But I wanted to talk about it today because all of us are prone to straying off course, and collectively, churches are very prone to straying off course. If we are not careful, churches allow their lives to orbit around what the traditions they have long held dear, or what programs they offer, or even around the pastor. I don't think anyone ever means for this to happen. It's just easier to organize ourselves around something we can see rather than the Jesus whose presence and leading is not always easy to discern. But Jesus never told any of us to follow John Wesley, or to follow our Sunday school teacher, or to follow a particular denomination or theologian. We are all called to follow Jesus Christ. We are all called to follow, knowing there are special spiritual blessings that come with faithfulness—but also knowing there are sacrifices, too. We follow because we believe in the mission. That's what makes us Christians, little Christs.

Last week we talked about being disciples whose lives match with the meaning of our name. Peter's name in Greek literally means little rock. Since we are all spiritual descendants of Peter, we are all called to feed God's sheep and tend God's flock. We are all called to be servants, building blocks, in the kingdom of God. But we are also spiritual descendants of John. Do you think we too can call ourselves "the disciples whom Jesus loves"? Are we people who are cultivating a special bond with Christ? You know, it may very well be that there were other disciples who thought they were special to Jesus,

too. What difference would it make in your life if you claimed the name John, and committed yourself to following Jesus because Jesus loves you? What would you do with the power that comes from knowing you are beloved?

This week I talked with a clergy colleague who has been serving a small church in Springfield in her retirement. A few weeks ago, that small church, CC Hancock, closed. I should have done this weeks ago, but this week I emailed her to see if there was a way Lima could provide a special welcome to the displaced members of her church. She said they had decided to come as a group to Lima today. There might be a few at the 9:45 service but she thought mostly they would come at 11.

I don't know how many of you have ever been through it, but it is very painful when your church closes. It takes a lot of courage to start looking for a new church. It takes knowing you are beloved. Knowing you are the disciple Jesus loves, and knowing that you having a spiritual home really matters to Jesus. It takes trust. It takes believing in the mission. The Hancock folks are coming to Lima to see what we have to offer to them. But I think as they come, they are offering something to us. They are giving us a witness, a living example of people who, one step at a time, are trying to follow Christ—even though it's hard, even though there's loss, even though there's pain along the journey.

The apostle Paul wrote, "We walk by faith, not by sight." We don't know where that journey will take us. Our eyes of faith can usually only see Jesus leading one step at a time. But with each faithful step we are putting ourselves on track to go the distance. Everyone gets a different deal, but we don't walk by fate. When we believe in the mission, and know ourselves to be beloved, we can walk by faith our unique callings as disciples, all to the glory of God. Amen.