

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

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 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: John 21:1-19

Introduction

In my short time here as your interim director of administration, I have come to appreciate the dedication and love members have for their church. I’ve also come to understand the anxiety and uncertainty that comes naturally from a lengthy pastoral vacancy, staff turnover, membership decline, and a change in governance. That’s why the gospel lesson for today comes at such an appropriate time.

The followers of John, the Johannine community, from which this Bible account was written sometime around 90 A.D., was also under stress and anxiety. This cluster of congregations in Asia Minor was increasingly experiencing tension with their neighboring Jews. Their strong emphasis on Jesus as Messiah put them at odds with others. They had to wonder what Jesus had in store for them, how they were to follow him, and who would now lead them. They were stressed and anxious.

The disciples in the Gospel account were anxious, uncertain, and confused, too. I suppose it is human nature in times of stress to do those things which are most familiar. Seven of the disciples returned home and went back to work – fishing. After toiling most of the night, they did not find much success. But then, early in the morning, from a distance, someone yells out to them to put down their nets on the other side of the boat. A ridiculous suggestion to veteran fishermen. But was it that much different than the command Peter and his cohorts received three years earlier when Jesus first called them to be disciples?

And now, there he was again, on the beach, offering them fellowship in a kind of Eucharistic meal – fish and bread prepared and shared. Not the bitter herbs of disappointment over their having abandoned him, but loving acceptance of their humanness. In a breakfast meal he gave himself to them, yet again, and in so doing restored their relationship.

For Peter, the circle is about to be completed. From the charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest to a charcoal fire on the beach. From a three-fold denial to a three-fold restoration to a three-fold repurposing. Peter’s arrogance is gone, replaced by humility. When Jesus asks Peter if he loves (agape) him more than anything else, he can only say, I’m not capable of loving you the way you deserve, the way I want to love you. You know that I love you (phileo) in only the imperfect way I can. And Jesus, in his last question, essentially says, Hey, Peter, it’s OK, do you love (phileo) me? I know you do.

Jesus restores them and moves Peter and the disciples from anxious fear and self-pity to other-directed purpose: feed my sheep, feed my lambs, tend my sheep.

And to make sure they see the completion of this transformation, he says “follow me,” echoing the words he had spoken to them three years previously when he first called them to be his disciples. From the first “follow me” to the last “follow me” – discipleship is restored and redirected. Their anxiety and their fears and their insecurities are transformed into purposeful service.

So what? How can we apply this lesson?

In the context of Bethel Lutheran Church, two questions came to my mind as I studied this text. The first question I’d like to ask is, **“Who are these sheep and lambs that Jesus said should be fed and tended?”** For the disciples, was it people just like themselves? Well, certainly they weren’t to exclude them. But if you explore how the disciples interpreted this command through their actions described in the Book of Acts, you will discover that sheep and lambs included everybody in “the world” that God so loved.

Earlier in the 10th chapter of this Gospel, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock and one shepherd.” Jesus calls us to serve others and to seek and encourage oneness with them, with Jesus and with the father.

Bethel is positioned to reach the other. Yes, the other can mean fellow educated middle and upper-class white folk of Northern European descent. But Bethel is also positioned to reach others who aren’t just like us. They may be millennials, gen-x, y, or z; the others may be Asian, Hispanic, African, Indigenous, or Transylvanian; they are the transgendered, lesbian, gay, queer or bisexual; wealthy or impoverished; tattooed and pierced or not; abled or disabled; urbanite, suburbanite or homeless; professional or laborer or unemployed; and yes, even university professors. All are the sheep and lambs – the others – we are called to feed and tend.

At Bethel, you already feed the homeless. How can you tend to them further? Can you help them overcome their homelessness to find work, housing, health care, a welcoming faith community? Looking around at these many white faces, how can you become more welcoming to people of other colors and ethnicities? The age demographic of Bethel skews heavily toward older adults. How can Bethel serve a younger population? What does Bethel today choose to look like five years, ten years, fifteen years in the future as it strives to serve the other? The possibilities are exciting to consider.

The second question I’d like you to think about is, **“What does it mean to follow Jesus?”** In only a few recorded instances will you find Jesus telling people to “believe him,” and even then, it is usually in the context of trusting that he could heal. There are dozens of instances in the Bible, however, in which Jesus tells people to “follow him.”

I have come to believe that following Jesus means much more than thinking correctly about Jesus, about believing the right doctrinal teachings, and certainly more than belonging to the right denomination. If my salvation depends upon my cognitive understanding and acceptance of information about God – well, that would be a pretty small god.

Luther defined faith as “right thinking of the heart about God.” What? An affective experiencing of God trumps head knowledge about God? Makes you think doesn’t it. How do we experience God? How do we grow in awareness of his loving presence? Certainly, we encounter him in worship, in the Scriptures, in sacraments. But how often do we miss his presence in nature and in other people? Has thinking God is out there somewhere limited our ability to experience God’s grace in here at the deepest levels of human relationship? Or do we follow Jesus with our heads only?

I would like to suggest that the prerequisite to following Jesus is to die before we die. Luther explained that we are buried with Christ by baptism into death, that even as he was raised from death by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. Jesus said in Matthew 16 “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” By that, he means we are to sacrifice our ego, our self-importance, our willfulness, our thoughts and ideas, and align our hearts and our minds with the love and will of God. Peter is a great example of how transformation can only begin by hitting the rock bottom of self-inflicted trauma and ego-deflation.

How do we die before we die? Well, I’d suggest that we do what Jesus often did – spend time in earnest prayer and meditation, striving to improve your awareness of God’s presence in your heart and in your life. And then, once you have subordinated your life and your will to God, opportunities to “follow Jesus” will present themselves everywhere. Jesus said, “feed my sheep,” “feed my lambs,” and “tend my sheep.” Focusing on the spiritual, emotional, material needs of others is the way we are to follow Jesus. Who these lambs and sheep are doesn’t matter – all that matters is that they are not you. Ultimately, the reason each of us is on the planet is to love and serve others. That’s following Jesus.

Now what?

Bethel has gone through a time of testing and trauma. An extended vacancy. Staff turnover, reorganization. These can all cause feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. But through this trauma, God has been working to effect transformation. More members are involved in leadership than ever before. And now, prayers have been answered and a new lead pastor will be joining Bethel at the end of this month. Having had numerous conversations with Pastor Brown, I know that he has very clear answers to the questions I posed. You will find him to be an optimistic agent of change who will challenge you to walk along-side him in new and different ways as together you follow Jesus.

From trauma to transformation. From self to others. From anxiety to certainty. These are the changes that God has in store for this congregation as it journeys into a new future. I pray that God will help you receive your new pastor with willingness and open-mindedness as together you seek and follow Jesus. Amen.