

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
May 1, 2022

Return to Your Call

John 21:15-25

One woman tells of how her family has a close friendship with another family in their congregation. They often spend Sunday afternoons relaxing together. Once, when she phoned their friends, their 4-year-old daughter, Alicia, answered and politely asked who was calling. To tease her, she said kiddingly, "Alicia, you come to my house almost every Sunday and you don't know who I am?" In a reverential voice, she replied breathlessly, "Jesus?"

One of the reasons we come together for worship each Sunday is to hear again the call of Jesus. Last week, I emphasized the way that every Sunday is actually a commemoration of Easter, a celebration of the resurrection, an encounter with our risen Lord. And Easter reminds us that the voice of Christ has not gone silent. In his aliveness, he still speaks, addresses us, calls us.

"Good morning! Did you catch anything for breakfast?"¹ Those are the first words out of Christ's mouth in the passage right before today's text. It's a joyous story of how Jesus turns scarcity into abundance. His presence takes the disciples' empty nets and fills them with more fish than they can handle. This fishing miracle stirs recollections of what Jesus did by turning the water into wine and by feeding the five thousand, confirming the testimony at the beginning of John's Gospel: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (1:16, NRSV).

God's gift of life through Christ is just as available after the resurrection as it was before the cross and empty tomb. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus' ministry was inaugurated with a miracle of abundance. And now, as the church's ministry gets underway, there's another miraculous act of fullness. Whether in the form of wine or fish, when Jesus shows up and speaks, life starts to fill and overflow, pressing against the boundaries of what's expected.

At the beginning of the story, it's pretty clear what the disciples are expecting. If Peter is any indication, they're planning on a return to the known, the familiar. "I'm going fishing," he says. "We'll go with you," said the other disciples. In one respect, it strikes me as a sad sort of picture. After three years of devoting themselves to Jesus and his cause. After witnessing his works, watching his miracles, and taking in his teaching. After launching out into some of their own ministries for the sake of the kingdom. After all the challenges, sacrifices, and struggles of being Jesus' disciples. Now it looks like all those high hopes have come crashing down. Even after Jesus has appeared to them in his risen glory, they still don't seem to be sure about where all this is leading, and how to go forward.

Maybe the best way forward is to return to what they've known, what they've done, what they're good at. Fishing. As one commentator puts it, "They go down to that lake and boat, those oars, ropes, nets, and those fish—the things that are the very most real for them—in order to get their feet back down on the ground again, to establish some kind of moorings for themselves, to do something useful."²

But Jesus has more in mind for them. His mission of bringing life into a world of sin and death continues, and Peter and the others have a part in it. In the next scene, after the miraculous catch of fish, the focus narrows to a conversation between Jesus and Peter. Jesus engages Peter in the deepest things about their relationship. Jesus hasn't come to reject Peter but to restore him. He hasn't come to rebuke him but to rehabilitate him. He hasn't come to reprimand him but to reinstate him. What Peter gets from Jesus isn't a tongue-lashing but a call. A call to discipleship and a commission to go forward in the work of Jesus.

Here at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, his word to Peter is the same as it was at the beginning: "Follow me." So in one respect, we've returned to where we started, not because the first "Follow me" didn't work, but because now we've reached a new chapter in the story. Even after Jesus, the Word made flesh, returns to the Father, the Word will still be enfleshed. Jesus, the embodiment of God, will still be embodied in the form of the community of his people. And that community is comprised of those who are obedient to his call. As Mark Labberton has summarized it, "It all turns ... on our response to Jesus' two words: "Follow me." This is the primary call of God that creates and defines the church"³

Our church exists because of those two words, and for those two words. We've been summoned and assembled by Jesus, so that others may also hear and join in. As summarized by the expression that gets printed on brochures, ironed onto T-shirts, and posted on church websites, we are "disciples making disciples." At least that's how we like to think of ourselves. But sometimes the vibrancy and costliness of Jesus' call can get lost in the midst of our ecclesiastical structures and traditions. Again, I draw upon Mark Labberton, who says,

Our calling has become encrusted, buried under layers that lack significant evidence of life. Viral cat videos seem to touch our humanity and longing more than many church services do. I have felt caught in this vortex. The temptation in the church is to bring in more clowns and light the sparklers, but the real solution is what the Bible declares is our calling: to live out genuine love that shows up in the face of real need.⁴

This love may take a multitude of forms. We can see this coming to expression in today's text. When Peter three times answers Jesus, "Yes, I love you," he's not just giving lip service to his devotion to our Lord. He's in essence pledging his life. And in the end, that's what Peter gives, his own life, in martyrdom, for Jesus. Peter fulfills Jesus' core commandment that his disciples love one another as he has loved them. And how has Jesus loved them? By giving his own life.

In early April, the dean of a small evangelical seminary in Kyiv, Ukraine was among more than 400 civilians found dead in the streets in and around the capital city. Vitaly Vinogradov was trying to walk about 10 miles from the occupied city of Bucha to get to safety in the office of a Christian ministry in Kyiv, when he was shot and killed by Russian forces. As one source reported it, "His body lay on the street beside that of fellow believer and friend Oleg Grishchenko."⁵

The deaths of these brothers in Christ testifies to the risks involved in following Jesus. In the midst of invasion, they were focused on faithfulness, and their violent end reminds us of how discipleship is more than just an idea far removed from the dangerous realities and risks of day-to-day life. On the contrary, for many, discipleship includes vulnerability to enormous hardship, including the threat of death.

But what about those of us who live out our love for Jesus in contexts where we're not as exposed to the risks of persecution or death? How should we understand our witness compared to the witness of someone who literally loses his or her life in the journey of following Jesus? I believe our text can help us work through this issue.

Recall that in his conversation with Peter, Jesus uses a short parable to contrast the freedom of Peter's youth with the limitations that will come with Peter's old age and death. According to John, "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God" (v. 19a). In other words, this is a prediction of Peter's martyrdom. That phrase "by which he would glorify God" points back to the way Jesus' death was characterized earlier in John's Gospel. Jesus glorified God through his death, and Peter will now share in that work.

But remember that there's another follower of Jesus in the picture, the one called "the beloved disciple." Tradition has generally taken this as a reference to John, the son of Zebedee. When Jesus predicts Peter's death, Peter points to the beloved disciple and asks, "Lord, what about him?" (v. 21). Jesus goes on to say that though the beloved disciple won't die a martyr's death, that doesn't mean his witness is any less valuable than Peter's. Peter should be about the business of his discipleship, and the beloved disciple should be about his. The community of Jesus' followers shouldn't get caught up in comparing various expressions of discipleship, in order to determine if certain forms of following Jesus should be more prized than others.

You and I may not be in circumstances where discipleship involves laying our lives on the line daily, risking physical death for the sake of the gospel. But that doesn't mean that your daily efforts at living a life of love for Jesus are less significant or valuable. Go back to the fishing story that precedes our text. It's a story about the abundance that Jesus brings. As one commentator has pointed out, "Jesus gave gifts to all the disciples in the boat."⁶ The catch of fish and the breakfast on the beach were for all of them. What was true at the beginning of John's Gospel is even more fully revealed here at the conclusion: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

In the classic film *The Sound of Music*, Maria, played by Julie Andrews, is searching for God's will for her life. She's a candidate for the convent, but has trouble fitting into convent life, so she's sent to be a governess overseeing the children of the Von Trapp family. That's where she hopes to find out whether she is truly meant to be a nun or whether God has something else planned for her.

Confused about her feelings for Captain Von Trapp, Maria suddenly flees and returns to the convent. She meets with the Mother Superior, who asks her why she was sent back. Maria admits that she left because she was afraid and confused and needed the sanctuary of the abbey. But Mother Superior tells her firmly, "An abbey is not to be used as an escape. What is it you can't face?"

Maria admits she may be in love with Captain Von Trapp but isn't sure. "That's what's been torturing me. I was there on God's errand. To ask for his love would have been wrong. I couldn't stay. I just couldn't." Maria faces a crucifix and says, "I'm ready at this moment to take my vows. Please help me."

Mother Superior tells her, "Maria, the love of a man and a woman is holy, too. You have a great capacity to love. What you must find out is how God wants you to spend your love." That's the challenge and the promise of daily discipleship. Each day is an opportunity for you to return to your call. What was true at the beginning of your relationship with Christ is

true now. The summons remains the same. "Follow me." And your response, "Lord, how do you want me to spend my love for you this day?"

¹ Eugene Peterson's version of John 21:5 in *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 234.

² Duane A. Olson, "The Church in Mission: Gospel Texts for the Sundays of Easter (Series C)," *Word & World* (Spring 1995) 220-21.

³ Mark Labberton, *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014) Kindle edition, 9.

⁴ Labberton, *Called*, 20

⁵ Diane Chandler, "Gunned down seminary dean was trying to escape." Baptist Standard. April 11, 2022. <https://www.baptiststandard.com/news/world/gunned-down-seminary-dean-was-trying-to-escape/> (April 27, 2022).

⁶ Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John." *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) n.p.