

Follow Me

John 21:1-19

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April 18, 2010

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

Though many of the Bible stories are very public in their nature and setting, the scene for today featuring Peter and the Risen Christ is private and intimate. “Peter, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Follow me.” This is what I call soul talk. This is not idle chatter. This is conversation regarding ultimate loyalties. It’s a private, soul-filled moment.

Peter is invited to follow. He is on his own in this place apart from the other disciples. There is no peer pressure here; the others aren’t there chanting, “Follow, follow, follow!” There is no arm twisting, no advice from mom and dad. There is only the invitation, “Follow me.” This is often where the faith journey begins, with the simple invitation. In a way, it could be said that this story marks the beginning of the church: the Risen Christ extends the invitation; Peter accepts the invitation. There’s no turning back. The church is born in that intimate dialogue. “Peter, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Though the journey begins in a private, intimate way, it does not remain so for very long. Indeed, the life of faith must not remain private at all. Peter discovers from day one that following the Christ means going public, means entering the public discourse with a faith perspective; means bringing the love of God to bear on the world’s brokenness.

This is why we have clear glass windows in our sanctuary, so that we can have one eye on the Biblical text and one eye on the world, so that we see the connection between what we do within these walls and what happens within the walls of a tent in Darfur,

so that as we think about welcoming the stranger at our door we are also concerned about the welcome of the Palestinian in his own homeland.

When the Risen Christ said, ‘follow me,’ he didn’t mean into the closet; he meant into the world, into the trenches, into the prisons, into the addiction recovery centers, into homeless shelters, into the remaining pockets of racism and sexism and homophobia, into the neighborhoods of loneliness, into the world of illiteracy, of intolerance, into the world of mental illness. When he said, ‘Follow me,’ he was issuing an invitation to be involved in humankind, to be a vessel of redeeming love. So, this invitation is not like those that ask whether we’d like the beef or the chicken or the vegetarian lasagna. It’s an invitation asking whether we’re ready to use the gifts God has given us to work for that day when righteousness flows like a mighty river.

And sure enough, almost right away, in the Biblical record, Peter finds himself face to face with an uncomfortable, very public, situation. He is on his way to the temple to pray when he is accosted by a man begging. Alms, alms for the poor! This unnamed man has been lame since birth and he has found that by positioning himself at the temple gate known as the Beautiful Gate, he will receive enough coins for his daily bread. Peter could do what everyone else has done, flip the man a quarter, a handful of loose change, and continue on his way. By doing only that, Peter isn’t really being a vessel of redeeming love. He’s only maintaining the status quo. By doing only that, this same scene will be repeated over and over ad nauseum: Peter will return to the temple; the beggar will return to the Beautiful Gate.

Instead, Peter sees beyond this man’s disability to his humanity. Peter refuses to allow this beggar to be defined by his lameness any longer.

Instead of tossing him a few coins, he tosses him an invitation, an invitation to live by faith, an invitation to imagine a resurrecting God, an invitation to approach his wholeness in a brand new way. I think you know the rest of this story! You know how the fellow receives the invitation, arises from his begging posture, from his pity pot; walks; then runs; then kicks up his heels and dances a jig!

It is likely that Peter is just as amazed as is the man by the gate. It is Peter's first attempt to take his faith public. The emphasis in this story is not so much on the miracle cure as it is on Peter's movement from that very private moment on the beach, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you?" to this very public embodiment of that profession of love.

If the church was born back there on that secluded beach in that private, intimate conversation; the church is born again in Peter's bold expression of love for this man who struggles to love himself.

Peter could not have known ahead of time where the invitation 'to follow' would take him. He doesn't need to know in advance where the path will lead. He only needs to trust the one who has made the invitation. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

In 2000 years, the call to discipleship really hasn't changed much. The name Peter becomes Amy or Jose or Jessica or Walter or Nadia. The beggar becomes an addict or a dealer or a homeless orphan or a person confused by dementia. But the essentials remain the same. In one way or another, the Risen Christ elbows his way into our consciousness and conveys the invitation, "Do you love me?" It may arrive in a dream; it may be delivered in a church school classroom, in a sermon, in an anthem, on a walk through the blueberry fields, in the pages of a novel, in the berthing room at the hospital, doing the dishes after a church potluck supper, at a dance recital. In one way or another, we are all confronted with this haunting question.

“Do you love me?”

And each of us, like Peter, is left on our own to respond,
“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

The invitation to discipleship begins in private and becomes public in surprising and in life-affirming ways.

One of the women who said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” was the writer, Harriett Beecher Stowe. Her discipleship went public with the publishing of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, an effort that more than any one sermon or hymn or legislative act changed the hearts of American families and led to the abolition of slavery.

One of the men who said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” was the visionary, Millard Fuller. His discipleship went public in the form of Habitat for Humanity, a faith-based effort that seeks to bring an end to anyone anywhere living in a leaky shack.

One of the women who said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” is Hazel Owl King who lives in Dupree, South Dakota. Her discipleship goes public everyday after school when she meets children at the local YMCA where she tutors them in the arts of beadwork and quilting and in the values of dignity and self-respect.

One of the men who said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” is Edwin Ayala. His discipleship went public when he noticed that Hartford’s teachers have time off in the summer and that Hartford’s children are chronically behind in their grade level, so he brought the two populations together and calls it Adventures in the City. Our South Church mission board supports this summer ministry. The hundreds of children who participate with Edwin hit the ground running in the fall, having been enriched by caring teachers in July and August.

The list goes on and on.

Peter's unfolding story told so powerfully by the New Testament writers becomes a working model for discipleship in every generation. The Risen Christ finds a mysterious way to confront us with the question: do you love me. We respond in some form, verbally or non-verbally; you know that I love you. Discipleship is born there, and then wiggles its way into the public arena. That is how I have understood the Gospel text for this week. As always, I share it with you in the greatest of hope. Amen!