

From Failure to Following

First UMC of Pocatello

Third Sunday of Easter

May 1, 2022

John 21:15-19

In the stories told by the other three Gospels, Simon Peter's life as a disciple follows a very different plotline than it does in John. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Simon receives his call to follow Jesus at the very beginning of the story. He fishes with his brother on the Sea of Galilee. He hears Christ's voice cut across the water: "Follow me." And he leaves everything right away, and follows.

Later, in the midst of public ministry, Jesus asks his disciples a pair of questions: *Who are others saying that I am? Who do you say that I am?* Simon boldly answers for the whole group, "You are the Messiah" (Mark 8:2) – which Jesus recognizes as a moment of God-given insight. He changes Simon's name to Peter, *petros, cephas* – which means rock or stone – and says, "[O]n this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). Peter, the rock, goes on to flesh out the stereotype we are familiar with – quick to speak, quick to act, quick to lead, quick to fail – but the fact remains that the direction of his life has been set by his initial following, and his role as a leader only requires time to mature.

John's depiction of Peter is different. According to John, the first time that Simon and Jesus ever meet Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter. From the very first, he is *rock*. But then Peter's role as a disciple goes understated, almost dormant, until the final chapters of the Gospel. He emerges in all his flaws and glory in proximity to Jesus' death and resurrection. And it is only in this final scene of John's Gospel, as he sits on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, eating breakfast with his Lord and speaking aloud his love, that Peter is at last given a vocation: "Follow me."

Why *now*, at the *end* of John's story, is Peter invited to follow Jesus? What can we learn from this moment of commissioning, which occurs not in the first chapter but in the last?

I believe there are three lessons here for us:

1. With God, failure is not an end, but a beginning.

- a. We can define failure in different ways: *betrayal, omission, losing hope, burning out, coming to the end of our rope, losing our way, putting ourselves out there and getting rejected.*
- b. It is *failure* that throws Peter into passionate seeking
 - i. Wash all of me!
 - ii. Running to the tomb
 - iii. Plunging into the water and swimming to shore
- c. It is failure that requires Peter to answer for himself
- d. Even how the story frames him (Simon Peter / his death glorifying God)

2. Healing takes time.

- a. Three questions for three denials – circular, but moving deeper
- b. Penetrating to the level of *feeling* – sadness, hurt
- c. Jesus sits with us in a process of gentle dialogue, helping us find our voice and awaken our heart

3. True leaders have been humbled; they've walked the path from failure to following.

- a. It is this journey from failure through healing that justifies Peter's position as a leader: Follow me.
- b. In relation to God, he is called to follow and be dependent
- c. In relation to others, he is called to feed and serve.

In the beginning, we fail.

In the middle, we heal.

In the end, we follow, we lead by nurturing.

Perhaps it's a cycle of deeper and deeper maturity, repeating its steps; perhaps, the longer we live and the more experience we accumulate, we might see how the narrative arc of our lives as a whole follow these steps.

This week, I was able to mediate on how these three lessons apply, in a wide-angle view, to the Church, or at least to our United Methodist Church. I was asked to participate as a Sage District clergy representative in what's called the Oregon-Idaho Conference's Legislative Assembly.

The Assembly takes a first look at legislation being proposed to the Annual Conference in June, refines it, and votes on whether the various pieces should be recommended for adoption by the Annual Conference or not.

The Legislative Assembly doesn't carry authority to adopt legislation on behalf of the Conference, but it serves as a litmus test, a refiner's fire, and its recommendation often speeds up the process of dialogue and voting at the summer Conference.

What I got to see this weekend were numerous pieces of legislation – some carrying the weight of action, others simply stating the values of the Conference – that call United Methodists in Oregon and Idaho to behave civilly in public discourse, both in online and in person; to divest from companies that perpetrate human rights abuses in other parts of the world; to defend the dignity and rights of migrants, of refugees, and of transgender children; that call the Oregon-Idaho Conference to remain a part of the United Methodist Church in the midst of the denomination's fracturing, and to continue pushing forward toward the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the denomination. All of these things, considered in biblical terms, really have to do with the love of God and the love of neighbor, and the church's call to nurture – to feed and tend the sheep of God's fold. They were all celebrated and voted for favorably by a group of pastors and laypersons from around the Conference. And it gave me a bit of hope

It is as if Jesus is sitting with his Church. *Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?* And finally, the recognition that we have fallen short in our love touches the depths of our feeling, and we respond earnestly, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." *Then feed and shepherd my sheep; stick out your hands so that you might be dressed how I want to dress you, taken where I want to take you. Follow me.* May it be that the Church of the future is humbler than the Church of today; aware of its failure, committed to love, living out the process of healing.

But, of course, Peter's story only resonates with the Church because it first resonates with individual lives – persons failing, healing, humbly following. People like you and me. For all of us, there is a table open to receive us, and no matter where we are on that journey of failure, healing, and following, we come and receive God's freely given grace as equals.

Have you failed recently – betrayed, faltered, lost hope, run dry? Come and receive; know that you are forgiven, that he feeds you anyway.

Are you healing – are you in honest and patient dialogue with the one who loves you and desires your love? Come and receive; he will help you find your heart and voice again.

Are you following, leading humbly, emerging with a vocation that seeks the glory of God and the flourishing of others? Come and receive; have a foretaste of that reality which God would have you tend in the world.

Come, be fed. Come, speak with Jesus. Come, stretch out your hands.

Become the people who become the church, that we might follow faithfully.

Amen.