



# Come, Follow Me

Moving from membership to discipleship

# Come, Follow Me: Sermon Series

## Introduction and Overview

“How do we help churches think about discipleship instead of membership? When and where do we talk about moving from member to disciple?” Several South Carolina clergy discussed these questions at the Intentional Growth Center at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. That discussion, based on Phil Maynard’s book “Shift” (Excellence in Ministry Coaching, 2013), led to a dream of involving other United Methodist clergy. The group defined “discipleship” as “our response to Jesus’ invitation to ‘Come, follow me.’” The group discussed possibilities for a sermon series on discipleship with a companion study for children, youth and adults.

Two different groups worked to develop this series. Events in the life of Peter became a model for what it means to follow Jesus as a disciple. This is not a biography of Peter, but a way to see the formation and maturing of a disciple. As you will see, we follow Peter from his response to Jesus’ invitation to follow him and end with Peter’s sermon in Acts 10.

Before looking at the range of this series, consider the idea of moving from member to disciple. What is the difference between a church member and a disciple? Are they the same? Have we made an artificial distinction for the sake of argument? Maybe.

People may join a congregation because of the call of Christ, and their missional understanding finds an outlet in the ministries of that church. They may join a church because generations of their family participated in the congregation. They may join a church because they sense that this church will meet their spiritual needs and invite them to grow in Christ. They may join a church because of its ministry with different constituent groups. People may join a congregation because of the benefits they may receive or because they discover a way to use their gifts in service to others.

The reasons people join a church are many, but the challenge remains for every congregation to help people grow into a deeper relationship with God. This series of sermons and the companion learning sessions offer models for moving into that deeper relationship.

The seven chapters of this resource follow the growth in Peter as a disciple of Christ, landing on key pillars in the life of Peter. We focus on Peter’s response to the call of Christ to follow him and then deal with Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ. That bold confession of faith is followed by Peter’s faltering or failing. Still later we see transformation in Peter after Jesus’ resurrection. We then see Peter serving others, proclaiming the Gospel, and crossing the barriers or borders erected by tradition or culture. The Peter who speaks in Acts 10 differs significantly from the Peter we meet in Mark 1.

Peter does not stay at the same level of discipleship across his lifetime. We see growth and change in him. Our model as disciples of Jesus calls for similar growth and change. We do not remain at a fixed level of discipleship. Our prayers and our actions expand and go deeper because of our deepening sense of the love of God in Jesus Christ for all people.

While the sermons may seem to indicate a linear connection and logical path of growth, we understand that growth in discipleship is not a straight path; God's Holy Spirit is constantly working in our lives, bringing us to deeper love.

Each chapter contains the following sections:

**A Note to the Pastor:** Introduction to the sermon and its place in the series.

**Exegesis:** Examination of the Bible passage as it concerns discipleship.

**Outline:** Structure of the sermon.

**Sermon:** Read it. Adapt it. Use it as a jumping-off point for your own preaching.

**Other Illustrations:** Something not used in the sermon, which may spark creativity.

**Video and Music:** Suggestions for worship.

**Bibliography:** Further reading, material that contributes to the understanding of discipleship.

We hope that this sermon resource will stir a conversation in which Christians think and act less as members and more as disciples. We hope congregants will learn from Peter's journey of discipleship and instill a desire to begin or restart their journey as disciples of Jesus.

For further reading about stages of discipleship, you may find "Deepening Your Effectiveness" (Discipleship Resources, 2006), by Dan Glover and Claudia Lavy, helpful. Other books and resources are listed with each sermon.

**A note on editing:** The seven main contributors offer many different gifts and they come from different traditions. Rather than editing their work to fit a common style (as is done with curriculum resources written by multiple authors), the editor retained their different writing styles as a witness to their different experiences and understandings.

## Sermon 1: Following

Writer: Rev. Angela Ford Nelson

Scripture: Mark 1:16-20

### Note to the Pastor

The Gospel of Mark begins with an invitation: an invitation to join Jesus at the beginning of something – a movement that is the beginning of the Good News. This is the Good News that the prophet Isaiah foretold. This is the Good News that John the Baptist proclaimed in the wilderness. This is the Good News that Jesus, the Son of God, came to fulfill in the lives of all who would repent and believe. The Good News is that the Kingdom of God has come near in the person of Jesus Christ. The Good News is that Jesus is inviting all who will believe to not only proclaim the Good News, but to also become the Good News in the world.

However, as with any invitation, the invitation of the Good News of Jesus must be accepted. Remarkably, Mark's Gospel records that Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John immediately accepted Jesus' invitation – seemingly without hesitation, consideration or buyer's remorse. What was it about Jesus' invitation that was so irresistible to these first disciples? What is it about Jesus' grace-filled invitation that is still irresistible today?

Come along with me as we journey with Jesus to the seashore to hear anew this invitation to the four common fishermen to join Him at the beginning of the Good News. Watch as wilderness-weary Jesus walks along the shell-lined shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. Eavesdrop as common fishermen cast and mend their nets. Lean in as Jesus calls four of them to leave it all behind and to *come after Him*. Wait with me to see how they respond, and rejoice with me at their faithful obedience. Wonder anew with me as we contemplate our daily responses to Jesus' continuous invitation to follow Him.

As we journey together, let us ask ourselves and one another the tough questions: Are we still in our boats casting and mending our nets while Jesus is softly and tenderly calling us from the shoreline? Are we too hindered by the apparent abundance of our lakes and the familiarity of our nets to follow Jesus further into the Kingdom of God? Who is leaning in and witnessing our faithful response to Jesus' invitation to follow Him? What would it take for us to drop our nets again and follow Jesus anew?

Beloved colleague, in this sermon series we will witness Simon Peter's faith-filled acceptance of Jesus' invitation to discipleship, his challenges to believe, and God's sustaining grace every step of the way. But, let us also witness the grace that God shows in the formation of a community of disciples at the very beginning of the Good News – a nurturing community that continues to grow today. Let us not forget that the journey of discipleship is both individual and communal, and though it is personal, it is not private. I pray that you and your beloved community of faith will be renewed as we take this discipleship journey together.

## Exegesis: Mark 1:16-20

Although the writer of the Gospel of Mark is anonymous, we know that the author was an early Christian teacher and a skillful interpreter of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.<sup>1</sup> The evangelist's writing is brief yet descriptive; it is fast paced with its characteristic use of the word *immediately* (some 40 times), yet in our text time seems to stand still. Unlike Matthew and Luke's Gospels, Mark omits Jesus' genealogy and infancy and moves quickly to Jesus' mission to usher in the Kingdom of God. The writer makes it clear throughout the Gospel, and specifically in our preaching text, that Jesus' obedience to God is what saves us and our obedience to Jesus' call is what brings us into the Kingdom of God that has drawn near.<sup>2</sup>

The earliest readers of Mark would have needed to hear the life-giving message of the Kingdom of God as they were likely facing persecution from Nero's government and bewilderment after the destruction of the Temple during the Jewish-Roman War (66 – 70 CE).<sup>3</sup> We can imagine, that as the Gospel was read aloud during worship services, members of the early church were inspired by the disciples' amazing faithfulness and reminded that the key to faithful discipleship was following Jesus. The early hearers of the text would have been invited by Mark's Gospel to remember their individual decisions to follow Jesus, the challenges and the victories, and to faithfully follow Him anew.

From the outset, the Gospel of Mark seeks to reorient its readers. This new Kingdom is nothing like the old one. Instead, in the Kingdom of God which is fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, Old Testament prophecies come to pass; an Elijah-like prophet named John baptizes many in Judea and Jerusalem, and Jesus too. The Trinity appears in the wilderness: Jesus emerging, the Spirit descending and driving, and God commending; and the deep recesses of the wilderness become a place of testing for the Son of God – a place of defeat for Satan and a place of ministering for God's angels. And in this new kingdom, Jesus brings about a radical social reorientation<sup>4</sup> in the lives of four common fishermen by inviting them to follow Him.

Jesus' invitation was radical because Rabbis rarely called their students – instead, their students sought them out.<sup>5</sup> And, His invitation was radical because the disciples were called to do the unthinkable in that day (and still today): to abandon family and livelihood. Further, the original Greek reveals that Jesus' invitation is radical because he invites his disciples to do more than these two simple words, "Follow me," might imply.

Jesus' radical invitation to discipleship is an invitation to do more than follow as students traditionally followed teachers: living with them, asking questions, seeking to be like them. Instead, the Greek reveals that Jesus invites his disciples to **ὀπίσω** – to "Come After Him." Just as John the Baptist had foretold the coming of one more powerful who would *come after John* (1:7), Jesus is inviting His

<sup>1</sup> *The People's New Testament Commentary*. 105

<sup>2</sup> *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. 48

<sup>3</sup> *The New Interpreter's: One Volume Commentary*. 658

<sup>4</sup> *True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. 123

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 123

disciples to come after Him: to learn of Him, to belong to the Kingdom that has come near in Him; and to become as He is – tellers of the Good News. Jesus is calling the disciples to do more than learn of the Good News of the Kingdom of God, but to share in His vocation and to become a part of God’s life-giving mission.<sup>6</sup> This is the radical invitation which Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John immediately accepted – an invitation that Jesus continues to extend to us today: “Come, Follow Me.”

## **The Sermon Outline**

### **I. Introduction – Do You Remember?**

- a. Do you remember – Where were you or what were you doing when you heard Jesus’ invitation?
  - i. Although the invitations we receive differ, the invitation is the same for us all.
  - ii. The invitation is to belong to the Body of Jesus, to join in God’s life-giving mission.

### **II. Good News: Jesus meets us where we are and invites us to follow Him from there!**

- a. John Wesley followed Jesus, though filled with doubts.
  - i. Jesus continued to invite him.
    1. At Aldersgate, Wesley felt the assurance of salvation. Then continued to tell the story.
- b. Mother Teresa experienced a “Call Within a Call.”
  - i. Firstly, responding to the invitation to become a nun and to teach.
  - ii. Secondly, responding to the call to live and serve among the poorest of the poor and sickest of the sick.
  - iii. She faced intense feelings of loneliness as she followed Jesus.
    1. By God’s grace she continued to tell the story.
- c. My personal story of accepting Jesus’ invitation to follow Him.
  - i. ***[Pastor, consider inserting your story here]***

### **III. Mark’s Invitation to Discipleship Story Unfolded**

- a. The text leaves us with so many unanswered questions.
- b. Let’s walk with Jesus along the seashore to find some answers.
  - i. What we do know is that the disciples were already at work.
    1. Yet they left their work (symbolized by their nets) to become members of the Kingdom.
  - ii. Each had “something to lose,” but they left anyway to gain much!
- c. There is something miraculous about Jesus’ invitation.
  - i. That changes us from fisher-people to fishers of people!

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<sup>6</sup> *The Christian as Minister. 16*

#### IV. Conclusion

- a. Certainty of this text: we have been extended the same powerful invitation
  - i. An invitation by Mark to remember
  - ii. An invitation to Jesus to follow after Him and to belong.

#### The Sermon

“Come, Follow Me.” Do you remember when you heard these words from Jesus? Did you hear them for the first time as a child in Sunday school and wonder what they meant? Did you hear His invitation as a youth while enjoying pizza with your friends during a youth group meeting? Did you hear His invitation in the sheer silence of your daily activities – while getting ready for work or even washing the dishes? Maybe you are hearing Jesus’ call to come after Him right now! For some of us, we may not remember where we were or what we were doing when we heard Jesus’ radical call, but we know that we heard it and we responded.

Although the circumstances of Jesus’ call to each of us may have been unique, His invitation is the same as the one He extended to Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John by the seashore in Galilee: Follow after me and I will make you fish for people. This invitation is more than a job offer! This invitation is more than an opportunity to learn and to grow! This invitation isn’t something that we receive once and that’s it!

Instead, the invitation that the two sets of brothers received, and the one that we continue to receive today, is an invitation to come alongside Jesus, to become a part of His Body, and to join in His life-saving mission of declaring the Good News!

By His grace, Jesus invites each of you to follow Him, regardless of your station in life, your occupation, or where you might find yourselves – on the school bus, in the classroom or even behind prison bars. You see, when Jesus casts His net, He does so from your seashore, wherever you may be, and invites you to join Him again and again – regardless of your resume, your background, in spite of your doubts. Isn’t that Good News!

For the Rev. John Wesley, responding to Jesus’ invitation to follow after Him came with intense doubts. Although Wesley felt led to leave home and to make disciples in America, he did so without the assurance that he was truly saved himself! It wasn’t until he attended a society meeting in a chapel on Aldersgate Street in London that his heart was strangely warmed and he followed Jesus anew with the assurance that he belonged – not because of who he was or what he did, but because of God’s grace. By the power of God’s grace, John Wesley accepted Jesus’ enduring invitation to follow Him, to belong, and to declare the Good News of the Kingdom of God! By the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, John Wesley became a fisher of the people – who became known as Methodists.<sup>7</sup>

For Mother Teresa, as a teenager she heard Jesus’ invitation to follow after Him, to become a nun, and to dedicate her life to teaching the poor – even though answering His call meant leaving her mother

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<sup>7</sup> *The Essential Works of John Wesley. 27-40.*

and sister behind, traveling from India to Ireland, and a life of financial poverty. Years later, Mother Teresa heard Jesus' call again – "A Call Within a Call" to leave the classroom and to minister amongst the poorest of the poor in India. This was an invitation not to be a visitor among the poor, but to become a part of their lives. Although she experienced extreme periods of loneliness in her ministry, Mother Teresa continued to accept Jesus' invitation to come after Him, to belong to the Kingdom that had come near in Jesus, and to declare the Good News by touching the<sup>8</sup> bodies, hearts, and souls those on the margins: the sickest of the sick and the poorest of the poor. <sup>9</sup>

As for me, I first responded to Jesus' call to follow Him as a little girl growing up in rural South Carolina. It was there that I learned about the Good News of Jesus from my parents, pastor and youth leaders. And it was there, in a little town called Wedgefield – with its one railroad track and one stop sign – that I accepted the call to follow after Jesus and minister to those in need. While I can't remember how I heard the invitation, I am certain that I did because at 8 years old I began negotiating with my parents so that I could gather our old clothes, wash them and package them up just so, and then take them to school and quietly share them with the school nurse who made sure that they were put to good use.

Even as an awkward, skinny little girl with short pig tails, I felt a sense of belonging and purpose as I shared the love I had with those in need. When I struggle along this discipleship journey that we are on, I remember that little girl, and I get back up and follow after Jesus again!

In Mark's concise yet colorful manner, he invites his readers to experience the first disciples' call to discipleship and for us to remember our own. From our brief text (just five verses) we have no idea whether the disciples knew Jesus before He called them to join Him – maybe they grew up together in Galilee? Certainly, they would have bumped into Jesus and His family a time or two in the synagogue, right? Perhaps they heard about Jesus' baptism by John the baptizer in the Jordan? Had they too been baptized with those from the Judean countryside and from Jerusalem? Were they holding on to John's hopeful promise that the One who would follow him would baptize them with the Holy Spirit?

Were they expecting Jesus when they answered His call? Or was this their first meeting? Mark doesn't answer any of these questions, but he does invite us to stand on the pebbly beach with Jesus and to witness a miracle: the miracle of Jesus' grace-filled invitation and the disciples' faithful response.

Let's walk a little closer to the brothers' boat so we don't miss a word!<sup>10</sup> The brothers Simon and Andrew were working on that morning. While others were mending their nets – likely getting ready to take a break after fishing all night, the brothers were still fishing. They were persistent. You see, the fishing business wasn't for the faint of heart! No, to make a living at it, these entrepreneurs had to take the good days with the bad. Some evenings they would drag in more fish than they could handle, yet sometimes they would be found casting their nets into the sapphire blue waters of the Galilee way

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<sup>8</sup> *Mother Teresa. 1-51.*

<sup>10</sup> *Note: Pastor, consider putting on beach sandals or even taking off your shoes and rolling up your pant legs at this point. You are inviting the congregation into the Good News.*



after the early morning quitting time. That was the life of a fisherman – a hard life, but a rewarding one. It was rewarding because they knew that their work was important, not only for their livelihood, but also because the markets and the community depended on the fruit of their labor.

Jesus likely would have gone unnoticed as the brothers worked together that morning to cast the heavy leaded net into the fresh waters one more time, but His powerful words – like the net they skillfully used to capture fish – captured them! His words, *"Follow me and I will make you fish for people"* captured more than their attention; they must have captured the brothers' hearts, their souls, their minds, and their strength because they immediately left it all behind!

**Do you see what I see?** There goes Jesus and following after Him are the brothers, Simon and Andrew! Who's gonna take care of the boat and drag in the net and the fish? *Wait, lean in and listen closely, the brothers aren't asking these questions – we are!* What was it about Jesus' invitation that would cause them to leave it all behind without hesitation? They must not have had much to lose! They were just two fishermen, setting off on an adventure that few common boys from Galilee ever experienced. That's why they left it all – right? It must have been an easy decision *for them*, but no one else would do that – right?

**But wait,** that's not the end of this story – let's keep walking along the seashore, Jesus' miraculous fishing trip continues. Let's go just a little farther along the seashore with Jesus to find a bigger boat carrying James, John, their father and some hired men. *These folks are no small-time fishermen!* They must have a lucrative business to be able to afford such an operation. Surely, Jesus' second invitation would not yield the same results as His first – they have too much to lose – right? And who would He invite anyway? The father? The hired men?

But Jesus' eyes have already rested upon the brothers, James and John – and His invitation has again made disciples of common fishermen. Immediately, miraculously, by the power of Jesus' own Words, they deserted it all – their father, colleagues, livelihood, and the familiar ebb and flow of sea-life to accept Jesus' invitation to come behind Him and to do as He has done in their lives – to fish for people!

We will never know what Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John were thinking before, during or after they responded to Jesus' call as he passed along the seashore, but what we do know from Mark's story is that there was power in Jesus' invitation. A power so miraculous that, in an instant, they were changed from fishermen to disciples; from citizens of Galilee to citizens of the Kingdom of God that had come near; from family members to members of Jesus' Body; from tellers of fish stories to proclaimers of the Good News!

What we do know is this was the same heart-warming invitation that John Wesley heard at Aldersgate, and Mother Teresa heard as a youth and followed anew as a young woman. This is the same miraculous invitation that you may have heard as a child or which you may be hearing now for the first time. And, this is the same grace-filled invitation the early believers were invited to remember and which we are invited to remember, too.

Jesus has come again by His Spirit to the seashore – *Come, let us follow Him. Amen!*

## **Other Illustrations**

A couple of months ago, I traveled to Myrtle Beach with Ken, my husband, to support him as he preached a three-day revival. On our last day there, two hours before he was to preach, we rushed across the street from our hotel to get a bite to eat. As we were walking, I noticed a lady sitting on a beach, and then I heard her say, "May I have something to eat?" I turned to look in her direction, and thought about our schedule: *Would we have enough time to stop and talk with her, to see what she might need? Would that make Ken late for his preaching engagement?* Yes – all of these questions and others ran through my mind.

We decided to stop, to sit with her, and to spend some time with her. She shared that she had been on an 11-year journey of following Jesus. Her journey seemed radical to me. She had left her home, her family and her livelihood to journey around South Carolina telling anyone she met about Jesus. Her journey meant that she often had to ask for food and clothing, ultimately relying on the kindness of strangers. After a while, we thanked her for sharing her story and she thanked us for the gift that we gave her, and we went our separate ways.

When we arrived at the Revival and Ken stood to preach – I gasped when he read the title: "Let's Get Reckless!" This indeed was what we had just witnessed in the life of a sister in Christ who left it all to follow after Jesus. Tears flowed from my eyes as Ken shared what it means to be a radical disciple – one who continues to yield to the power of the Holy Spirit. What does it mean to be a radical disciple? Is that the kind of discipleship that Jesus is inviting us into? Are we answering this call?

## **Video and Music**

"Forrest Gump" – When Jesus calls the disciples to follow Him, He does so in the most personal way – He meets them where they are and then He invites them to join Him where He is going. His invitation, though not private, is deeply personal – it is heart-warming – it is real. It is an invitation for us to share in Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, which has come near.

Jesus' invitation to the disciples reminds me of the one that Benjamin "Bubba" Buford Blue extended to his buddy, Forrest, in the 1994 movie "Forrest Gump." While sharing the menial duties of two soldiers in boot camp, Bubba invited Forrest to come with him when their military service ended and help Bubba fulfill his dream to become the owner of a shrimp boat. There is no doubt that this shrimping business is important to Bubba because it's all he can talk about for almost half of the movie! He knows every kind of shrimp dish that there is – and he doesn't mind sharing it with his buddy Forrest.

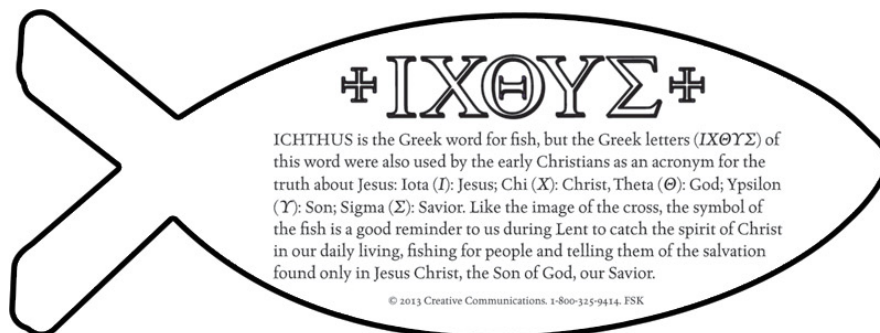
Although Bubba dies before his dream is fulfilled, Forrest eventually follows in Bubba's footsteps – becoming a successful shrimp boat captain and inviting a wounded comrade to come along. In your time of reflection or with your congregation, explore what it means for Jesus to invite us to follow Him. What is He inviting us to? And what is the vision that He is inviting us to see and to continue?

“The Letters” – Consider watching “The Letters,” a touching depiction of Mother Teresa’s life, the loneliness she experienced over 60 years of her ministry, and the unfolding of God’s mission through her faithful discipleship. As a part of the sermon series, consider a short study on faithful discipleship and ask participants to remember their discipleship journey – the struggles and the victories.

“Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore” – With your worship team, please consider visiting [umcdiscipleship.org](http://umcdiscipleship.org) to learn more about the history of the hymn “Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore,” written by Monseñor Cesáreo Gabaráin (1936-91).<sup>11</sup> There you will discover Gabaráin’s motivation for writing the hymn, which so beautifully captures the simplicity of our pericope. If you and your worship team decide to sing the hymn during the worship service, consider sharing some of the background with the congregation before the singing begins.

### **Just for Fun**

With your youth, consider inviting them to go on an online journey to discover the meaning of the acronym ICHTHUS. During Children’s Time, allow them to share what they have learned about its meaning and its connection with the sermon text. One of the many questions that you can ask the youth to ponder might be: Now that you know the meaning of ICHTHUS, was Jesus fishing for the disciples, or were the disciples fishing for Jesus?



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Richards, Lawrence O., *Bible Reader’s Companion*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook. 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Note: “Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore” can be found on page 345 in the *United Methodist Hymnal*.

## Come, Follow Me

*The Christian as Minister: An Inquiry Into Ordained, Consecrated, and Commissioned Ministries in The United Methodist Church.* Edited by Robert Kohler. Nashville, TN: The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. 1998.

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*The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. 2003.

*The United Methodist Hymnal.* Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House. 1989.

*True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary.* Brian Blount, General Editor. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2007.

Williamson, Lamar. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Mark.* Louisville, KY: John Knox Press. 1983.

### **Online Resources**

For more information about fishing in Biblical Times:

Campbell, James P., "Biblical Fishing 101 Reeling in the First Fishers of Faith".  
[loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/prayer/arts-and-faith/culinary-arts/biblical-fishing-101-reeling-in-the-first-fishers-of-faith](http://loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/prayer/arts-and-faith/culinary-arts/biblical-fishing-101-reeling-in-the-first-fishers-of-faith).

For more about the Hymn "Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore":

Hawn, C. Michael., "History of Hymns: 'Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore' ".  
[umcdisciplineship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-lord-you-have-come-to-the-lakeshore](http://umcdisciplineship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-lord-you-have-come-to-the-lakeshore)

For more about the Greek text:

Biblos Interlinear produced in partnership with Helps Ministries.  
[biblehub.com/interlinear/mark/1-16.htm](http://biblehub.com/interlinear/mark/1-16.htm)

For more about the suggested movies:

Bubba on Shrimp – *Forrest Gump* (3/9) Movie CLIP (1994) HD,  
[youtube.com/watch?v=4rT5fYMfEUC](http://youtube.com/watch?v=4rT5fYMfEUC).

*The Letters* – Mother Teresa, Wikipedia, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Letters\\_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Letters_(film))

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*The Rev. Angela Ford Nelson is the pastor of Good Hope Wesley Chapel  
United Methodist Church in Camden, South Carolina.*

## Sermon 2: Confessing

Writer: Rev. E. Rossiter Chellis

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20

### Note to the Pastor

Responding to the invitation of Jesus to follow is one of the most important moments in the life of any Christian disciple. Our response to the invitation of Jesus is a first step in a lifelong journey. Baptisms, professions of faith, and the reception of new members are moments to be celebrated by all churches, but they must be celebrated as the commencement to the process of following, to the process of growing closer to Christ.

You have a blessed opportunity before you this week to share a comforting truth with the people of your congregation: *They are still in the process of growing closer to Jesus!* Some of your congregants may wonder or fear that they are not the "ideal" disciples they believe they should be. Some of your congregants may be wondering, after professing their faith, "Is that it? Is this all there is to being a follower of Jesus?" This week you get to share the good news that your congregants are not, yet, what Jesus has called them to be ... and that is OK because discipleship is a lifelong process!

The point of this week's lesson is to encourage your congregants to acknowledge the value of their relationship with Jesus. Following Jesus can sometimes feel like a struggle. Being a follower of Jesus does not mean we have all of the answers. We experience Jesus when we participate in his continued ministry in this world. God works within us through ministry and mission with Jesus. We catch a glimpse of God in these moments, and these glimpses reveal the truth about God and God's Son.

While it might make sense to take your congregants to a moment in the life of Peter where he witnesses Jesus' teaching, preaching or a deed of power, you are encouraged to take them to the road leading into Caesarea Philippi. Jesus will ask his disciples a question every follower will have to answer at some point: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter would respond with a bold confession – a confession inspired by God, but born from his life with Jesus, his ministry with Jesus, and his following of Jesus.

May God bless you to be a blessing to your congregation this week! May God empower you to validate your congregants and the relationships they share with Jesus. May God work through you to encourage your congregants to see the glory of God revealed within their experience. And, most importantly, may God use you to inspire your congregants to confess Jesus is Christ!

### Exegesis: Matthew 16:13-20

Discipleship is neither instantaneous nor static; rather, discipleship is an ongoing process of *growing closer to Jesus Christ*. While this maturation process may vary between individual disciples, there are particular points of growth, phases, or markers every disciple will encounter as they *grow closer to Jesus Christ*. Matthew 16:13-20, particularly the confession of Peter (16:16), identifies a prominent

moment in the discipleship journey. At some point, every disciple must answer the question of Jesus, "But who do you say that I am?" (16:15)

While the call to discipleship (Mark 1:17) addressed by our previous chapter can be viewed as an invitation to participate in the life and ministry of Jesus, "But who do you say that I am?" is an invitation to confess the identity of Jesus. The disciple discovers the authentic identity of Jesus as Christ within the process of following Jesus. The disciple's confession is more than an acknowledgment of identity; rather, confessing that Jesus is Christ is an affirmation of faith and a pledge of allegiance. Such a confession signifies faith born out of one's intentional engagement in the life and ministry of Jesus as his follower.

Matthew's Gospel contains an added detail about Peter's confession. Jesus credits God for revealing Jesus' identity to Peter: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (v.17) God has issued a gift to Peter; God has revealed the identity of Jesus. God does not arbitrarily extend this blessing. Peter had faithfully followed Jesus. Peter participated in the life of Jesus and served in the ministry of Jesus. God revealed the identity of Jesus *through Peter's experiences of Jesus*. Thomas G. Long writes,

Peter is able to say what he does only because God came near to Peter through Jesus, the Son. Peter is not merely informed about Jesus; Peter *knows* Jesus, an intimacy possible, of course, only because Jesus has entered into communion with Peter. Jesus has given himself, given the very self of God, to Peter, and Peter's confession, then, is not an answer to a theological riddle; it is an expression of a profound relationship.<sup>12</sup>

Peter's confession is possible because Peter has encountered the divine in Jesus. Having responded to the invitation extended by Jesus (Mt. 4:18-20), Peter began to follow Jesus. He experienced Jesus at a personal level. He witnessed the teaching and preaching of Jesus. He observed Jesus' deeds of power. Simply, Peter discovered Jesus from Jesus. While the confession of a disciple is divinely inspired, the confession rises out of one's experience of Jesus.

Peter may have identified Jesus as the Messiah, but Peter still lacks a proper understanding of the identity of Jesus. Moments later, Peter rebukes Jesus for predicting his death for the first time. Jesus responds to Peter's rebuke by referring to him as a "stumbling block." (Mt. 16:21-23) The "rock" of verse 18 has already become a "stumbling block" to the ministry of the Messiah. Peter's failure to understand is symptomatic of a *disciple in process*. Choosing to follow Jesus does not equate to comprehending the complexity of his person, his authority, and his divine purpose. Confession is essential and commitment is necessary, but they are only the beginning to a lifelong journey with the "anointed one" who makes God known. Responding to his call and confessing his identity are the initial steps to begin the journey; the first breaths one takes as he or she begins a life with Jesus Christ.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas G. Long, "Matthew," *Westminster Bible Companion*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) pg. 185.

## The Sermon Outline

I begin the sermon with a personal anecdote. Riding in the backseat of my mother's car gave me a unique perspective. *I always knew where we had been, but I never knew where we were going!* I share this story to suggest that one's perspective will influence their understanding. I introduce this thought from the outset of the sermon, because I will make a similar claim in my reading of Peter's confession. Namely, Peter's previous experiences of Jesus will influence his confession. The illustration will be reintroduced at the conclusion of this sermon, as well. There it will be used as a challenge to the audience to consider their past experiences of Jesus so that they can make their confession.

The second section of the sermon uses our gift of imagination to consider the circumstance of our scripture reading. Jesus is traveling to Caesarea Philippi. I wonder, *what is unique about this city and why does Jesus ask about his identity on this trip?* To answer these questions, I begin with some basic background information about the city. I give this information *so that* I can address the relevance of the snow-capped peaks of Mt. Hermon (Caesarea Philippi is at the base of this mountain chain). The water produced by the melted snow merge through series of channels and tributaries to form the Jordan River. Jesus is traveling to the source of the river that sustains much of the life in region of Palestine.

Please, let me be clear. I have written this section in such a way that will create a space that allows for wonderment. Jesus asks his disciples an important question; and, I would like for us to wonder why Jesus asks this question on this particular trip. Is it plausible Jesus knew he was traveling to the source of the Jordan River, which sustains much of the life in the region of Palestine? Is it reasonable, therefore, for Jesus to wonder how other identified him? *Did people realize he was the source of the living water?*

The third section of the sermon examines Jesus' conversation with his disciples. The primary aim of this examination is to elevate the significance of Peter's confession. The people see Jesus as another *one of God's great servants*. Peter, however, confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. His experience of Jesus in the past has led to his understanding in the present (in addition to God's blessing of revelation in these events, but more will be said on that later).

Ultimately, the sermon will challenge our congregations to realize the necessity of confession in their life of discipleship. The necessity of confession is first introduced at this point of the sermon. The question Jesus presents to his disciples is before all of us!

I have inserted another illustration at this point. I share a hypothetical situation of a question asked by an employer in an interview. The illustration is used to make the point that we must reflect upon our life and our experiences to have a clear understanding of one's identity.

I conclude this fourth section of the sermon by returning to Peter. The confession of Peter is an example for all of us. Peter makes a bold confession about the true identity of Jesus. Everyone who accepts the invitation to follow Jesus must make this same confession. Where can the follower of Jesus find the strength to make this bold confession? The conclusion of this section answers that

question. Divine revelation has inspired the bold confession of Peter. The revelation of God inspires confession! If our congregants entered into a time of reflection, they would discover the moments in their life when the love of God was made known to them through Jesus Christ, Son of God.

Our sermon series is an exploration of discipleship. It utilizes moments in the life of Peter to make general observations about the life of discipleship for all followers of Jesus. The final section of the sermon arrives at the general observation to be gleaned from this moment in Peter's life.

I reintroduce my initial illustration as a reminder that our perspective influences our understanding. When we are looking in reverse we are not able to see what is before us. Peter did make a bold confession inspired by divine revelation. Peter was looking in reverse. He was not able to see what lie ahead of the Christ. The Messiah must suffer, die and be raised. While I do not examine the tense exchange between Jesus and Peter in the verse that follows our scripture reading, I do acknowledge Peter's limited understanding.

Everything, I hope, comes together at this point to make a clear observation about the life of discipleship: Every follower of Jesus must confess that Jesus is the Christ, but this confession does equate to completion! Discipleship is a journey. Accepting the invitation to follow is not the end. Confessing Christ is not end. The ongoing journey of growing closer to Christ is the aim of discipleship, which begins with the acceptance of his invitation and the confession of his identity. The sermon, therefore, concludes with the lingering discomfort of his question, "But who do you say that I am?"

### **The Sermon**

Our message from last week delivered a message of hope to all of us: Jesus calls all of us to be his disciples. He calls for us to "come" and he invites us to "follow" him. His call to discipleship is a grace-filled invitation to authentic community in which we become participants in the continued life and ministry of Jesus. The call to discipleship is not reserved for the best among us, a certain type, or a select few. Jesus invites everyone, including ordinary men and women like you and me, to come, follow, and participate in his extraordinary life and ministry.

By choosing to follow, we begin an ongoing and ever-fruitful process of growing closer to Jesus Christ. By choosing to follow, we take the first step in a lifelong journey. But, by choosing to follow, we have only begun. At some point, Jesus will present all of us with a question. At some point, Jesus will ask, "But who do you say that I am?"

My mother drove a 1980-something Buick station wagon when I was a child. The midsection of the wagon was covered with fake wood paneling. Apparently, this was a stylish look. The wagon had three rows of seats with the third row facing backward. As the baby of the family, I was the first to be relegated to the back seat when there was a need for its use. Riding in the back seat was a little awkward. You were forced to look in the direction of the driver following behind you. Making eye contact was unavoidable! Should you wave? Should you act like you couldn't see them? What was the socially appropriate behavior in these situations? These are the things one must think about in the back seat.



Riding in reverse did offer a different perspective. Every trip with Mom was a mystery. You never knew where she would take you next; you could only watch as the places you had been faded away in the distance! For this reason, I have jokingly remarked of my youth that, "I never knew where we were going. I only knew where we had been." It is strange, if you think about it, but discipleship can feel a little bit like riding in the back seat of Mom's old station wagon. You never know where Jesus will take you next...

The disciples may have been unsure of where Jesus was taking them in our lesson for this morning (Matthew 16:13-20). Yes, Jesus and his disciples have traveled to the region of Caesarea Philippi, but no reason is given for this trip. The absence of an explanation may signal the insignificance of their destination. Or, possibly, the city of Caesarea Philippi is the detail that enables us to find our place within this narrative.

Herod Philip built up Caesarea Philippi after he received the city following the death of his father, Herod the Great. Caesarea Philippi was approximately 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee at the base of Mount Hermon. The three peaks forming Mount Hermon – the highest point in Israel – are perpetually covered in snow. The story of this snow is most fascinating. As the snow melts, the icy waters collect in a system of channels eroded into the mountain. This system of channels directs the chilled water into a series of springs that flow from the mountain. Some of these spring form magnificent waterfalls while others spew from the mountain. These springs gather into a network of tributaries that eventually merge into the Jordan River. The snow covering the three peaks of Mount Hermon have a humble beginning, but the water resourced by this mountain sustains much of the life of Israel, nourishing the very land nations have fought to possess for centuries.

Caesarea Philippi was built up around the Banias Spring, one of the primary tributaries forming the Jordan River. While Matthew does not clarify what prompted Jesus' question, one might wonder if the destination inspired the conversation between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus was traveling to the headspring of the Jordan River (and, therefore, the Sea of Galilee) – the source of the water that surrounded his life and ministry. Jesus was traveling to the origination of the water that nourished and sustained the life of his people and their land.

One can only speculate; perhaps this destination inspired Jesus to contemplate beginnings: the beginning of the Jordan River, the beginning of the Sea of Galilee, the beginning of the water that nourishes and sustains the life of the region. Maybe, just maybe, traveling to the beginning inspired Jesus to consider his beginning, his identity, his purpose. Maybe this contemplation prompted Jesus to wonder how the people perceived him: Were the people aware of his beginning? Did they realize he was the source of the living water? Who did people say he was?

Upon entering the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The disciples respond to his question: The people believe Jesus is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. From the perspective of the people, Jesus reflects something (or someone) from the past. He is a bold preacher of repentance (like John), or a prominent apocalyptic figure (like Elijah and Jeremiah), or a great messenger of God (like the other prophets).

The limited view of the people prohibits their ability to perceive the full complexity of Jesus' identity. Jesus is more than another one of God's great servants, but the people look at Jesus and see their reflections. Jesus turns to his disciples for an enlightened answer; perhaps their unique perspective into the life of Jesus has uncovered a greater, spiritual truth. Jesus asks them, "But who do you say that I am?" The question lingers before the disciples waiting to be answered just as the same question lingers before all of us waiting for our response.

The most obvious questions can often be the most difficult to answer. Imagine you are interviewing for a new job. The employer begins the interview with a basic question: "Tell me a little about yourself." The employer's question comes across as an open-ended, non-threatening question, which has been offered to allow you to grow comfortable in the interview. In reality, the employer has asked a complex question. The employer is not interested in the unnecessary details of your life. She does not want to know you have a 13-year-old basset hound named Wilson. She does not want to know that you are passionate about flying kites at the beach. She does not want to know that you have collected 472 snow globes from across the world. The employer wants to know how you are uniquely qualified for the position.

Her question is tough because she has asked you to take a moment to reflect upon your life, in two to three sentences, to explain why you are the correct person for the job! The question is tough because it requires you to discover and acknowledge your true identity within the past experiences of your life. In essence, the employer has asked, "Who are you?"

Jesus' question continues to linger before the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter steps out in faith and replies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." He boldly confesses the identity of Jesus, prompting a conversation between Jesus and his disciples that marks the last major shift in Matthew's account of Jesus' life. From this point forward, Jesus will set his eyes upon Jerusalem and the suffering the Messiah will encounter at the hands of the religious elite. His ministry in Galilee will conclude as he descends upon Jerusalem and the fate awaiting him in the Holy City.

"But who do you say that I am?" also signals a critical moment in the life of every person who has ever encountered Jesus. There is a simple reason for the critical nature of this question: At some point, everyone must determine who they believe Jesus to be. Everything else will pivot upon their response. While this is a tough question, which most people would rather ignore, *answering this question truly matters*. Peter, who steps out and boldly proclaims, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," presents us with the response upon which our confessions should be based.

How can we confess Jesus is Messiah with the confidence of Peter? We must acknowledge the source of his confidence. Matthew explains, "And Jesus answered [Peter], 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.'" (v. 17) The confession of Peter has been inspired by divine revelation. God has blessed Peter with an awareness surpassing human knowledge. It is a truth of divine proportion. While Peter's confession is a gift of revelation, this gift was revealed to Peter the longer he followed Jesus. When Jesus called for Peter to follow him (Mt. 4:18-20), Jesus invited Peter to enter into a relationship with the one through whom

God is made known. Peter (along with the other disciples) was invited to experience Jesus. He heard Jesus teach and preach, he asked questions of him, he witnessed his deeds of power, he prayed with him, ate with him, and served with him. The confidence empowering Peter to confess Jesus as Christ was the product of a life lived in the presence of Jesus. God was at work in that space and time revealing Jesus is Christ.

It is easy to misjudge your direction when you are riding in the back of your Mom's station wagon. Looking out the rear window may show you where you have been, but where you have been does not always say where you are heading. The same is true for Peter, who confessed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." A confession inspired by God's presence in past events. This awareness, however, could not have prepared Peter for what lay ahead for the Messiah.

As the verses following our lesson show us, Peter will mistakenly rebuke Jesus for predicting his suffering and death. Peter had made the proper confession, but he was still young in his faith! Jesus was the Messiah, but Peter did not understand what would be required of the Messiah. Peter would eventually come to understand the necessity of the Messiah to suffer, but this knowledge would come in time. Peter was not finished growing in his understanding. Peter was not finished *growing closer to Christ*.

One of the greatest mistakes we make as disciples is to believe our responsibility ends once we accept the invitation to follow Jesus. Professing faith does not make one a disciple. Professing faith makes one a believer. Discipleship is more dynamic; it refers to the ongoing process of *growing closer to Christ*. Peter did not become the "ideal" disciple when he dropped his nets and began to follow; rather, by dropping his nets and following, Peter entered into a journey of becoming a disciple.

"But who do you say that I am?" is a question the disciple must answer every day. This daily confession is born out of the ability to discover the revelation of God in the places Jesus has already taken you. It is a confession that is being formed every time you agree to follow Jesus even when the destination is unknown. Discipleship is not about the destination; rather, discipleship is about the journey of becoming. Discipleship is about *growing closer to Christ* through a life lived in his footprints.

Now the question of Jesus is before you: "But who do you say that I am?"

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Other Illustrations**

1. An alternative to the illustration of the interviews question is a comedy routine by Brian Regan. You can find the bit, "Stupid in School," on his album "Brian Regan Live." Within this bit, he makes fun of his younger self by telling the funny ways he would respond to his teacher when she asked him difficult questions in class.

Regan's routine "Stupid in School" pokes fun of himself as a child. He recalls the annual day of public humiliation he knew to be the yearly spelling bee. He gives a nod of respect to the kid who intentionally misspelled his word so he could sit down dodging embarrassment: "Cat...K. A. T.

...I'm out of here," as the boy takes his seat. Regan extends the bit by sharing a funny episode illustrating the discomfort he felt when the teacher called on him in class: "Brian," asks the teacher, "what's the "I before E" rule?" Brian replies with uncertainty, "Duh, I before E...always?"

Tough questions can easily cause discomfort, whether you are a child in grammar school or a disciple on the way to Caesarea Philippi. "But who do you say that I am?" is a tough question. Regardless of the discomfort, Jesus' question demands a response from the disciples, and his question demands a response from each of us, as well.

2. An important book for my generation was Donald Miller's "Blue Like Jazz: Non-Religious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality" (Nelson, 2003). In many ways, Miller's reflections on Christian spirituality validated the experiences of young people who were struggling to make sense of their faith in a post-9/11 world. One episode in his book stands out in light of our conversation on "confessing." Miller and his friends put a confessional booth in the middle of their college campus during an annual party weekend. People invited into the confessional quickly learned Miller and his friends had prepared a twist on the concept of confession. Rather than asking the participants to confess their sins, Miller confessed to the participants the many ways he and other Christians had failed to follow the example of Christ. It is a powerful scene, which acknowledges our failure as disciples, but also the reality of our existing in process. Miller concludes the scene with these words: "Many people wanted to hug when we were done. All of the people who visited the booth were grateful and gracious. I was being changed through the process. I went in with doubts and came out believing so strongly in Jesus I was ready to die and be with him. I think that night was the beginning of a change for a lot of us."<sup>13</sup> While Miller is speaking of "confession" in the sense of pardoning of sins or forgiveness, his reflection could be equally valuable for our conversation on discipleship. The act of confessing is part of a transformative process through which we are brought closer to Jesus. Perhaps Miller's story of the confessional would be applicable for your congregational setting.

## **Video and Music**

A couple of videos and a few hymns/songs may inspire you during your time of preparation. You also may find some of these resources useful for your planning of worship:

- Rob Bell's video, "Dust," the eighth video in his "Nooma" series, provides an interesting perspective on discipleship. If anything, the video may offer a place to begin a conversation.
- Donald Miller's book, "Blue Like Jazz," was adapted into a movie and released under the same title in 2012. A version of the confessional booth episode is included in this movie. (Warning: The scene does contain material/language that may not be suitable for all ages). One of Miller's friends involved in this event was Tony Kriz (also known as Tony the Beat Poet). An interview with Tony Kriz, in which he tells the story of the confessional booth, can be found on his YouTube channel: [youtube.com/watch?v=NABrPyc7fhU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NABrPyc7fhU).

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, Donald, "Blue Like Jazz: Non-Religious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality," Nelson, 2003.

- These hymns may be appropriate for traditional settings: "Go, Make of All Disciples" (UMH #571), "Precious Name" (UMH #536); and "Precious Lord, Take my Hand" (UMH #474).
- These songs may be appropriate for use in contemporary settings: "Jesus Messiah," by Chris Tomlin; "The Cost," by Rend Collective; and, "Christ is Enough," by Hillsong United.

### **Further Reading**

Here are four resources you may find valuable during your planning for this week's message on "confessing." Each of the following resources takes a different approach to the topic of discipleship.

- "The Cost of Discipleship," by Dietrich Bonhoeffer – A necessary read for anyone who desires to go deeper into the theological significance of discipleship.
- "Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth," by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson – Based on the "Reveal" study performed by Willow Creek Community Church, "Move" is saturated with statistical information pertinent to reimagining discipleship amid a "seeker-friendly" culture.
- "Shift: Helping Congregations Back into the Game of Effective Ministry," by Phil Maynard – There are several materials available by Phil Maynard, but "Shift" is a good starting point. In particular, the third chapter of this book, "From Membership to Discipleship," may be helpful to you this week. Maynard has recently released a book by the same title: "From Membership to Discipleship."
- "Dust," a video featuring Rob Bell – In the eighth session in the "Nooma" series, Bell offers what some describe as a post-modern approach to discipleship.

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*The Rev. E. Rossiter Chellis is the pastor of Hampton United Methodist Church and Varnville United Methodist Church in South Carolina.*

## Sermon 3: Failure

Writer: Rev. Brad Gray

Scripture: Luke 22:54-62

### **Note to the Pastor**

Pastor, Preacher, Teacher, Reverend, and a thousand other titles that you carry, I am so grateful that you have decided to use this tool in whatever way you can to help you in ministry in your local context. I believe this week to be important for two reasons.

First, I believe this topic as it is related to the whole series may speak to the majority of the people sitting in the pews. Many of the folks we minister to and with have been in the church for a long time. Many have faithfully answered the call of Christ and most have chosen to follow Jesus – after all, they are present with you in worship. But many, if not all, have in some way experienced failure, struggle and doubt when it comes to their walk as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This week is the one in which they will be encouraged that they are not alone in their struggles. Not only do other disciples also experience difficulty, failure and even death of some kind, but God's own self walks with them in the midst of their pain. While this week will not explain away the pain, the Good News is that they are not abnormal when dealing with loss and that it is not a disqualifying feature of a disciple.

Secondly, this week reminds them that the path of discipleship is one of ups and downs. Our minds would like to think that there is a set process when it comes to faith and that as long as the instruction manual is followed closely, everything will fit together nice and neatly. Any seasoned disciple knows that not to be the case, but we still yearn for that process and secretly think we are different if it is not that easy. We celebrate Peter's call and acceptance as a disciple the first two weeks, so this third week is essential because even the one on whom the Church would be built struggled. Peter's denial brings us solace to know that we are not alone when we struggle, doubt, and fear. We are in good company.

This sermon is meant to be a difficult one to preach and to hear, but it is necessary to understand the full scope of what it means to be a disciple, for failure brings out our complete need for redemption. May God bless you as you walk with your people and with Peter through denial and failure. Peace for the journey.

### **Exegesis: Luke 22:54-62**

Throughout his Gospel, Luke shows a certain concern for those considered "lost." For example, only in Luke's Gospel do we find stories concerning a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost child – all of which are eventually found. Luke also tells the story of the thief on the cross, the one whom Jesus invites into paradise – again one who is lost but now is found. Luke seems to have a soft spot in his heart for lost things.<sup>14</sup> His treatment of Peter's denial of Christ fits this theme. Peter falls into this category of being lost during the accusations made by those gathered around the fire. Eventually, he too would be

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<sup>14</sup> Duling, Dennis and Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenthesis, Myth and History*, 3rd edition. Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994, 370.

found as Luke reports his being the only male disciple who goes to the tomb following the resurrection.

Luke's version of the story of the denial is the only one of the four Gospels that begins with Peter following from a distance, and this Gospel continuously tells of the entire experience start to finish. The other Gospels seem to focus on the greater narrative of Christ's Passion story, interspersing details of the denial during Jesus' questioning. In Luke, the disciple becomes the focal point. He takes the main stage for his moment of truth, which ultimately ends in failure. Raymond Brown points out about the Gospel writer, "Luke is a gifted storyteller, e.g., manifesting a truly artistic sense (the beautifully balanced infancy narratives), and presenting scenes of exquisite tenderness (the 'penitent thief')...Accurately, Dante described him as 'the scribe of the gentleness of Christ' – more than any other evangelist Luke has given the world a Jesus to love."<sup>15</sup> As such, Luke's portrayal of Peter's denial is a story masterfully told. Luke is the only Gospel writer that tells of Jesus' eyes falling upon Peter immediately at the cock's crow, as if both Jesus and Peter remembered in that moment. This small detail adds a layer to an already painful reality. It is one thing for Peter to remember Jesus' earlier prediction; it is altogether another thing to have to look the man whom he has just denied in the eyes.

Luke's telling of the story also differs slightly from the other Gospels regarding the accusations that are levied against Peter. While the other Gospels' accusers associate Peter with Jesus by simply saying, "with him," Luke has what appears to be an intentional sequence. The first accuser says, "with him," which seems standard to the Gospels and implies an intimacy with Jesus. The second accuser says, "one of them," which broadens the scope, guessing that Peter is not merely one of those who followed Jesus. The third accuser says, "Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean," insinuating that he was from the same region that Jesus had spent so much of his time. With each accusation and the accompanying denial, Peter is moving further and further away from the truth about who he is. For someone to be so caught up in a lie that they disown their place of origin demonstrates the depths to which Peter has fallen in attempting to distance himself from Jesus. His failure is complete.

## **The Sermon Outline**

### **Come, Follow Me: Failure**

- I. Begin with the question, "What difference has faith made in your life?" A response offered by a disciple talks about being released from a fear of death that often accompanies people. This would be a great place to think about other fears that people have around the topic of loss and failure.
  
- II. Discipleship experiences life in ways we never could imagine, and that even includes the hard and difficult times. The quote from Stanley Hauerwas in the manuscript encompasses

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<sup>15</sup> Brown, Raymond E., *An Introduction To The New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997, 267.



the idea of experiencing unimaginable things in our journey of faith. The overarching theme of Luke 22:54-62 centers on loss and failure. Peter's experience as a disciple during those difficult three days of Jesus' Passion narrative are symbolic of our own discipleship experiences when it comes to failure.

- III. Our tradition does not forget Peter's experience. In fact, it has been memorialized with a sacred site, the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu (cock's crow). The tradition of discipleship includes a site of pain to help us remember that suffering and denial can be a part of our walk with Christ.
  - a. What is denial? Simply put, a lack of memory. We forget. Peter forgot. When things get really tough, we lose focus of our call to "Come, Follow Me" and think, act, speak and even believe in ways that are contradictory to what we originally imagined faith to be. Looking at the details of Luke 22:54-62, Peter offers us an example of the difficulties when things do not go according to plan.
  - b. Peter is still following Jesus, but now at a distance. How often do we continue to follow, but only at a safe distance? Peter's failure is exposed to himself.
  - c. Peter still seeks community. He attempts to warm himself by the fire with others. When we struggle, our natural inclination is to seek community still, even to our detriment. Peter's failure is exposed to others.
  - d. In his denial, Peter's memory fades. He focuses only on his own failure and disappointment. Peter's failure is exposed to Jesus.
- IV. Failure is extremely hard to experience. It can even lead us to the question, "What difference has faith made in my life?" If that question comes, and if the answer is not easily available, know that you are not alone. Others have been there, and God is with you even then.

The life of a disciple includes it all – even that which you never could have imagined.

### **The Sermon**

The question was one that gets asked in church from time to time: "What difference has faith made in your life?" The young woman tentatively raised her hand, not one to normally respond aloud in a group setting. "My faith has helped me conquer my fear of death. Most of my life I have been terrified of the thought of dying. Over the last year, my faith has helped me to not be so afraid of losing my life." What a tremendous thought from someone who easily is living in the first half of life. Most people are afraid of death to some degree or another. The world of medicine, in many ways, prides itself on keeping people alive as long as possible. Our monetary investment in military spending for weapons and staffing enables us to live in a "safer" world. We institute safety measures in our planes, trains and automobiles to protect us in case of an accident. All of this in order that we are assured the maximum amount of years on this planet. And yet, we follow a man who says, "For those who want to

save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:25) Now, let us assume that Jesus was not a masochist who went looking for death around every corner. Instead, what Jesus may have been saying is that the life of a disciple will include some form of loss or death both literally and figuratively.

We do not really think about having to deal with pain and suffering when it comes to being a disciple. In all likelihood, we were either raised in the faith or had some spiritual conversion at some point. Theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas talks about a life of discipleship in terms of conversion. He says, “I resist the notion that conversion is a sudden change at a particular point in one’s life. Now, people clearly have had overwhelming religious experiences of which I stand in awe. But conversion is the name for the lifelong process of discovery, in that one’s life has been constituted by a good God in ways one never could have imagined.”<sup>16</sup>

Today’s Gospel reading from Luke captures the essence of a disciple’s life that includes that which we could never have imagined, even pain and suffering. One might wonder if any pain we experience can compare to that which we associate with the end of Holy Week, culminating in a bloody cross on Good Friday and a loneliness spent waiting on Holy Saturday. It is a vital piece of our story, one that includes doubt and death. It is a stark reminder that when we put on the mantle of disciple, there are no promises that life will always be sunshine and roses. In fact, quite the opposite, our life will experience loss and failure.

According to Luke’s Gospel, right before the prediction of Peter’s denial, in verses 31 and 32, Jesus says, “Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Did you catch that? “...when once you have turned back” means that it is going to happen – Jesus knew Peter was going to fail. We are all going to fail, we are going to have moments of weakness, struggle, doubt and despair when it comes to a life of discipleship following Jesus.

If you ever have the opportunity to visit Israel and the Holy Land, one of the sites you will inevitably spend time touring will be the Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu. The word Gallicantu is Latin for “cock’s crow.” It is the site that memorializes the late-night interaction Peter experienced from the Gospel lesson for today. It seems strange that our tradition would choose to place a church, a space to worship, in the very spot that Peter – the “rock” of the Church – denied even knowing our Savior. But we are a people who remember. We remember his failure because his failure was not remembering. Peter forgets it all.

Oftentimes, a denial is simply a lack of memory. It is a momentary statement made when forgetting all that lies behind. For this reason, acts of remembrance are so important because in those moments of stress and struggle, our memory tends to fade. We develop tunnel vision, only seeing the difficulty we face. We forget all that is good, right and just. We begin to buy into the lie and corruption offered to us as a quick fix, an easy answer, a simple solution. We ultimately suffer a spiritual amnesia.

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<sup>16</sup> Berkman, John and Michael Cartwright, eds. *The Hauerwas Reader: Stanley Hauerwas*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001, 534.

Because of this, our clouded minds lock onto anything that will keep us safe, even that which is not of God. A new perceived reality takes hold of us. It can even be argued that our own expectations of what a life of discipleship might be begin to crumble and die.

The disciple Peter offers us an interesting glimpse into an example of experiencing a death of expectations. So let's look at the text again. "But Peter was following at a distance." Is this not how we tend to follow Christ in a lot of ways. Just enough to still be considered a follower but enough distance so as not to get caught up in any collateral damage that might occur if something should happen? Something has happened in that Jesus was arrested and being dragged before the high priest, and here is Peter – just close enough to witness what will happen, but only at a safe distance away to avoid being harmed any further. No doubt curious about what is happening, but fearful enough not to engage.

When we become fearful, our natural tendency is to pull away, if not to run in the other direction altogether. While Peter was not like most of the other disciples who were nowhere to be found, the once-bold disciple has decided to fade into the background of the Jesus story that is unfolding in the courtyard. Even in his loneliness and loss, we see that Peter still longs to be a part of something. While others have gathered to witness what was going on with this man Jesus, Peter slips into the crowd of people who are warming themselves by the fire. No matter our circumstances in life, our desire to belong to something, to fit in with others, is very strong. Oftentimes, that is what leads us to faith as a disciple in the first place. We want to be a part of something that is amazing, something we have witnessed and experienced. And so, even as Peter is distancing himself from Jesus in a moment of weakness, he does not do it alone but seeks the comfort of others, those around the fire.

Even the temporary community and comforting warmth of the fire does not provide the safety he seeks. As "The Interpreter's Bible" states, "The very light of the fire that warms, in that instant betrays."<sup>17</sup> It is hard to see things by the light of the fire at night. Very different than seeing things in the light of day. You can notice things, but a full picture is elusive. Sitting around a fire with others provides just enough light to be able to see the other's faces, but the darkness is never fully erased. It was the light of the fire in which people began to recognize Peter. Three different times accusations were made against him and each time he denied even knowing the accused. The charges directed at the disciple became more vague each time. They went from being 'with him' to being 'one of them' to being from the same general area as some of Jesus' followers. It is as if Peter is slipping further and further away from the once-intimate relationship with Christ that had defined his life for the past three years."

In his denial, Peter's memory failed. He forgot the times of success in following Christ, he forgot his boasting claim, "You are the Christ!" He forgot Jesus grabbing him as he sank down in the sea. He forgot the corrective declaration, "Get behind me Satan." He forgot his own protest of, "Don't wash

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<sup>17</sup> Buttrick, George Arthur, ed. *The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 8*. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952, 393.

my feet, Lord." Peter forgot it all and instead is left with the unshakeable lonely gaze of his rabbi's eyes as they fell upon him in the courtyard.

While the three accusers only saw dimly because of the firelight, Jesus saw more completely. It was only Jesus' piercing look in verse 61 that rightly convicts Peter of being who he had been denying he was. For the first time, he remembered something. He recalled Jesus' warning from earlier in the evening. The darkness of the moment, as he saw Jesus in shackles, overwhelmed Peter so much that only his short-term memory seemed to kick in. He must have thought, "How did he know?" For it is in this moment that Peter then remembered, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." Utter failure. In fact, there may not be a way for us to fail any more miserably than Peter did that night.

Rembrandt's "The Denial of Saint Peter" portrays this scene in a dramatic way. By using a lighter color paint, the light from a candle held by a young boy falls on the face of a distraught Peter. Meanwhile, over his shoulder, the shadowy figure of a man with his hands behind his back looks toward the light and the denial taking place. In the painting, no facial expression is evident on Jesus' face, just his gaze falling on Peter. Jesus knew it would happen, he had told Peter as much, so his look is not one of judgment in that moment. And Jesus is never one to gloat or say, "Told ya so!" Instead, we see in Christ an unconditional and indiscriminate observer, much like his love for us.

Now, if we are honest, none of us who choose to be a disciple ever wants to deny Jesus. We do not set out thinking that at some point we will fail. We are hardwired to succeed and sometimes at any cost. We do not want to admit that our actions or inactions will lead to pain and suffering in any capacity, either for us or for others. But like Peter, we forget. We become so overwhelmed by all that goes on around us that we suddenly look up and cannot remember how we ever let things get so out of hand. In the moment, it can be devastating. However, the truth is that it is merely another part of the greater adventure of discipleship, one of those parts you wouldn't wish upon yourself or anyone else, but a part nonetheless. How long will it last? God only knows, but be assured, God does know.

Peter never could have imagined himself in a place of such loss and despair when he first left his nets and followed Jesus. None of those first disciples could have imagined themselves lost like they were from Thursday night until Sunday morning. After all, Jesus was dead. At some point they may have even asked, "What difference has faith made in my life?" A few days later, the answer would look different, but in those moments of doubt and fear, the pain of that loss was real. Those men and women who grieved and experienced such loss were still disciples. They never stopped being disciples.

You see, the life of a disciple is so bold that it even includes the pain, suffering and loss that we experience. We do not become less of a disciple when we struggle. That is a hard lesson, one we would surely wish away. But it is a necessary one. The life of discipleship is like putting a puzzle together piece by piece without the help a full picture, more so than being a linear process that moves you from point A to point Z. Even when we struggle, we know the God who is Alpha and Omega is with us. Will the pieces always fit together nice and neat? No. Will there be loss? Yes. Peter's expectation for what a faithful disciple should look like died the night of his denial. We must never forget that where there

is death, there is also rebirth. The life of a disciple includes it all, even that which we never could have imagined.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

### **Other Illustrations**

While there was a specific reference to Rembrandt in the sermon, many artists over the years have portrayed Peter's denial in many different ways. A quick search online might prove fruitful to find other examples to be shown or to be referred to within the sermon.

For poetry lovers, Alfred Lord Tennyson's line, "'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" comes to mind. Below is that particular line in context:

"I envy not in any moods  
The captive void of noble rage,  
The linnet born within the cage,  
That never knew the summer woods:

"I envy not the beast that takes  
His license in the field of time,  
Unfetter'd by the sense of crime,  
To whom a conscience never wakes;

"Nor, what may count itself as blest,  
The heart that never plighted troth  
But stagnates in the weeds of sloth;  
Nor any want-begotten rest.

"I hold it true, whate'er befall;  
I feel it, when I sorrow most;  
'Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all."

– Alfred Lord Tennyson  
*In Memoriam A.H.H. OBIT MDCCCXXXIII: 27*

"Star Wars" also offers a great portrayal of the hero's journey, i.e., The Path to Discipleship. Several examples of failure come to mind. Luke Skywalker's training on Dagobah with Yoda would be a great example of trying and failing. Showing a clip in a contemporary setting with video capability may be an option. To that extent, any movie in which an individual or team fails in some capacity would be appropriate.

### **Video and Music**

Music for a tradition setting could easily include any hymn from the Passion and Death section in "The United Methodist Hymnal." Examples include:

- "To Mock Your Reign, O Dearest Lord," #285
- "O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done," #287
- "Ah, Holy Jesus," #289
- "What Wondrous Love Is This," #292

## Come, Follow Me

- "Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed," #294
- "Beneath the Cross of Jesus," #297
- "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross," #301

Music for a contemporary setting may prove to be a bit more challenging. Many contemporary settings offer "praise music," which may rub up against the concept of today's sermon topic. Nonetheless, some options for contemporary songs include:

- "Beautiful Things," Gungor
- "God With Us," MercyMe
- "How He Loves," David Crowder Band
- "If We Are The Body," Casting Crowns
- "Lead Me to the Cross," Hillsong United
- "Let Me Feel You Shine," David Crowder Band
- "Lord, I Need You," Matt Maher
- "My Savior My God," Aaron Shust
- "You Never Let Go," Jeremy Camp
- "Need You Now (How Many Times)," Plumb
- "Oh My God," David Crowder Band
- "Sweetly Broken," Jeremy Riddle
- "The Light in Me," Brandon Heath
- "You Are I Am," MercyMe
- "You Love Me Anyway," Sidewalk Prophets
- "Your Great Name," Natalie Grant

## **Further Reading**

**Here are some books to help in the process of looking at Luke 22:54-62:**

- Achtemeier, Pal J, ed. *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishing Co., 1996.
- Barclay, William, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Brown, Raymond E., *An Introduction To The New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.
- Buttrick, George Arthur, ed. *The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 8*. New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952.
- Duling, Dennis and Norman Perrin, *The New Testament: Proclamation and Parenesis, Myth and History, 3rd edition*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994.

**These books will help shape your thoughts related to failure and loss when it comes to thinking about Peter's life:**

- Campbell, Joseph, *The Power of Myth*. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.
- Berkman, John and Michael Cartwright, eds. *The Hauerwas Reader: Stanley Hauerwas*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Rohr, Richard, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2014.
- Rohr, Richard and friends, *Contemplation in Action*. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2006.

## **Online Resources**

- [blueletterbible.org](http://blueletterbible.org)
- [workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx](http://workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx)
- [textweek.com](http://textweek.com)
- [davidlose.net/2013/02/luke-22-54-55/](http://davidlose.net/2013/02/luke-22-54-55/)
- [davidlose.net/2013/03/luke-22-54-60a/](http://davidlose.net/2013/03/luke-22-54-60a/)
- [davidlose.net/2013/03/luke-22-60-62/](http://davidlose.net/2013/03/luke-22-60-62/)

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*The Rev. Brad Gray is the pastor of St. Andrews Parish  
United Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

## Sermon 4: Transforming

Writer: Rev. Wendy Hudson-Jacoby

Scripture: John 21:1-14

### **Note to the Pastor**

Peter has always been one of my favorite Bible characters, probably because he most clearly represents both the best and the worst of our human experience. In other words, Peter is no goody-two-shoes or perfect Pollyanna. He's impulsive, impetuous and rash. He is often naïve, thinks before he speaks, and may have good intentions – but when it comes to putting them into practice, he often has a hard time following through. Peter is so relatable to us; the 2,000 years that separates the Gospel narrative from our lived experience melt when we focus on Peter.

In this sermon, we mark a shift in Peter's life and in our lives on the path of discipleship. Here, Peter encounters the resurrected Lord Jesus, not just in Jerusalem but also in the place of Peter's ordinary life. Once Peter recognizes Jesus, his response is typical Peter – impulsive and urgent – but the purpose behind his actions has refined. He wants to be with Jesus, to be close to him. He recognizes Jesus in abundance. Our own discipleship journey begins to shift when we recognize that in the face of the living Christ, we have more than we need. Our devotion to Jesus begins to shift from duty or obligation to overflowing joy and delight when we see that Jesus gives us an abundance of grace in our own ordinary lives.

As you prepare for this sermon, note the shift from last week's despondency to this week's delight. Where in your own journey have you experienced a shift from obligatory discipleship to joyful discipleship? When have you needed an abundant or overflowing experience of God's grace and forgiveness and hope? Place yourself in John Wesley's shoes during his Aldersgate experience. Have you had an experience with Jesus like that? How can your lived experience inform your sermon and what your community needs to move them along the path toward discipleship?

### **Exegesis: John 21:1-14**

Simon Peter is the leader of the action in this story. As usual, he is exaggerated in his actions, impulsive in his words, and "all in" in his every response. He is the one who suggests a nighttime fishing trip (v.3) and who jumps right into the water when he realizes Jesus is on the shore (vs. 7). He single-handedly dragged the net to shore (v.11) and was the one Jesus spoke to after breakfast (vs. 15).

This passage is similar to other miracle stories found in John. We see the three-fold pattern of Johannine miracles: a situation of need, a miracle to meet the need, and acknowledgment of and response to the miracle. But given that this pericope takes place post-Resurrection, this story goes



beyond a mere miracle and into the revelation of Christ himself.<sup>18</sup> In this story, we begin to see Peter move from a mere follower into a transformed disciple.

This is the third of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. It is also the one where the disciples have a difficult time immediately recognizing that this is Jesus. The first two appearances in John take place in a locked room, a place of protection and comfort, even if the disciples are afraid of being taken away by the religious leaders. This appearance, however, takes place in their “normal lives,” out in the world where they are no longer locked away or protected by doors or one another.

Peter suggested this nighttime fishing trip, the usual time for fishermen to make their haul. Remember, each part of John often has multiple meanings: Things aren’t as simple as they appear. The disciples got into a boat, a symbol of the church in early Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Peter’s declaration that they were to go fishing also harkens to Jesus’ claim in Luke 5:10 that when they followed him they would fish for people. And throughout the Gospel of John, nothing good happens at night!<sup>20</sup>

Notice the similarity of Jesus’ appearance to the fishermen here and his appearance in the garden to Mary in Chapter 20. Both parties begin their journeys in the dark, before the dawn, and the sun has just risen when they encounter Jesus. At both, the disciples and Mary did not initially recognize Jesus until he spoke to them. Here, Jesus tells them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat; when it fills with fish, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” exclaimed it was their Messiah. The sheer abundance of the haul is a reminder, especially to the Disciple Jesus Loved, of all the previous miraculous abundance the disciples have witnessed, such as water changing to the best wine (2:1-11) and feeding 5,000 with a basket of fish and bread (6:1-14).

Peter, impulsive Peter, pauses just long enough to grab his cloak before he “throws himself into the sea,”<sup>21</sup> leaving his friends to bring in the boat and net. Fishermen of the time customarily were naked or wore just a loincloth while they worked.

When Peter joins Jesus on the shore, it is the second time Peter has confronted his relationship to Jesus around a charcoal fire<sup>22</sup>. When Jesus was being questioned by the high priest, Peter was waiting around outside, in the night air, warming himself by a charcoal fire and was identified three times as a follower of Jesus. Three times he denied his relationship, until the cock crowed (18:15-27). Smells are among the strongest triggers of memory; imagine Peter’s feeling of pain, disappointment and betrayal that were triggered by the smell of this beachside charcoal fire.

Jesus is already cooking bread and fish but asks for some of the catch anyway. Peter once again takes the lead, going to get the fish that Jesus asks for. Jesus cooks them a meal (the bread, which is his body, and the fish, which is the labor of their hands, caught under Jesus’ instruction/direction) and shares it with them, a direct connection back to the Last Supper. They seem to eat in stunned silence,

<sup>18</sup> Hylan, Susan and Gail O’Day, *Westminster Bible Companion: John*, p. 200

<sup>19</sup> Madsen, Norman, *Basic Bible Commentary: John*, p. 149

<sup>20</sup> Howard-Brooks, p. 162

<sup>21</sup> Wright, N.T. *John for Everyone: Part 2*, 155.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158

realizing that they are not the same anymore. Their faith was transformed when they experienced the bounty and abundance of Jesus Christ in the ordinariness of their regular lives.

The disciples are shown in a concrete way that when they venture into the world and are willing to follow Jesus' commands, they are fed by Jesus himself. When they tried to make their own way, they came up empty handed. But when the disciples acknowledged that they were empty and helpless on their own, they were given a huge bounty, a bounty representing all the people of the earth. The bounty wasn't for their personal fulfillment but for the fulfillment and salvation of the world. "The church's home isn't behind locked doors but out in the open, exposed yet safely under the guidance of God's spirit."<sup>23</sup>

### **The Sermon Outline**

Introduction: Examples of times when you have felt knocked down by life's circumstances. These experiences of defeat are similar to Peter's feelings when he denied Jesus around the campfire at Caiaphas' home before Jesus was crucified.

1. Peter recognizes Jesus when he catches an abundant haul of fish and his response changes from sadness to incredible joy. He must get into Jesus' presence as quickly as possible.
  - a. Jesus' presence transforms even the mundane part of our lives and creates abundance where there was scarcity.
2. When we look with the eyes of Jesus, we can see his abundant forgiveness and mercy all around us. That new awareness changes the way we view ordinary tasks, opportunities and annoyance.
3. When we recognize the abundance of Christ around us, we are moved to respond with joy and celebration, like Peter did when he jumped out of the boat.
  - a. Compare this response to Jesus' presence to the first time Peter tried to get to Jesus on the water, when he focused on his own scarcity and sank.
4. Jesus nourishes us in our discipleship journey by offering us the sacrament of Holy Communion.
  - a. Children can grasp the delight and joy of Holy Communion, and their delight in the sacrament can change our hearts.
5. Jesus gives us the same power to change and be transformed that he offered Peter. Will we accept it?

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<sup>23</sup> *Howard-Brook, p. 164*

## The Sermon

Remember the television commercial for Life Alert,<sup>24</sup> a button that older adults wear so if they fall, they can call for help? Anyone remember the famous slogan? “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!” The quality of acting and the production value of the commercial certainly won’t win any Oscars, but that tag line has embedded itself in popular culture. Part of its appeal, I think, is that at one time or another, we all have fallen and couldn’t get ourselves up. Poor health, a relationship that ended, a decision made out of anger, a financial disaster, a lost job, a betrayal – any of these can knock us to our knees and we feel stuck, unable to move forward.

Our life as a follower of Jesus Christ, as a disciple, is no different. We discovered last week when we stood with Peter around a campfire that sometimes, despite our best intentions, we fail Jesus. We will deny him. We choose our own path and the easy way out when we have the chance. And we grieve our faltering. We run away to try to hide from the consequences of our sin. We fall, and we don’t think we will ever get back up so we can follow Jesus the way we want to. We will be like Peter.

But as we see today, Jesus doesn’t leave us in our sin, in our failures and in our fallen state. Instead, as we discover when Jesus meets Peter on the edge of the Sea of Galilee, our encounters with the living Christ transform us. Once we experience the abundance of the mercy of Jesus, we are never the same. We rise into a deeper experience of discipleship that changes us.

The last time we saw Peter, he was in Jerusalem. He had denied Jesus not once or twice, but three times before Jesus was crucified. He fled in shame and fear. He was distraught. But we know the story doesn’t end there! Jesus was resurrected, and he appeared to the disciples in Jerusalem twice. The second time, he told Peter and the other disciples that He would send them where they needed to go. But as usual, Peter being Peter, he was impatient. He was rash. He wanted his life to get back to normal, whatever that would be, so he and his friends left Jerusalem and went back to what they knew best – fishing.

Now, some of you can really relate to Peter here. He gets his friends together (a total of seven, a nice Biblical number for wholeness and completeness) and off they go, into the night, with their nets, their questions, their impatience. They want to *DO* something while they are waiting around for Jesus to come back.

And so they fish. All night long. In the dark. Mostly in silence. And... and... nothing. Not a single bite, not a single fish, not a solitary tug on the net. Nothing.

Until... until as the first light peeks over the horizon, a solitary figure calls out from the sea shore. “Little children,” he says. “Sweet, innocent, misguided, good intentioned friends,” he says. “Just throw your net on the other side of the boat.”

They didn’t have anything else to do, so why not? And suddenly, not one bite, not one tug, not a single fish, but a whole school of them – so many that the nets were straining. So many that the boat started

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<sup>24</sup> *lifealert.com*

to tilt to the side. So many that their arms strained under the weight. Not just one, not just a few but so many. An abundance of fish. And in that moment, in that abundance, in their everyday lives, they realized who called to them. Jesus, their Lord. Their attitudes, their hearts, their faith, their lives of faith were transformed in that one moment when they recognized Jesus. Even though Peter faltered, even though he previously abandoned Jesus, Jesus still calls out to him. And that love, that forgiveness, that invitation is what we call grace. And grace transforms us as disciples of Christ.

As we explore the shift from mere membership to passionate discipleship during these weeks, this encounter between Jesus and Peter shows us that when we see Christ's mercy all around us – in our ordinary, daily lives where people know us and we are known – we are changed. Christ's mercy transforms us.

When those moments occur in our lives – when the blinders fall off, when the scales are removed, when the usual way doesn't work anymore – we are awakened to the reality that Christ comes to give us MORE in our lives. More grace than we could ever deserve. More forgiveness than we thought possible. More mercy than our hearts can bear. When the dawn begins to break in the dark places of our lives, the places where we have faltered and failed, we realize that Jesus is standing right there, right where we are, and beckons us, "Come, have more. I come that you may have life and have it abundantly."

And suddenly, like Peter realized the moment before he leapt into the water, when we follow the instructions of Christ, when we open our eyes to the abundance around us, the ordinary everyday things of life are no longer ordinary but are filled with possibility, hope and grace. They are filled with the Risen Christ. They are transformed. And then, by God's grace, so are we.

We are transformed when we realize that the people standing in the long line before us at the grocery store used to make us irritated and short-tempered. But when we look for Jesus in them, we see invitations to pray for others. A kind word to the cashier leads to an invitation to pray for his difficult family situation. Abundance transforms.

Late one evening a mother and her two daughters show up at your house. They have been kicked out of their temporary home with a friend, after being abandoned by their abusive husband and father. They need a place to stay. You could refer them to a homeless shelter or you could let them stay in your spare bedroom until they can get on their feet. Abundance transforms.

You've been saving a year for a family vacation to Disney World. Right before you reserve your trip, you find out a family in your church has no car. Without the car, the single mom cannot get to work and will become homeless. Your vacation money will provide the down payment for her to get a used vehicle. You offer the money to her instead of taking your trip. Abundance transforms.

One of our members, Jonathan, signed up to participate in a walking program through his work. If he walked a certain number of miles per week, he would receive a \$5 reward. He could have used those few dollars to buy himself a luxury item or cut down on his grocery bill. Instead, he looked for Jesus' instruction in those \$5. And he heard a call to buy bars of soap. Plain old soap. But soap that will go to

families who cannot afford the basics of human hygiene. To children who enter homeless shelters with nothing but the clothes on their backs. He told a few people about his idea. And soon, bars of soap began to appear on his porch. At church. On his desk at work. And in the 13 weeks between Memorial Day and Labor Day, he walked for and received as donations 800 bars of soap – 800 blessings. Amazing abundance that transforms.

And that abundance of fish that Peter experienced, that transformation, was cause for Peter to celebrate. He jumped out of the boat and swam as fast and furiously as he could toward Jesus. Nothing stopped him. Now remember, Peter had tried this once before. In a storm, in a place of complete fear and scarcity, Peter saw Jesus walking on the water and wanted to come to him. So Jesus invited Peter. And out he climbed, a bit cautiously, a bit carefully, and gingerly began walking across the water, until he realized that the storm still raged, the wind still howled and the waves still slapped at his legs. And even though he could see Jesus, he was afraid. His fear took over. He began to sink. He was saved by the outstretched hands of Jesus.

But this time – this time was different. Peter was different. He recognized Jesus in abundance – the abundance of fish, yes, but also the abundance of grace and forgiveness and mercy that Jesus offered to Peter, even in the face of Peter’s disobedience, his betrayal, his doubt. Jesus offered Peter the abundance of new life – again and again and again. This is what truly transforms us and moves us to a deeper level of joyful discipleship – no matter what we do or say or experience, Jesus welcomes us. Not begrudgingly, not half-heartedly, but wholly and completely and with great love. That abundant life gives us courage, creativity and boldness to follow Jesus everywhere.

So Peter jumps out of the boat and swims to Jesus. Without fear, without caution, just completely and with intense purpose. When he arrives on the shore, Jesus doesn’t just give him a high five or a “Good job.” He prepares a feast. A feast of abundance.

Eating together always has been a hallmark of Jesus and his disciples. Jesus spent so much of his ministry eating at tables – with outcasts, with friends, with extended family members, as a guest and then, at his last meal, as the host. His meals were raucous parties – full of celebration and life. They transformed those who ate there – sex workers were given seats of honor, grandstanders were humbled, tax collectors returned the money they stole back to the poor after an invitation to feast with Jesus.

Jesus offers us that same opportunity of transformation every time we gather around the table to celebrate the Eucharist. Each time we lift up the bread and the fruit of the vine, we participate in the feast of Jesus. We may bring bread we have baked and cups of juice we have prepared, but the abundant, unending grace, mercy and love of Jesus Christ transforms our gifts into a feast where a single bite can change us and change our world.

Francisco was a precocious 5-year-old. He started coming to church with his older brother and sister. He was known to talk all throughout the service, sometimes disturbing the older members. He was often wiggly and chatty and excitable, and the life-long members would murmur among themselves, asking, “Where is his mother?” He disturbed their worship experience more than enlivening it.

This dying, declining church liked their worship experience to be quiet and reflective, with all proper decorum and solemnity. They especially liked their communion experience that way. Holy Communion was a solemn occasion, with quiet, almost funeral-like music played. It was the most silent part of worship.

Until one morning, when Francisco went down with his siblings to receive communion. He danced down the aisle, in the way of excited 5-year-olds. He eagerly took a piece of bread and popped it in his mouth. He took the little cup with grape juice and sucked it down loudly. As he got up from kneeling at the communion rail, he looked up at his sister and said in a loud voice, "Mmm, mmm! That was so good! Can I get some more?"

A hush fell over the small congregation. And in Francisco's delight, in his joy, in his desire for more – more of Christ, more of love, more of those gathered – the complainers began to feel a change in their hearts. They had a glimpse of the feast that Jesus prepares. They were transformed when they witnessed the abundance that was possible. They saw Jesus.

Friends, this same transforming power that moved Peter from fear to joy is available to you. The transforming power that enabled him to recognize Jesus when he saw the abundance Jesus provides is available to you. The transforming power that changed the hardened, cynical hearts when they saw Francisco feast at the communion table is available to you. To take you with Jesus to a new place of forgiveness, joy and mercy. All you have to do is jump out of your boat. See Jesus in the abundance that surrounds you. And respond with unrivaled abandon. Can you see him? Do you hear him calling to you? How will you respond?

### **Other Illustrations**

John Wesley had his own experience of fear on the water when he was traveling back from the colonies to England after his failed stint as a missionary. When a large storm surrounded the ship and the ship was threatened with sinking, Wesley was fearful for his life. He found no peace in God or God's promises. He was jealous of and curious about the faith of his fellow passengers, a group of Moravians. They sang and prayed with great peace and joy even in the storm. Upon return to England, Wesley studied with the leader of the Moravians who nurtured him in prayer and maintaining faith. When Wesley had his Aldersgate experience and his heart was strangely warmed, Wesley transformed. His faith became personal – he could see the saving presence of God everywhere.

### **Video and Music**

The hymn, "Lord, You Have Come To the Lakeshore (Tú has venido a la orilla)" is number 344 in The United Methodist Hymnal. Originally the song refers to Jesus' calling of the brothers to leave their fishing careers and follow him, but it has great connections to this scripture passage and the theme of joyful obedience in discipleship. For a contemporary service, the song "Thrive" by Casting Crowns connects with the joyful, abundant nature of discipleship.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> [youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_0uczHvvlM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_0uczHvvlM)

One response activity is to include a piece of paper with a simple fish outline printed in each bulletin or on each chair. Near the end or at the end of the sermon, invite people to write down an experience they have of Jesus' abundance. In the song after the sermon, have worshipers bring their sign of abundance to a net draped in the worship space and place it on or inside the net to create a visible sign of the abundant presence of Jesus in our daily lives.

N.T. Wright has a short video at [theworkofthepeople.com](http://theworkofthepeople.com) on the abundant life. This website also has several background loops and short films by a variety of speakers, theologians, preachers and scholars on the transformative act of partaking in Holy Communion.

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*The Rev. Wendy Hudson-Jacoby is the pastor of Two Rivers United Methodist Church in the Cainhoy community near Wando, South Carolina.*

## Sermon 5: Serving

Writer: Rev. Neal Woods

Scripture: John 21:15-19

### Note to the Pastor

Our faith is about discipleship. It is about being in relationship with the One who created us, redeemed us, sustains us, and loves us beyond measure. And even though we have a God who is always faithful, we are imperfect beings who do not always get it right. This means that we fail, and fail often. The good news of this passage is that God is a God of many chances. God is in the sanctifying business, so God is patient enough to wait for us and work with us, restoring us to a life of discipleship and commissioning us to bear witness to our love for God and neighbor and to the Gospel by serving one another.

We have people in our churches from all walks of life. Some of our members may feel like they have been caught up in some sin or have put their faith on the back burner and that God is angry with them. They may feel like they have fallen beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. They may be living with the fear that there is no hope. This passage can serve as a reminder of the boundless love and grace of God and of the call to discipleship through service. Others may simply be living a convenient Christianity (what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace"), in which they miss the bigger picture of discipleship to their own detriment and stifled growth. This passage is a great reminder that we are called to join God in the healing work of the kingdom and that living into this call is part of living out the eternal life we all long for.

### Exegesis: John 21:15-19

You sit in a dark movie theater as everyone gets up to leave. The movie ended well, providing a satisfying conclusion, but you linger, hoping for a possible hint of something more. Then after the credits roll, there it is. A glimpse that whets your appetite for a possible sequel. John 21 is like that post-credit scene, giving a glimpse into Peter's restoration to discipleship, which is picked up in the Book of Acts (and possibly the Petrine epistles) as well as in later church history.

The early part of the chapter should send shivers of *déjà vu* down the spine of any reader who is familiar with the life of Peter. The passage finds Peter unwittingly retracing events from earlier in his life. As the chapter opens, we find Peter on a boat with six other disciples fishing on the Sea of Galilee. This is where we find Peter when he first encounters Jesus (Luke 5 gives the fullest account). Peter has fished all night without a catch, and Jesus performs a miraculous catch, which reveals who he is and captures Peter's attention. The difference is that in the earlier account, Peter demands that Jesus leave his presence, but in John 21, Peter jumps in the water and makes his way toward Jesus. After the morning's catch of 153 fish is unloaded, Jesus invites the disciples to breakfast. This is important and should not be overlooked. The provision of the catch and the breakfast as well as the invitation to fellowship are the beginning of the reconciliation process. Jesus is about to commission Peter (and the disciples as a whole) to a life of service. This life is made possible only as one is being equipped by God.



Jesus feeds his disciples before commissioning them to feed others. Our passage picks up as the meal ends.

Jesus asks Peter a question. It is a question that he will ask twice more, each time followed by the same instruction. "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me more than these?" Jesus asks.

There are at least three possible interpretations of what Jesus is asking here: 1. Jesus is asking whether Peter loves Jesus more than Peter loves the fish; 2. Jesus is asking if Peter loves Jesus more than Peter loves the other disciples; or 3. Jesus is asking if Peter loves Jesus more than the other disciples love Jesus. Given Peter's earlier declaration of loyalty in John's Gospel (John 13:37), the third option is most likely, but it could be that all three options are intended. After all, elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus makes it clear that we are to love God more than things (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13) and that we are to love God more than even those closest to us (Luke 14:26). Our love for Jesus must be paramount.

Peter answers the question in the affirmative and Jesus asks the question a second time. Much has been made about the author's use of synonyms. In this chapter, the author uses two words for "love," two words for "tending/feed," two words for "lambs/sheep," and two words for "know."<sup>26</sup> While drawing out these distinctions may produce homiletical bounty, the author of the fourth Gospel seems to enjoy employing synonyms to add variety to his writing. The word choice here is likely more stylistic than theological.

Peter answers again in the affirmative, and Jesus asks the question a third time. When Jesus asks the question a third time, we are told that "Peter felt hurt." This appears to be an allusion to Peter's three denials of Jesus after his arrest. Gail O'Day points out that by asking these questions, Jesus is reminding Peter of his command a few chapters earlier (John 13:34-35) after he washed their feet and right before he predicts Peter's denial of him: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>27</sup> Jesus has enacted the kingdom and will bring it to fulfillment, and he invites us to join him in this ministry. The meal has ended, but the feeding must continue.

After commissioning Peter, Jesus warns him that the life of discipleship will not always be easy. There will be long days, difficult circumstances, opposition, rejection and persecution. There is even a shadowy hint about Peter's death as a martyr for the faith. And Peter accepts the call. This Peter who was so frightened for his life in a Jerusalem courtyard just weeks before that he denied even knowing Jesus has received a second invitation to discipleship. Follow me. And Peter follows. Peter has heard these words before, but from the lips of the resurrected Jesus, the One who has conquered death, they seem to have a fuller meaning.

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<sup>26</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 404.

<sup>27</sup> O'Day, 861.

## **The Sermon Outline**

### **I. Introduction – A brief review of the series so far to help orient everyone in the congregation.**

My reason for beginning the sermon with a brief overview is to create a sense of continuity with what has come before. This will remind those who have heard the previous sermons in the series of where we have traveled so far and will enable those who have missed a week or more of the series to get on the same page of music with everyone else.

### **II. Reading of the scripture passage.**

Now that everyone is caught up, we can turn to the text at hand.

### **III. A brief summary of the verses that appear before our periscope.**

Because the assigned passage is dependent on what comes immediately before, it makes sense to briefly cover that. This summary will serve as a reminder for those who heard the previous Sunday's sermon.

### **IV. A retelling of the day's Gospel lesson.**

Now that we have sketched the background, we can see our text with new eyes. I have tried to use sense imagery to draw the connection between the two scenes we are looking at: Peter's denial and his restoration. Whether the author included these details in order to make this connection or not, I find it helpful to consider them. On some level, I think approaching the text this way helps the listener realize that God takes sin seriously. It isn't that God ignores sin or excuses sin; it is that God recognizes our sin and forgives us. It is important to understand that our ever-patient God, who was willing to forgive and restore Peter, is also willing to forgive and restore us.

### **V. A reflection on the connection between discipleship and service.**

This connection between discipleship and service is not unknown to Peter nor to John's original audience. The one thing that is new is that this message of discipleship now can be seen in the light of the resurrection. The Suhard quotation is one of my favorites because it reminds us that what we do is made possible because we are empowered by a living God who has been at work in the world well before we showed up on the scene.

### **VI. A glimpse into the future and how Peter managed to answer faithfully this call to discipleship.**

Jesus reminds Peter that disciples are called to share the love of God with others and to faithfully follow him, even when things get tough. Discipleship means living into the new life God has given us, so I think it is important to say a word about how Peter went about doing just that in his life after this point. The Chesterton quotation is intended to make the point that we all find ourselves at God's mercy, and when we receive the grace God offers, we begin to see things differently.

**VII. A time to reflect on our own relationships with God.**

Before concluding the sermon, I want to give listeners an opportunity to personalize the story: to think about their own relationship with God and how God's forgiveness is open to each of us.

**VIII. Conclusion – Story about grandmother and grandson.**

My hope is that this story will help reinforce the idea that a life of discipleship is a life of service. I think it might be effective to hear Christ's words to Peter as a commission of our own.

We are invited to accept Jesus' gift of forgiveness, Jesus' invitation to follow him, and Jesus' commission to serve others in the name of God. In short, we are invited to accept the call to discipleship for ourselves – a gift made possible only by God's grace.

**The Sermon**

**"Come Join the Living World"<sup>28</sup>**

When I was in Jericho a few years ago, our group visited a store that sold items made of Hebron glass. Hebron glass is a colorful hand-blown glass, whose increasing popularity is reflected in its inflated price, so a couple of my friends and I were looking around for something that wouldn't set us back so much. That's when I saw some little glass bowls. They looked similar to Hebron glass, but were slightly different in design and were only \$4, so I reached for one. A friend asked, "Why are you buying that?" I said that it was kind of cool looking, and I thought it would be perfect, not only as a souvenir from my time in Jericho, but also as a perfect container for our Ash Wednesday service. After all, we were in Jericho, the city where the walls came tumbling down into dust and ash.

Apparently, I was a good enough salesman that several of my friends bought a bowl for themselves. When we got back, my best friend called me up and said, "Have you held your Jericho bowl up to a light?" And I said, "Of course not. I'm not an idiot. Why would I do that?" He said, "Just hold it up to a light." So I did, and I saw what he saw. I could just make out a word etched in capital letters on the bottom of the bowl: FRANCE. I traveled all the way to Jericho to buy a bowl made in France.

That humble French bowl sitting in a basket in Jericho was suffering an identity crisis. As such, it reminds me a little of Peter at this point in the story. Peter has experienced a roller coaster ride with Jesus, where his assumptions have been challenged, expectations have been dashed, and illusions have been shattered. Through Peter's life we have had an opportunity to explore various characteristics of discipleship. We have seen how disciples are invited to belong to a wider community, how disciples follow and live sacrificially, how disciples experience the risen Lord and are awakened, how disciples might stumble and fall, and how disciples are being transformed and feast together. As we continue examining Peter's journey this morning, we are going to explore how disciples are forgiven and are called to serve.

*Read John 21:15-19*

As we discussed last week, Peter is in a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee, where he was when we first met him. And also as we first met him, he is not catching a thing. That is until a voice from the shore calls out and tells him to cast his nets on the other side. When Peter raises the nets, he finds them almost bursting with fish – 153 to be exact. The beloved disciple exclaims that it was Jesus who called from the shore, and Peter, without a second thought, grabs a garment to wrap around himself and jumps into the water. This time Peter isn't worried about walking *on* the water so much as just getting through it. And this time Peter is not about to take his eyes off of Jesus.

As Peter reaches the shore, he steps out of the water into the Galilean dawn and he feels what he felt the night he denied Jesus: the chill of the air pinching his skin. He smells what he smelled that night: charcoal – drifting from the fire that Jesus has made to cook their breakfast of fish. Jesus invites the disciples to breakfast, which is a sign of friendship, a sign of communion. It is with this gesture that the act of reconciliation begins.

After the meal, Peter hears what he heard on the night he denied Jesus: a question. "Peter, do you love me?" Peter with all the devotion he can muster says, "Yes. You know I love you." And Jesus commands him to feed his sheep. This command coming just after Jesus has fed him. Jesus asks the question a second time and the scene repeats itself: "Peter, do you love me?" "You know I do." "Feed my lambs." Jesus then asks the question a third time, and we are told that when Peter heard the question the third time his heart became heavy – his heart broke. Even Peter, the "rock," was not too dense to see what was going on.

The question that Jesus was asking was the exact same question that Peter was asked the night of the arrest: "You were with him, weren't you? You are one of them – one of his followers, one of his disciples." "Peter, do you love me? Peter, you are with me, aren't you – one of my followers, one of my disciples?"

This is the question asked of all of us who claim to be followers of this Messiah, this crucified and resurrected one, this God with us. Do we love Jesus? Are we committed to him above all else? Will we deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him whatever the cost?<sup>28</sup>

So this is the question that Jesus asks Peter a third time: "Do you love me?" While the question may have been the same, the answer could not have been more different. Peter again answers in the affirmative, and Jesus commands him a third time to feed his sheep. The passage we read this morning ends with the invitation to discipleship: "Follow me!"<sup>29</sup> This is not an easy invitation to accept. Accepting it means putting down the other stuff we are carrying and taking up our cross.

Jesus is reminding Peter that disciples are called to love God with all of their heart, soul, mind and strength, and to express that love by loving their neighbors as themselves.<sup>30</sup> He is reminding him of what he told the disciples in the upper room when he washed their feet (only a few chapters earlier): Love one another. Disciples are to love one another as Jesus has loved them and *because* Jesus loves

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<sup>28</sup> *Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23.*

<sup>29</sup> *John 21:19.*

<sup>30</sup> *Mark 12:28-31.*

them. As Jesus says elsewhere, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...”<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Suhard’s way of putting this is that to be a disciple “*means to live in such a way that one’s life would not make sense if God did not exist.*”<sup>32</sup> It means feeding sheep.

It isn’t just Jesus who speaks these words to Peter; it is the risen Christ, the resurrected Jesus. And this makes all the difference. Jesus’ very presence on that beach is a witness against the power of violence, corruption, oppression and death in this world. As Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 15, because Christ has been raised from the dead, death no longer has a hold on us. This allows us to bear witness to a new reality, a new way of living, a whole new world. Peter could face death with courage and faith because Jesus has already conquered death and made possible eternal life.

And when we look at Peter’s life after this point, we find that he did just that. He preached the word, he cared for the sick, and he died for his faith. Peter was forgiven, and he was called to live a life of service. Now, he wasn’t perfect. Paul mentions in his letter to the Galatians, for instance, that he had to confront Peter, who was disobeying God by not treating the Gentiles as well as he treated his fellow Jews.<sup>33</sup> Peter was not perfect, but he was faithful. We see this in the Book of Acts and in church tradition, which tells us that Peter died by crucifixion, but considering himself unworthy to die as Jesus had died, he asked to be crucified upside-down. Peter finally saw the world as it truly is, and the poet in me loves what G.K. Chesterton does with that scene: “*St. Peter...was crucified upside-down...[And] he...saw the landscape as it really is: with the stars like flowers, and the clouds like hills, and all men hanging on the mercy of God.*”<sup>34</sup> And this is the good news this morning.

I don’t know if you can identify with Peter this morning. I don’t know if you have been wrestling with God lately or if you have been battling with demons in your life. I don’t know if you feel like you have fallen so far down that not even God can reach you, but I do know that God has longer arms than you think. I know that even in the face of human sin there is divine grace. I know that even when we have been faithless, God remains faithful. This is the good news.

Even when we have stumbled and fallen, God doesn’t give up on us – God is there to pick us up and dust us off. The good news this morning is that the rooster does not have to have the last word. The good news this morning is that even in the midst of our sin and unfaithfulness, there is a way back. There is such a thing as repentance, and there is such a thing as forgiveness, and there is such a thing as restoration – all because there is such a thing as grace. And through grace we are empowered to live out this newly restored life in service to God and others. We are called to feed sheep. That’s what a life of discipleship is about.

I debated whether I should conclude this morning’s sermon with the following story, because if we take the details too seriously, we will end up with some dubious theological claims. But I understand

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<sup>31</sup> Mark 10:44.

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Célestin Cardinal Suhard, *Priests Among Men* (Chicago: Fides, 1949).

<sup>33</sup> Galatians 2:11-14.

<sup>34</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Poet and the Lunatics* (NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1929), 26.

that we find that danger in most illustrations. While the details are questionable, the main thrust of the story is unassailable.

When I was a kid I remember reading a book of folktales that I checked out from the school library. In one story, a young boy asks his grandmother to tell him what hell is like. The grandmother says, "Hell is like a great big table on which there is food of every kind – all of your favorite food – and all of it filling the place with the most wonderful aroma. And everybody in hell is seated around this large table. The problem is that everybody is given 6-foot long chopsticks with which to eat the food. And while the chopsticks grow and shrink to allow each person to reach whichever dish they desire, the chopsticks always remain just too long for the person to get the food into his or her mouth. So each person in hell spends eternity trying to figure out a way to feed themselves." It is not unlike the Greek myth of Tantalus who is resigned to an eternity of trying to reach the fruit that is always just beyond his grasp.

"That sounds horrible!" says the boy. "What is *heaven* like?"

"Heaven," says the grandmother, "is like a great big table on which there is food of every kind – all of your favorite food – and all of it filling the place with the most wonderful aroma. And everybody is seated around this large table. And everybody is given 6-foot long chopsticks with which to eat the food. And while the chopsticks grow and shrink to allow each person to reach whichever dish they desire, the chopsticks always remain just too long for the person to get the food into his or her mouth."

"But grandma," the boy says, screwing up his face, "heaven sounds just like hell!"

"Oh no, my child," the grandmother chuckles. "You see, everybody in heaven had already learned the secret long before they got there: They learned how to serve one another."<sup>35</sup>

Amen.

## **Other Illustrations**

Here is a parable called "The Disabled Fox" from Anthony de Mello's "Song of the Bird":

A man walking through the forest saw a fox that had lost its legs and wondered how it lived. Then he saw a tiger come in with game in its mouth. The tiger had its fill and left the rest of the meat for the fox.

The next day God fed the fox by means of the same tiger. The man began to wonder at God's greatness and said to himself, "I too shall just rest in a corner with full trust in the Lord, and he will provide me with all I need."

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<sup>35</sup> *I have not been able to track down the specific book I mentioned, but I have since run across different versions of this same story. A brief history of the allegory can be found here: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory\\_of\\_the\\_long\\_spoons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_long_spoons).*

He did this for many days but nothing happened, and he was almost at death's door when he heard a voice say, "O you who are in the path of error, open your eyes to the truth! Follow the example of the tiger and stop imitating the disabled fox."<sup>36</sup>

And another:

On the street I saw a naked child, hungry and shivering in the cold. I became angry and said to God, "Why do you permit this? Why don't you do something?"

For a while God said nothing. That night he replied, quite suddenly, "I certainly did something. I made you."<sup>37</sup>

## **Video and Music**

Suggested hymns for traditional worship:

- "The Summons," *The Faith We Sing* 2130
- "Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service," *The United Methodist Hymnal* 581
- "Here I Am, Lord," *The United Methodist Hymnal* 593
- "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace," *The Faith We Sing* 2171

Possible Anthems for traditional worship:

- "Feed My Lambs," written by Nathalie Sleeth
- "Feed My Sheep," by Don Francisco

Suggested songs for contemporary worship:

- "Beautiful Stranger," by Rebecca St. James
- "Hands and Feet," by Audio Adrenaline
- "The Doing of the Thing," by Bob Bennett

Artwork:

- "Feed My Sheep" statue at Church of the Primacy of St. Peter (Tabgha, Israel)
- "Christ's Charge to Peter" by Raphael (1516)

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<sup>36</sup> Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (NY: Image, 1984), 79.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

Prayer for the day:

God of victory over death,  
your Son revealed himself again and again,  
and convinced his followers of his glorious resurrection.

Grant that we may know his risen presence,  
in love obediently feed his sheep,  
and care for the lambs of his flock,  
until we join the hosts of heaven in worshipping you and praising him  
who is worthy of blessing and honor,  
glory and power, for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>38</sup>

### **Further Reading**

A few books that might be helpful as you continue to think about (and live out) what it means to be a disciple:

- “Surprised by Hope,” by N.T. Wright – A book about eschatological hope (what Wright calls “life after life after death”) may not seem like a likely suggestion as a book about discipleship. However, glimpsing the big picture of what God is doing and what the kingdom is intended to look like might be the impetus one needs to live as a disciple right now.
- “Out of Solitude,” by Henri J.M. Nouwen – This may seem like another odd selection because it does not deal with discipleship, per se. It is actually a small book of three meditations/sermons that focus on the importance of solitude in the Christian life. The first section of the book is a helpful reminder of God’s immense grace and boundless love for us, which is essential to a proper understanding of discipleship.

Of course, there is a whole genre of books dedicated to exploring what it means to live a life of discipleship. Among the most helpful are “The Cost of Discipleship,” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and “Celebration of Discipline,” by Richard Foster.

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*The Rev. Neal Woods is the pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina.*

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<sup>38</sup> [lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=135](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=135) (Reproduced from Revised Common Lectionary Prayers copyright ©2002 Consultation on Common Texts admin. Augsburg Fortress.)



## Sermon 6: Proclaiming

Writer: Rev. Ken Nelson

Scripture: Acts 2:29-39

### Note to the Pastor

Over the course of this series, we have explored Christian discipleship by looking at the life of Peter. Our journey began with overhearing Jesus' invitation to Peter and others to "follow me." This is not just any invitation, but a personal invitation to become a part of a movement that will usher in God's kingdom and transform the world. Such an invitation demands a personal response. As we walk the path of discovery and discipleship with Jesus, something about who He is evokes a response from those who would be his followers. The power and presence of Jesus is so powerful in the life of Peter that he boldly confesses Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God!

Almost as soon as the words have fallen from Jesus' lips, it becomes clear that this life of discipleship may be more challenging than imagined. What begins as a promising journey takes a startling turn as Jesus reveals to Peter and the disciples that the Messiah must suffer, die and be raised to new life. Contrary to their expectations of Him, Jesus explains that He has not come to establish an earthly Messianic kingdom. Although Peter understands the words, he cannot reconcile his view of the conquering Messiah with the suffering and death Jesus spoke of. So Peter rebukes Jesus! We watch in utter amazement as the one who boldly confesses Jesus as God's messiah, on three occasions denies that he has even known Jesus! In his despair, he is locked behind doors even as his messiah is crucified upon a cross!

But just when it seems as if the dream has faltered and the whole Jesus movement has come to a crashing halt, Peter and the others disciples have a life-transforming encounter with the Risen Lord that releases them from their brokenness and reconciles them anew to himself, a mission and ministry greater than they ever could have imagined!

When and how have you seen or experienced the ebbs and flows of Christian discipleship in your own life? What has kept you on the road of discipleship? What has enabled you to get back up and continue moving forward when you have faltered?

In this next-to-the-last sermon in this series, we glimpse how different the life of a disciple can be when it is empowered by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit! Together, we will explore how Peter is transformed from an uncertain and unsteady follower of Jesus into a daring and dynamic disciple whose message and mission are so inspiring that about 3,000 other persons respond in faith in a single day.

What difference has the power and presence of the Holy Spirit made in your life as a disciple? What has enabled you to do the things that God has asked of you? Join me as together we learn that we serve a wonderful God who gives us the power and to become all that he invites us to be!

## **Exegesis: Acts 2:14, 29-41**

The Book of Acts is often described as a continuation of the Gospel of Luke.<sup>39</sup> It begins, as Luke began, by addressing a man known as Theophilus, a word that means “lover of God.” The Gospel bearing Luke’s name focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus. Acts continues where the Gospel of Luke ends and advances the story of what happened to Jesus’ followers and the movement that became Christianity. Will Willimon commented, “The Book of Acts opens with the community waiting for something to happen, listening for a word.”<sup>40</sup> The world in Acts is not a sober description of what is, but an evocative portrayal of what by God’s work will be!

At its most basic level, the purpose of Acts is straightforward. Acts provides a narrative or a story of how the church started, how it grew, and what the church did through men and women of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. In a very practical way, Luke demonstrates the difference that Holy Spirit makes in the lives of the disciple and the corporate community of believers who came to be known as the church. “Acts, like the rest of Scripture, has as its purpose *the formation and equipment of disciples*. Jesus did not come bringing an interesting philosophy of life; he came calling people to a new way of living and dying.”<sup>41</sup>

Nearly one-third of the Book of Acts consists of speeches, most with similar goals of convincing listeners of key tenets of the Gospel: Jesus is Messiah and Lord (confirmed through resurrection), and through Jesus, God fulfilled God’s promise to save the world from sin and death.<sup>42</sup> Our text from Acts 2:14, 29-41 is an example of one these speeches.

Chapter 2 of Acts focuses upon the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. For our purposes, we will look at Peter as an example of life transformed by the power the Holy Spirit. When we encounter Peter in Act 2: 14, 29-41, he is a very different man. Both the message and messenger have been transformed. Peter boldly proclaims the message that Jesus was truly the Messianic King who David prophesied would come and whom the grave could not conquer.

Peter’s persuasive sermon on the Day of Pentecost ends by persuading thousands that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Even a brief comparison and contrast between Peter’s actions during Christ’s passion and the day of Pentecost might illustrate the potent ability of Christian conversion to transform lives.”<sup>43</sup> Why did they believe? Was it simply the eloquence of Peter’s word? They believed as a result of the empty tomb, but also because of the testimony of an eyewitness.

In this particular text, this was the first time that those who believed in Jesus’ resurrection have spoken so openly about their beliefs or the way of salvation. This text invites us to see and experience how the Holy Spirit is involved in every aspect of our life of discipleship from the beginning to the end.

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<sup>39</sup> *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts. 1*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid. 5*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid. 4*

<sup>42</sup> [umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-3](http://umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-3)

<sup>43</sup> [umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-3](http://umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-3)

Through the Spirit's presence and power, this new movement started by Jesus grows by leaps and bounds even in the face of persecution. It became what we now call the church. As we give ourselves over to a life of discipleship and we yield our lives to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, we become a new creation. This passage reminds us that, with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, not only are we transformed more into the image and likeness of Jesus, but we, too, are equipped to do the work He has called us to do.

### **The Sermon Outline**

- I. Have you ever seen a spiritual makeover?**
  - a. Have you ever encountered anyone who has undergone a spiritual makeover?
  - b. Joe and the family next to the church.
  - c. Have you felt called to something great but felt hindered by your own sense of limitations and inadequacies?
- II. Before-Peter/Before Pentecost**
  - a. Peter is a lot like us!
  - b. Peter leaves his net and career to follow Jesus
  - c. Peter is impetuous, uncertain, leaps without looking!
  - d. Peter says and thinks all the right things, but is powerless to do them!
  - e. Peter the Rock – God entrusts Peter and us with a great work.
- III. After-Peter/After Pentecost**
  - a. Peter – a new messenger. Gone is the unsure, unsteady Peter.
  - b. Peter's new message: The Jesus whom you crucified is Lord.
  - c. Jesus has received the Promise of the Holy Spirit and poured it out upon all.
- IV. The Difference**
  - a. Peter encounters the Resurrected Christ.
  - b. Peter is equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit.
  - c. That same power is at work in the world today and available to all.
- V. What does this mean for you and me?**
  - a. We are invited to live in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.
  - b. Failure is not final!

- c. Without the Spirit, we are more like pre-Pentecost Peter.
- d. As a congregation, we can do great thing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

### The Sermon

Have you ever encountered someone who has undergone a spiritual makeover? Joe and his family lived next door to one of my former churches. His yard was always a mess. The children were poorly cared for. Rumors were he got drunk on Saturdays, beat his wife, and cursed his children. Our church decided to help him. I visited the home. Some of the youth went by, invited his kids to go with them on their trip to the beach. The women's group asked his wife to their circle meetings and Annual Day of Prayer. Joe and his family came for a few Sundays, then quit coming.

That was the last I heard of him until a few months later when I met him on the street. At first, I didn't know him. He looked different. "Joe, is that you?" I asked. "Yeah, it's me," he said with a smile. "At least it's mostly me. I've changed." I could see it. His whole physical appearance had changed. He looked great. Come to think of it, his whole yard had changed. It looked great. What happened?

He told me how a group had come by to pray with him after they heard he had been on a binge. A church group. But not from our nice, middle-class Methodist church. They were from a fundamentalist church. The one over across the tracks, the pre-millennial, fire-baptized, Bible-believing, washed-in-the-blood Pentecostal church. They told him if he didn't stop drinking and beating his wife he was going to die and burn forever in hell. They told him God was coming to get him, and God was mad!

They got his attention. Got him to their church where they prayed for him by name and asked God to let him live just a little longer 'til they could get him saved. He got saved, turned inside out, upside down. Redeemed!

I said something about how I was sorry that our church had been "unable to meet your needs," but that I was happy their church had. "Rev. Nelson," he said, "don't feel bad. Your church gave me aspirin. I needed massive chemotherapy." What a change!

My friends in that Pentecostal church and I probably don't agree about very much theologically, but there is certainly something about which we do agree. The power and presence of the Holy Spirit makes all the difference in the life of a disciple! But, I suspect I don't have to tell you that, do I?

Have you ever felt a desire to do something great, but were hesitant to do so because you felt inadequate, unqualified, unprepared for the task at hand? You want to teach kids, or be a physical therapist or a nurse. You want to start your own business. Have you ever second-guessed yourself or your own ability? Maybe the task to which you were called, or the dream that burns within you, seems just a little too large or just beyond your reach.

Have you ever felt stuck, so paralyzed by a fear of failure that you stayed in a job that you knew you'd outgrown? You stayed even knowing that you were deeply unfulfilled! Have you ever stayed in a relationship that you knew was unhealthy for you because you could not find the strength to walk away?

Have you ever felt a sense of calling to Christian discipleship or some form of ministry? The church calls and asks you to serve as an usher or Sunday school teacher. You say to yourself, "Me...really?" You've been working up the nerve to share your faith with another or to answer a call to ministry. You teeter on the edge hoping to find the courage to take the next step. Does any of this sound familiar? Do you recognize any of these circumstances in your own life?

### **Before**

If so, then you will like my friend Peter. You know Peter, don't you? Peter was the disciple who loved Jesus. Peter was that disciple who perhaps more so than any of the others was always striving to do the very things that Jesus had done, but who somehow always managed to come up just a bit short!

Peter was impetuous. He was the lovable disciple who was always leaping without looking. When we first meet Peter in Mark's Gospel, he is on the Sea of Galilee fishing. With nothing more than a personal invitation, Peter drops his nets, and his steady career, and follows Jesus. He was always saying the things that everyone was thinking, but dared not say. He was like the proverbial "bull in the china shop."

In the 8th chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are on the way to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asks his disciples, "What are people saying about me? Who do people say that I am?" As the disciples share what others have said, Jesus personalizes the questions and asks them, "Who do you say that I am?" While the other disciples are trying to sort through their responses, Peter boldly proclaims, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"

This is Peter – Peter who says and thinks all of the right things, but who is powerless to achieve any of the great things that he desires! Peter has enthusiasm and passion, but more often than not, his unbridled passion seems greater than his ability or his understanding! This is Peter – Peter who courageously steps out of the boat to walk on the water, but then takes his eyes off Jesus and nearly drowns! This is Peter – Peter who in one of the worst hours of Jesus' life, denies on three occasions ever knowing the man.

And yet, it is to that same Peter that Jesus says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

My friends, I am confident that there are times when God gives us a dream so great, a vision so large, that it will take nothing less than the power of God to achieve it! That's Peter story! That's our story! That's God's story. It is the story of a gracious and loving God who invites us to do great things for the kingdom, and then equips us with the very power and gifts that we need to do the work to which we are called.

### **After**

When we encounter Peter in Acts 2:29-41, Peter has changed! We see a very different Peter! Both the messenger and message are different! Gone is the unsure, unsteady Peter. He is now Peter the

proclaimer. Peter is bold and confident. This one who has been hiding in the shadows, this one who has denied even knowing his Lord has undergone a spiritual makeover!

He stands before thousands in the very city where Jesus has been crucified – boldly, unashamedly proclaiming that Jesus was truly the Messianic King who David prophesied would come and whom the grave could not conquer. Peter declares, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses...Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

### **The Difference: The Resurrection and the Power of the Holy Spirit**

So exactly what was it that opened the door for Peter to preach Christ? What was it that changed the disciples from a disorganized, frightened band of confused followers into a bold and organized community of empowered believers? What enabled Peter to speak with such conviction, power and authority?

Listen to what Peter declares. “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.” The very power that has raised Christ from the dead has been set loose in the world! The very message and power of which Peter speaks is at work within his own life! In his encounter with the Risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter’s life is transformed!

My friends, that same power is still at work in the world today! That power is not found in the eloquence of Peter words nor is it found in the sincere desire of the crowd to get right with God. The power is found in the truth of Peter’s message. God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is working to make all things new!

Perhaps best of all, God’s message is not only for Jews but for Gentiles, as well. “For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” It is a life-giving message that gives power and possibility to a powerless people, formerly captured by the power of sin and death.

### **What does this mean for you and me?**

As disciples, we are invited to live in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. In his own strength, Peter could barely summon the courage to speak. But with the power of the Holy Spirit, he proclaims a message with such conviction that others are “cut to the heart” and moved to respond in faith.

In the Resurrected Christ, there is a power unleashed in the world for you and me. Not only is there greatness in us, but there is power to achieve greatness! The gift of God’s empowerment through the Holy Spirit is offered to all. We are not left to our own devices. We are not asked to live our lives in our own strength, but in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Peter, who had failed over and over again, is now strengthened by the Holy Spirit for a mission and purpose much greater than he could have ever imagined. Beloved, what was true for Peter and the disciples is also true for you and me. Not only does God have work for us to do, God equips us to do that work through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Does your life bear witness to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? Do others see the power and presence of the Holy Spirit at work within your life? Can they see that you, too, have undergone a spiritual makeover? Have you faith that when we rely on the Holy Spirit, we can be used by God in mighty ways – ways that are worthy of our calling to live as disciples. With the Holy Spirit comes God’s power to do God’s work!

Without the power of the Holy Spirit, we are more like pre-Pentecost Peter who too often relied on his own power, his own strength, his own ability to do God’s work. But with the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.

What great vision has God given you? Yes, you! What message has the Holy Spirit empowered and equipped you to share? The good news is that God invites us to join in God’s mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. As a congregation, what great things might God be inviting us to do in the life of this community as we lean and depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit?

You remember my friend, Joe, don’t you? Joe is not the same old Joe. Joe is now the pastor of a small congregation in that town. That church hasn’t been the same since either! Have you experienced that kind of power at work in your life? I bet you have. But if not, just keep gathering with your brothers and sisters in communities like this one –the community that we call “church.” There’s just no telling what the Holy Spirit will do next!

## **Video**

Think about your worshiping community. How can you help this text come to life in your worship experience? What works best in your context? Remember that people experience God in many ways. Each of us learns differently. You are welcome to think outside of the box! Here are some resources that may help as you think about this passage from Acts 2:14, 29-41.

As this is the sixth sermon in the series, consider using a video resource from a series titled “Wing Clips”: [wingclips.com](http://wingclips.com). These are movie clips for sermons and teaching. The series is divided up according to movie title, by scripture, by category, and by theme. This series is free and easily accessible to persons of all ages.

This series focuses on discipleship and this sermon in particular focuses on a transformation and power of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of disciples. Consider using “Fire Proof,” a video example of life transformed by God and the difference that this transformation makes on others.

The clip titled “Why Are You Doing This?” features a married couple. After seeing a drastic change in her husband’s attitude the last few weeks, Catherine asks her husband what has changed him. The clip can be found at [wingclips.com/movie-clips/fireproof/why-are-you-doing-this](http://wingclips.com/movie-clips/fireproof/why-are-you-doing-this).

## **Music**

Congregations of differing ethnicities and worship styles use a multitude of resources. Here are some hymns or songs that you might consider:

- "Oh, I Know the Lord's Laid His Hands on Me," *The Faith We Sing* 2139
- "I'm Gonna Sing when the Spirit Says Sing," *United Methodist Hymnal* 333
- "Holy Spirit," by Bryan and Katie Torwalt
- "Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart," *United Methodist Hymnal* 500

## **Questions for Discussion**

- What brings about change in the life of a believer?
- How are others impacted by these changes?
- What might this mean for your life as a disciple?

## **Bibliography/Suggested Resources**

*Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Acts.*

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Sampley, J, Paul, Wall, Robert. W., and Wright, N.T. *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 10: Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, 1989.

Willimon, William H. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

## **Online Resources**

"Come, Holy Ghost: A Wesleyan perspective on the Spirit"

- [umc.org/what-we-believe/come-holy-ghost-a-wesleyan-perspective-on-the-spirit](http://umc.org/what-we-believe/come-holy-ghost-a-wesleyan-perspective-on-the-spirit)

Sermon Starters on the Book of Acts – Discipleship Ministries

- [umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-1](http://umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-1)
- [umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-2](http://umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-2)
- [umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-3](http://umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-3)
- [umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-4](http://umcdiscipleship.org/resources/book-of-acts-sermon-starters-week-4)



## Resources for Children

- [sermons4kids.com/filled\\_with\\_the\\_holy\\_spirit\\_group\\_activities.htm](http://sermons4kids.com/filled_with_the_holy_spirit_group_activities.htm)
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*The Rev. Ken Nelson is the coordinator of clergy services and conference secretary for the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.*

## Sermon 7: Crossing

Writer: Rev. Paul W. Harmon

Scripture: Acts 10:34-38

### Note to the Pastor

This is the last sermon in our series on discipleship. We have followed the journey of Peter: his call to “fish for people” (Mark 1:17), his confession of Jesus as the Christ (Matthew 16:16), his experience of the resurrection (John 20:1-9), his affirming encounter with the risen Lord by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-14), Jesus’ challenge to Peter to tend and feed his “sheep” (John 21:15-19), his being empowered by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

In this seventh entry, we look at Acts 10:34-48, in which Peter is challenged to step outside his comfort zone and tell the good news to people who are not Jewish. Perhaps you can recall a time when you found yourself in an unfamiliar place among a people of an unfamiliar culture and were asked to share your faith. (No, being asked to return thanks at your in-laws’ Thanksgiving dinner really doesn’t count.) (Or, maybe it does!) How did you experience that level of discomfort? How did it stretch your commitment to Christ? Or perhaps you have seen other disciples cross a significant barrier to do what they knew God wanted them to do. As disciples, we go through life discovering that much of what we thought we knew about how to live is recast in the light of God’s claim on us.

Don’t fall into the trap of thinking of these seven sermons as a step-by-step process in discipleship maturity, or of this seventh section as the “pinnacle” of discipleship. We are not trying to present discipleship as a rigid course to be measured by specific growth experiences, but rather to demonstrate the broad variety and exciting possibilities of following Jesus Christ.

Nor should we give in to the temptation of treating this, or any of the passages, too narrowly – as, say, specifically against racism, or about the importance of a particular way of experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit so as to “authenticate” one’s claim to be a true disciple. Rather, we want to illustrate the exciting and sometimes scary diverse ways discipleship draws us into situations in which we can introduce others to Jesus Christ.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ will change you.

### Exegesis: Acts 10:34-38

When reading the Book of Acts, it sometimes seems we are following a rambling travelogue. Luke, the consensus author of Acts, is clearly familiar with the northern and eastern lands around the Mediterranean, and he takes us on a journey that wanders through a good part of the known civilized world of the time.

The first seven chapters, though, are confined to events in Jerusalem. Then, in Chapter 7, the first systematic persecution of the followers of Jesus begins as Stephen falls beneath a hail of stones thrown by an angry mob of people who cannot bear to hear about the resurrection of an unorthodox

rabbi from Galilee. That persecution resulted in the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world, beginning with Philip, who carried the Gospel into Samaria (Acts 8). He was later joined there by Peter and John.

Saul, the primary prosecutor of Christians for the Sanhedrin, was subsequently converted by an encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), and from that point the narrative takes wings. Later in Chapter 9, we read about the travels of Peter from Samaria through Lydda, where he heals a follower named Aeneas, and then to the coast at Joppa where he raises Tabitha from the dead. That's where we find him at the beginning of Chapter 10. By the end of the chapter, Peter will be in Caesarea Maritima (also known as Caesarea of Palestine) in the home of Cornelius the Centurion.

Chapters 10-12 tell the story of how the Gospel began to spread to the Gentile world, setting the stage for the account of the journeys of Paul in chapters 13-28.

The passage we're considering, beginning with Peter's brief sermon to the people gathered in Cornelius' quarters (v.34-43), is one of the earliest examples of the Gospel message, edited to the "bare bones" for Gentile hearers. It is a simple Gospel of peace and forgiveness, the first "official" words spoken to Gentiles. Peter's opening statement (v.34), that "God shows no partiality," is a way of rendering the obscure Greek word *prosolemptes*, which literally means, "God is not a 'receiver of the face.'" Maybe a contemporary way of expressing the idea is to say that "God doesn't care what you look like," or even better, "God doesn't care who you are." If you respect God and do what is right, God accepts you, and through the death and resurrection of Jesus you are forgiven and welcomed.

There is a distinction in the New Testament between Jews and non-Jews. Non-Jews are normally referred to as Gentiles, but there were other groups as well. For example, Samaritans were not Jews, but are never referred to as Gentiles. Gentiles were primarily Greek and Roman men and women, most of whom believed in and worshiped a pantheon of gods. Some of them, however, were already sympathetic to Jewish monotheistic beliefs, as is Cornelius in this text.

Peter, a Galilean fisherman, would have been closely acquainted with Gentiles, as the population of Galilee was heavily mixed, much more so than was the case in Judea. Peter had witnessed the interaction between the centurion and Jesus in Capernaum (Matthew 8:5-13), and certainly had had many encounters with other Gentiles in daily life. The Spirit was not asking Peter to do something entirely outside his realm of experience. There is a sense in which God has been preparing Peter for this moment all his life.

One important feature that should not be forgotten is that this event is preceded, encouraged and enabled by visions that came to Peter and Cornelius. The Holy Spirit is in charge here, both in setting up the encounter and in the reaction of the Gentile congregation, whose response to Peter's sermon is unexpected and powerful. Peter and his companions could not have converted the Gentiles at Cornelius' house without the preparation, presence and power of the Holy Spirit. And God chose not to bring Cornelius et al into the fold without the apostles.

God's preparation is essential. Our willingness is, as well.

## **The Sermon Outline**

An opening story to illustrate the call of discipleship – to “fish for people.”

1. General statement about the nature of discipleship.
2. Tell the story of the text at hand (Acts 10:34-48).
  - a. Talking point: Describe the separation of Jews and Gentiles.
3. The centrality of forgiveness.
4. How sin has inflicted humankind.
5. How divisiveness seems the natural human state.
6. Issue a challenge for the congregation to put themselves in Peter’s place.
7. Closing illustration of how we can cross the barriers inherent in our society.

## **The Sermon**

### **“Just a Dream”**

Jan and I have a cottage at Lake Junaluska in the mountains of North Carolina. There is a paved trail around the lake that we love to walk. One day a year or so ago I was walking around the lake and passed by a couple – a young man with an older woman I took to be his mother – who were fishing. I asked if they had had any luck.

“Oh, we caught a few,” said the young man.

“I guess you’ll have fish for dinner tonight,” I said.

“Oh no, no!” he said. “You don’ wanna eat no fish come outta this here lake. All them chemicals and poison they put on that golf course over there and the lawns around these houses, it washes down in the water. You don’ wanna eat none a these here fish. We just like to catch ‘em, but we throw ‘em back in.” Then he added, “Now, I seen some people out here fishin’ a couple a months ago and they had a good mess a fish that they said they was gonna take home and cook ‘em up and eat ‘em.” He paused for a moment, shaking his head. “But,” he continued, “I ain’t seen them people back here.”

Simon Peter was a fisherman. Jesus called him and his brother Andrew to be his disciples one day when they were fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” (Matthew 4:19) I would almost be willing to bet that Peter and Andrew and the other disciples never dreamed they’d be fishing for anything but Jewish people.

I wonder if Christians these days are guilty of the same narrow view. When Jesus told us to “make disciples of all nations,” do you think he was picturing today’s church in the world?

The passage we're looking at today provides some insight to our understanding of discipleship. Being a disciple of Jesus means being willing to step outside our comfort zones. Jesus wants us to fish for people, and in this passage from Acts 10, we learn that "people" means whatever people the Holy Spirit leads us to, and the Holy Spirit has absolutely no respect for the barriers we human beings invent to separate ourselves from each other.

Is our church gathering in the fish, or are we tossing back or ignoring the ones we think are not suitable?

The first Christians were Jewish Christians, and Jews were a clannish lot. Jews could speak to Gentiles in public places. Jews could do business with Gentiles. But Jews could not take meals with Gentiles. Jews could not enter Gentile homes. Gentiles could not enter the temple to worship with the Jews.

Every good Jew knew this, of course. The apostles knew this when they started spreading the Good News around Israel. Apparently, however, the Holy Spirit didn't think much of all those restrictions having to do with Gentiles, and the Holy Spirit proceeded to enter willy-nilly into the hearts and lives of Jews and Gentiles alike, as if there were no difference between them. It was a hard lesson for those first Jewish Christians to learn.

The story in Chapter 10 of Acts is an example of the dilemma they faced. Simon Peter, one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus and pre-eminent apostle, was summoned to the seaside city of Caesarea, to the house of a centurion whose name was Cornelius. Cornelius was not a Jewish name. Cornelius was not a Jewish person. Cornelius was a Gentile, a soldier in the Roman army.

Simon Peter would normally have refused to answer such a summons, because – well, because he was Jewish, and Cornelius was not. But on that very day, he had had a strange and powerful dream while he was napping on the rooftop. (Lots of important things happen in the Bible on people's rooftops. If your prayer life isn't what you want it to be, maybe you should try it. Remember, though, that in those days rooftops were flat!)

In his dream Simon Peter saw a sheet suspended from the sky. It contained all sorts of animals that Jews cannot eat because they are considered to be unclean. But in his dream, he heard a voice say, "Take and eat." He said, "No, Lord, I have never eaten anything that is unclean or common." The voice said, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." This strange scene took place three times, which in Biblical dream interpretation means that it was a done deal.

When Simon Peter awoke from his dream, there were messengers from Cornelius standing in his front yard, asking him to come to Cornelius' house. Simon Peter was convinced that the messengers' arrival at the very time of his dream was no coincidence, but was a sign from God that the walls were going to be broken down between Jews and Gentiles. He had a new understanding that the promise is offered to Gentiles, too.

So, he went to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius the Gentile centurion. He told Cornelius and his entire household about Jesus. He ended the sermon with these words: "Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Even before Peter finished speaking, the Holy Spirit was at work in the midst of his congregation. The Spirit “fell upon all who heard the word.” They were speaking in tongues and praising God, exactly in the same way the people in Jerusalem had acted on the day of Pentecost. I wish I could have been there! I wish I could witness such a thing! Of course, if you folks erupted in hallelujahs and unknown tongues, I wouldn’t have a clue about what to do with you. But I’d like to see it, nonetheless.

To put it simply, they lost themselves in ecstatic reactions to the news of the promise of forgiveness through faith in Christ and his resurrection from the dead, and the end of our reading has these new Gentile Christians being baptized in the name of Jesus. So, we learn that the only requirement for admission to the body of Christ is to surrender to the Gospel.

The text says they received forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus.

Forgiveness: That’s the whole point, isn’t it? But forgiveness is not, “OK, you’ve made a mistake, but we’re going to overlook it and expunge the records so there won’t be any punishment for your mistake.” Forgiveness is much more than that: Forgiveness is the restoration of a right relationship with God. You can be a good man or woman and still need forgiveness. Forgiveness is what Jesus came to bring us. Forgiveness is the reason he died for us. Forgiveness is the reason God raised him from the dead.

Most people think life is a process of figuring out how to be a winner. The Jews wanted to win. They wanted the Romans to go away. They wanted the world to beat a path to their doorstep. Their whole concept of history was that the world is moving toward a final victory for Israel. The disciples couldn’t get that out of their heads even when Jesus became a loser by dying on the cross, and doing it on purpose.

They still wanted to win even though Jesus told them that the first would be last – that winning in the worldly sense is the same as losing in the eternal sense.

We want to win, too. Our cultural imprinting is summed up by football coach Vince Lombardi’s famous statement, “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing!” Get the upper hand. Don’t give up. Don’t get angry – get even. If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. Be a winner. Be successful. That’s what life is all about.

Of course, there is one small problem with that philosophy. In order for some of us to win, the rest of us have to lose, and that’s not how God wants the world to work. That’s not the way of Jesus Christ.

God through Jesus Christ wants us all to win. God through Jesus Christ wants us all to receive forgiveness for our sins and win the goal of life, abundant and eternal.

Now, sin is more than “I did something wrong.” Sin is, “There’s something wrong with the world we live in.” We need to understand that the world, creation itself, is under a terrible burden. We need to think of sin the way we think of gravity. Sin is not an act, but a condition. Sin is not just opposition to God; it is separation from God. Sin is estrangement. Sin is failure. Sin is missing the mark.

The Bible tells us that way back in time sin entered the world. The creation stories in Genesis attribute the entry of sin to the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Because of their rebellion, not only did they have to leave the Garden of Eden; somehow the whole world changed. It was no longer a hospitable, comfortable, safe paradise in which to live.

Now there is disease and injury, and there are handicapping conditions and violence and catastrophes. There are earthquakes and volcanoes and tidal waves and tsunamis and tornadoes and hurricanes and typhoons and tropical storms and water spouts and floods and hailstorms and droughts and plagues and famines and epidemics and lightning strikes and meteor strikes and heat waves and forest fires and global warming and ice ages and *el ninos* and *la ninas* and polar ice cap meltings and holes in the ozone layer and wars and police actions and crime in the streets and abuse in the homes. There is murder and theft and dishonoring of parents and worshiping of idols and adultery and promiscuity and licentiousness and lying and cheating. And there is prejudice and bigotry and blind nationalism and racism and sexism and ageism and intellectualism. And there is money to be made and there are pockets to be lined and there are ladders to be climbed at any cost. And there is lust and rage and sloth and greed and jealousy and deceit and gluttony. And there is vote buying and ballot box stuffing and hollow campaign promising. And there are casinos and lotteries and R- and X-rated movies and trash on television and radio and DVDs. And there is pornography in the magazines and in the movies and on the Internet and in our heads. And there are hate groups and supremacy groups everywhere you look.

And that, says the Bible, is our natural state: sin.

I turned in an insurance claim a few years ago on my wife's car. The windshield was cracked, struck by a piece of gravel picked up on the highway. I thought the deductible on my policy would keep me from being covered, but when I told my agent about it, she said, "Oh, don't worry. The deductible doesn't apply to windshield damage. We'll pay the whole cost of replacing it."

She called an auto glass repair shop and made an appointment for me, wrote out a check for the entire amount, and handed it to me on the spot.

Now, there was something else wrong with the car. The outside rearview mirror on the driver's side was broken, too. I did it myself while washing the car one day. I was in a hurry, and I hit the mirror with the brush handle and broke it.

So when I took the car in for the new windshield, I asked the man how much he would charge to replace the mirror, too. He said, "Fifty dollars." I told him to go ahead with it, and that I would pay for the replacement of the side mirror out of my own pocket.

The next day I went to pick up the car. I gave him the insurance check for the windshield. Then I took out my wallet and said, "Let me pay you for the mirror." He waved me off. "Forget about it," he said. "I'll just throw that in for free."

In a way, that windshield represents the bulk of our sins. If you drive a car, it will get dirty and scratched and dinged and dented. The only way you can keep a new car looking brand new is to never

drive it. If you drive it, it will begin to show signs of wear and tear. So it is with sin. If you're alive, you're going to make some mistakes, because living means taking part in this world, and the natural state of this world is sin.

If sin is that pervasive, what can be done about it? How can we ever win if we can't help but sin?

The apostles knew the answer to that question. Jesus Christ paid for all those sins when he died on the cross. They're taken care of. They're fully covered. The cross is like an insurance policy. The cost of repairing my broken windshield was fully covered. The cost of repairing this broken, sinful world is fully covered.

But there are other sins that we commit knowingly, or at least we know better; sins we could avoid if we were just a little more careful. I could have avoided breaking that outside mirror if I had just been a little more careful. What can be done about those sins – the rearview mirror sins? Insurance won't cover them.

The apostles knew the answer to that, too. Jesus Christ was the perfect Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. That is the message they proclaimed, and in the 10th chapter of Acts, at a Roman Centurion's quarters in Caesarea, Simon Peter proclaimed that message to a house full of Gentiles! Outsiders!

So what does all this have to say to us in the 21st-century church – a church that is declining in numbers and in influence in the world? If nothing else, surely it has this to say: Stop defining people as insiders or outsiders. Go where the Holy Spirit leads you. If the Spirit leads you there, the way has already been prepared. The lesson here is that God doesn't recognize human barriers, and our job as disciples of Jesus Christ is to offer that gift of forgiveness through his grace to EVERYBODY.

We separate people according to our human judgments. We distinguish between men and women, old and young, black and white and brown and olive and red and yellow, rich and poor, fat and thin native and immigrant. All of this is fine, except that we go a bit further – we establish relative values to all these categories of people. The houses on one side of town don't look like the houses on the other side of town. The clothes worn by the kids in this school are nicer than the clothes worn by the kids in that school. This line of work is more prestigious than that line of work.

We wish these people would come to our church, but not those people.

I drive past an elementary school around mid-afternoon. A blinking yellow sign tells me the speed limit is 25 mph. If it's the school on the well-to-do side of town, everybody slows down to 25, because law enforcement vehicles are often seen around that school. If it's the school on the other side of town, drivers scarcely slow down at all, because law enforcement is hardly ever in evidence there. That's the kind of world we live in, friends. That's the way we put relative values on our neighbors.

The church isn't supposed to be like that. The church is for sinners. The church is for others. The church is for everyone.

Let's bring that home:



*THIS* church is for sinners. *THIS* church is for others. *THIS* church is for everyone. All *YOU* need is faith and a bit of courage to step outside the boundaries of race, creed, clan, age, clothing styles, hair styles, (or no hair at all, which is a growing style among men, though not among women yet, praise God), music styles, etc., etc. You never know when the Holy Spirit is going to completely ignore *YOUR* ideas of who to invite to the feast.

So, I was up in the attic the other day just to see what was up there. Among all the other clutter was an old armchair that used to be in the living room. I sat down in it, and the next thing you know I had dozed off.

I had a strange dream. I was standing behind the pulpit in the sanctuary of a church I had served years ago. The people weren't sitting in the pews, though. They were standing around the outside of the room in a huge circle, and they were all strangers. It seemed to me that every ethnic group in the world was there. On the far left stood an elderly couple who were darker than anyone I had ever seen before. Beside them a young man, also dark, but not as dark as they. Beside him a young couple with two children whom I recognized as an African-American family I had seen in a restaurant a night or two before. On around the room I gazed. There were Koreans and Filipinos, Puerto Ricans and Guamanians, sun darkened southern white folks, on to a Canadian couple who were as pale as anyone I'd ever seen.

As I gazed around that extraordinary circle of people I realized that I could not tell where one race ended and the next began.

I looked more closely. There were small children, adolescents, teenagers, young men and women, middle-aged and elderly, all mixed in together. Scattered here and there I saw that some were well dressed, others wore casual clothes, a few were in soiled blue jeans and flannel shirts as if they'd come straight from some menial job, one couple were in tuxedo and elegant evening gown, and some were even dressed in clothes that I can only describe as worn out, even tattered.

Then I saw that they were holding hands. And they were smiling large, happy smiles. And they were singing "Hallelujah, hallelujah, give thanks to the risen Lord! Hallelujah, hallelujah, give praise to his name!"

Finally, I heard a voice above all the singing. "Don't call anyone I have made unfit for this circle."

I awoke from my nap. But I have to tell you, friends, I don't think it was a dream.

I don't think it was just a dream.

## Other Illustrations

1. Here is a list I compiled while working on the text:

The Holy Spirit comes to those who believe	The Holy Spirit comes quietly
The Holy Spirit comes to those who invite	The Holy Spirit comes powerfully
The Holy Spirit comes to those who are ready	The Holy Spirit can take you over
The Holy Spirit comes serendipitously	The Holy Spirit can hold you up
The Holy Spirit comes unexpectedly	The Holy Spirit is God within you
The Holy Spirit comes uninvited	– Paul W. Harmon

2. "Up this way, then, did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back. He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending; and upon that place stood a Cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a Sepulcher. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the Cross, his burden loosed from his shoulders, and fell off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the Sepulcher, where it fell in, and I saw it no more. Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, He hath given me rest by His sorrow, and life by His death. Then Christian gave three leaps for joy, and went on his way singing." – "The Pilgrim's Progress," by John Bunyan.

3. When then-President George Bush encountered a homeless man outside St. John's Episcopal Church in April 1989, it seemed for a moment that nothing good would come of it.

"Will you pray for me?" William Wallace Brown Jr. asked Bush as he and his wife, Barbara, were about to enter the church.

"No," Bush replied.

The 41st president then politely added, "Come inside with us – and pray for yourself."

So began an odyssey of sorts that would transform Brown. He would go on to become a member of the "Church of the Presidents," as St. John's is called. And through his fellowship, St. John's – the bright yellow church across Lafayette Square from the White House – would be transformed as well.

"Mr. Brown dressed in old clothes – you could tell he was a street person," recalled Virginia Jones, an assistant head usher at the church. "When time came to take up collections, I was going to skip him. But he stopped me and gave me a wadded-up dollar bill. He gave one every Sunday. Now, some of our more well-to-do members only put in a dollar, and many of them were humbled by Mr. Brown's spirit of generosity." – Courtland Milloy, "A poor man who enriched others' lives," *The Washington Post*, November 29, 2000. B1.

## Video and Music

- [youtube.com.crossingculturesteaservideo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)
- [youtube.jamiegrace.showjesus](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

(This is what the world wants from us)

- "The Servant Song," *The Faith We Sing* 2221
- "One Bread, One Body," *The United Methodist Hymnal* 620

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On Acts:

1. William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* in **The Daily Study Bible Series**, pages 78-85. Dated but still useful.
2. William H. Willimon, *Acts* in **Interpretation**. Pages 93-104. Preachy and not too deep, but a good treatment that stimulates the thinking.
3. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. X, pages 146-7, 165-168. A good overview.
4. *Homiletics*. A monthly lectionary based commentary, now online.

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3. *The Communion of the Christian With God*. Wilhelm Hermann. Trans. J. Sandys Stanyon. First published in English in 1906. Fortress Press, 1971. Heavy reading, but rich.
4. *The Normal Christian Life*. Watchman Nee. Or anything else by Watchman Nee. Available at Cokesbury and other booksellers
5. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. N. T. Wright. A good general presentation of what it means to be a Christian in a postmodern world.
6. *Membership to Discipleship*. Phil Maynard. A good primer.

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*The Rev. Paul W. Harmon is the superintendent of the Spartanburg District of the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.*

Come, Follow Me



This "Come, Follow Me" Sermon Series was developed and written by a team from the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. It is intended for use with the "Come, Follow Me" Adult Discussion Guide, also produced by the South Carolina Conference.

We extend our appreciation to all involved for their work.