

“Passionate & Called” by Pastor Leah Rosso

John 21: 1-19

Week 1 of “Ever-Growing Faith”

Last week we had the holy privilege of hearing three people’s stories from this community of faith. Mary shared about her decision to switch faiths in her 60’s and what it has meant to her to find this community; Julia did what she thought she would never do by getting up here to tell us about the Big Questions group and how having a space to talk about questions that may not have solid answers has shaped her faith; and Adam told us about the massive transition in his life from caring for his father-in-law on an everyday basis to having to find a new place for meaning after his father-in-law died. It never ceases to amaze me how a simple request of asking three people to share how God is at work in their lives leads to such rich and vulnerable sharing. And then through hearing their stories, we too get to experience God’s Spirit as we reflect and are inspired. It is a very practical and important reminder that our faith changes constantly throughout our lifetime, and like all important relationships in our lives, our relationship with God is ever-growing.

I think it’s also fitting to hear these stories after Easter because the post-resurrection disciples are also trying to figure out their lives and how they’ve experienced God. They all had some kind of faith with God before they met Jesus. Then, in their following of Jesus, I’m sure their faith took on new aspects that they had probably not thought possible. But then Jesus dies and even in his resurrection they once again find themselves at a crossroads. What does it mean to be a disciple *now*? How do we follow Jesus when *he’s not even here with us in the same way*? What in the world is God doing and do we even have the energy for it? These might’ve been some of the thousands of questions with no answers going through the minds of those who loved Jesus. And that’s when our story this morning comes into play.

It was common in the ancient world to write an epilogue that would help people see what happened to all of the main characters, and in many ways that is the story we have in John’s Gospel this morning. It is the last story in the Gospel, and it is the third time Jesus appears to the disciples after the resurrection. And if the story seemed familiar to you, it may be because it’s a story told at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke at the start of Jesus’ ministry. We just read it back in February. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus calls Simon Peter in a similar story when Jesus is just starting out. And today we have a similar story at the end of the Gospel of John. In other words, Jesus is calling them again. They have come full circle. So the details that are different in today’s telling are important. And the first different detail that we see right away, is that this community is together.

Simon Peter, the sons of Zebedee, Nathaniel, Thomas, and two others are all together. They may be confused; they may be grieving; they may have no idea what they're supposed to be doing, but they are not alone. Following Jesus for the last few years has united them and they are sticking together. So when Peter says he's going to go fishing, they don't let him go alone. This may seem like a minor detail, but after trying to follow Jesus now for a couple of decades, I will tell you, it has not been minor in my faith. We all need friends, family, neighbors, acquaintances, whomever — people in our lives who will not let us go through hard times alone and who will remind us of who we are and who God is in times of chaos and confusion.

When we were at the community organizing event in February, Rev. Dana Neuhauser reminded us that to follow Jesus means we have a leader-full movement — we are open to lots of leaders with lots of gifts — not only because this is how to build a movement, but because that's what Jesus does too. There isn't just one disciple who will follow Jesus and do all the things. It is a leader-full movement even from the beginning before they knew it would be a movement. Jesus calls them all to lead in a variety of ways. And one of the marks of a leader-full movement that we see in this scripture as well, is that we will all be changed. Transformation doesn't happen down a hierarchy — Jesus doesn't stay the same while his disciples are changed. No, Jesus is changed forever — the risen Christ's ministry goes into all the world! And his disciples are transformed as well. Everyone who is part of this movement is in process of being transformed into God's love — this is still God's call for each of us — to become more Christ-like, or as John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Church said, we become more loving.

Another aspect of this funny fishing story, is the way it highlights listening. In the Gospel of Luke, Simon Peter in his typical fashion, questions Jesus, telling him they've already tried fishing in every spot. You can almost hear him rolling his eyes at Jesus' suggestion that they just put the nets in on the other side. In the Gospel of John, however, the disciples have been through it all with Jesus. They have seen everything. So even though they don't recognize Jesus yet, there is something about his voice that they follow without hesitation. I don't think it's that they have stopped asking questions, but perhaps they have learned to look for miracles. Maybe they have gotten used to being open to wonder and curiosity. Whatever it is, they listen; and even in their doubt, they are rewarded with a lot of fish.

Learning to listen to God in all times and in all places in our lives takes a lot of work; and yet it is a worthy practice. It takes listening to those who love us; listening to the quiet voice within us; and listening through prayer and meditation to hear God's call on our lives.

And then the biggest difference between the two Gospels, is that while the Gospel of Luke then has Jesus invite the disciples to become fishers of people; John's Gospel has Jesus feeding them all— and then, in a dialogue with Simon Peter, renewing the invitation for them to continue ministry out into the world.

As he sits around the fire pit with Jesus, we hear Jesus say,

“Do you love me Peter? Feed my lambs.”

“Do you love me, Peter? Take care of my sheep.”

“Do you love me, Peter? Feed my sheep.”

I don't know what Peter was longing to hear, but my guess is that he had major doubts as to whether Jesus had made a mistake in picking him in the first place. And he most certainly needed to hear that Jesus was still calling him; still saw something in him after all they'd been through; still wanted him to be a partner in ministry.

Following Jesus means being in community; listening for God's voice; and trusting that God will work through each and every one of us.

In the early 2000's, Bishop Sally Dyck had a chance to travel to Mozambique and meet Nelson Mandela and his wife, Graca Machal. She was astonished to find that while she was looking forward most to meeting Mandela, it was Graca that made a bigger impact on her. Graca had grown up in Mozambique at a difficult time in her country's history, and a difficult time in her family as her mother struggled to raise six daughters as a widow. Graca described how her father had made her mother promise she would educate them, and so her mother did the impossible and made sure they all received an education. Graca grew up and did many things, but after her country became independent, she realized that *she* wanted to do the impossible, just as her mother had and just as her teacher had, and give back. So feeling God's call, she became the first woman minister of education, and in five years transformed the literacy rate of her country from 7% to 90%. She had learned through her community and through listening to God's voice that she too could do the impossible. Bishop Sally reflected that while many people in the last two decades have been focused on having a purpose-driven life, Graca knew what it was to have a purpose-given life— to see the gifts she had been given, and then to live into those gifts, offering them to the world.

Jesus offers to Simon Peter and all of the disciples that day a purpose-given life— inviting them to renew their call, to connect with their passion again, and to serve the community. Here is the beginning of an ever growing faith: to acknowledge the gift of community around us; to bear witness to how God is a part of all of our lives; to listen well to the voice of God; and then to go out and serve others.

Jesus was fairly general both times he called Simon Peter— first, to be a fisher for people; and next, to feed God's sheep! And yet Peter found his way to share Christ's amazing love in this world. We are here, in this time and in this place. May you find a way to serve God and your neighbor; may we find many ways as a church to serve God and our wide array of neighbors; and may we do so, always, with love.