

4/26/20 WORSHIP SERVICE

OPENING PANDEMIC JOKES

- You know you're in a pandemic, if you work at a bank and you are relieved when 2 guys walk in wearing masks.
- Or you have now washed your hands so much that cheat notes for exams you took decades ago have actually resurfaced.
- From a few actual church signs since the pandemic started:
 - Wasn't expecting to give up this much for Lent
 - Wash hands, don't touch face - Hygenesis 24:7
 - Shout Hosanna! But first step back 6 ft
- James 4:7 suddenly feels like a timely theme verse: "Wash your hands, you sinners."

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the gift of another day. We don't want to take your goodness for granted. We're grateful for the many gifts you've given us – enough, and then some. Especially now, during this on-going time of physical distancing and of things being so uncertain for the future, we want to be grateful and to remember that you are our strength and our shelter.

Within our gratitude, we bring you the contents of our hearts. We offer you our grief, God. Be especially with Courtney Hiebert and her family as they grieve the loss of her Grandpa Traxson. Be with the family of Irvin Boese as they grieve his loss. We pray especially for Art as it's so hard to know how much he can hear and understand – comfort him – and Ann, in this confusing and sad time. Be with Nancy Schmidt as she continues to recuperate and heal at home now. We offer you our fear. Many of us are genuinely afraid – we have lost income, lost plans, lost our sense of routine and certainty. Help us to hold our fear, God, so that it's not so heavy and distracting for us. Help us to find the comfort of your Holy Spirit in new and deeper ways. Help us to rely on the people you send to us, the ways we can reach out to others, the ways we can uphold and encourage one another – being Christ to each other.

God, we are grateful for Keith Banman and the crew that is working this weekend to provide the MCC fund-raising meal. Bless their work and the 500+ people who are eating and donating. May this event encourage and inspire us to be generous and gracious as you have been generous and gracious to us.

As we listen to news, we realize how small the world has really become – we can be aware of not just what's happening in our community, but we can see and hear and understand vividly, clearly, what's happening around the world as this pandemic leads the world into a global food crisis. O God, give us wisdom and courage and ingenuity and creativity. Give us deep faithfulness and motivation to respond as your disciples – those who follow Jesus in our thoughts, our words and our actions.

O God, it is our joy, our privilege, our honor to follow your son, Jesus in our lives. There is no sorrow, grief or fear that we can experience that Jesus did not experience. As we said earlier, in our Psalm, weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning and you are the source of that joy. For this we are thankful and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

"FOLLOW ME" – PASTOR CALEB

READ JOHN 21

It might just be that a stay-at-home order is starting to feel kind of normal, if that is possible. This has been more of an adjustment for some of us than others, but we are all a little weary as we brace ourselves for the long-haul. We are anxious for life to return to "normal." Maybe in this time, Jesus calls us to follow him, journeying away from "normal" to life as it is in God's Kingdom.

Today, our lesson is to receive the invitation to follow Jesus once again. This Easter season we are following New Testament stories of the Risen Jesus. The final episode in the Gospel of John takes place on the lakeshore of the Galilean sea, the third time Jesus appears to his disciples after dying on the cross.

The last we knew the disciples were behind closed doors near Jerusalem. Since then, they've returned to Galilee, to the kind of activity they did before they met Jesus: they've gone fishing. We don't know their motivations; maybe they think they can pretend like this Jesus thing never happened and return to normal.

They've spent all night with no luck. Anyone who's fished knows the feeling. Then a mysterious man, calling to them from the shore, tells them to cast the nets on the other side, and suddenly the net is so full they can't haul it into the boat.

Like other resurrection stories, there's something different about the resurrected Jesus that means his disciples don't recognize him the way they would have during his earthly life. It seems to take a kind of spiritual sight to recognize him. The disciple who Jesus loved finally recognizes that it's Jesus. Though they aren't far from shore, brash Peter jumps in the water to get to shore faster. The others follow in the boat.

They soon see that Jesus has breakfast ready: fish cooked on a charcoal fire with bread. Jesus invites them to bring some of their immense catch. The number given – 153 – seems to have some symbolic value that interpreters have speculated about over the centuries with no single explanation holding sway. The surest interpretation is that this number signifies the spread of the gospel to all people groups.

The gospel is always about mysterious multiplication. We have to offer something – hopefully it's more than our time and talents, more like our full selves – as we show up wholeheartedly to each day of life. The work of God is that mysterious multiplication of a spiritual abundance beyond what we can manufacture.

Coming back to the storyline, Jesus serves the meal: food that Jesus has prepared along with the disciples' catch. I first came to like oatmeal after a hard day of hiking – anything would taste good then. After a hard night of fishing, the food must be so refreshing. Jesus *takes* the bread and *gives* it to them, and likewise the fish. I don't know about you, but I can't help but hear echoes of the Last Supper, where Jesus *took* the bread and the cup and *gave* it to each. "Last Supper" is a bad name for it – we really ought to call it the "First Supper," a pattern that has been repeated in countless moments of fellowship when believers recognize the presence of the Spirit of Christ.

The disciples have returned to the same place where they were called. Jesus first called his disciples in Galilee. According to Luke 5, Jesus called Peter and the sons of Zebedee at the shore of the lake of Galilee, with a similar miracle of a huge catch of fish. It's like there's a big circle – after the years of following Jesus around, watching him teach, heal, challenge the systems of his day, and die – now they've met Jesus again on the lakeshore.

After that breakfast, Jesus had some words with Peter: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (possibly meaning more than your fishing trade or more than the other disciples). Peter was the one who stridently claimed he would lay his life down for Jesus, but instead denied even knowing Jesus three times. Three times, Jesus repeats the question: "Do you love me?"

There are two different words for love in this exchange, and scholars have spilled a fair amount of ink debating whether word choice is deliberate or the writer is just alternating between synonyms. I'm persuaded there's a subtle difference. Jesus asked Peter if he has *agape*-love for him, a word choice that has a connotation of sacrifice – laying down one's life. Each time Peter responds with a different word for love. It's like Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" and the response is "Yes, I totally care about you." In light of his betrayal, Peter seems to hedge his answer. The third time, Jesus changes his question: "Simon son of John, do you care about me?" Peter gets the message.

All interpreters agree that Jesus graciously restores Peter after his betrayal, giving Peter the leadership of a shepherd for the church. The real question is how have *we* betrayed Christ, and what does it look like for Christ graciously restore us?

The coronavirus is the farthest thing from being the "great equalizer." We are not all equally affected. It greatly impacts people who were already relatively more vulnerable – poor communities, blue-collar workers, people of color, the uninsured. If Christ is present in the "least of these," as depicted in Matthew 25, maybe we have betrayed Christ by failing as the (white) American church to care for the marginalized of our society. This betrayal includes our willful ignorance of the dynamics of racism, our baptism of our highly consumptive lifestyles, our blaming the poor for their poverty, turning discipleship into self-righteousness, and turning the church into an institution preoccupied with its self-perpetuation rather than an incarnation of Christ's ministry.

The first step is to recognize our betrayal and fall in love again with Jesus.

As they continue conversation, Jesus hinted at Peter's future. Peter had freedom as a young person, but some day would be bound and led where he doesn't want to go. Someday, Peter would be killed for his faith. The point is never to seek suffering out for its own sake, but to not let the possibility of sacrifice deter us from being faithful. The American Church with our comfort and success-oriented culture has often softened Christ's call to follow.

Now this pandemic has asked people to make sacrifices, such as the way healthcare workers in hotspots are literally putting their lives on the line to do their jobs.

Peter was uncomfortable with Jesus' words and responded by asking about the other disciple. We all are tempted in different ways to compare ourselves with others – the need to be better than, the suspicion that others have it easier, the fear of being a failure. Comparison can make you feel you have the short end of the stick, or it might take the form of your own self-condemnation.

Jesus responded to Peter, "Why are you worried about him? You follow me!" As soon as you become aware you are comparing, remember the call to follow Jesus manifests itself in unique ways in all our lives. While we are "in this together," our individual Christian lives will also look different from one another. We each have to be able to hear the voice of the Spirit beneath the din of our distractions.

The life that will be ultimately the most meaningful and fulfilling won't avoid pain or sacrifice, but by the same token will also make us the most alive.

Right now, a specific way we can take up "costly discipleship," is to be willing to face the discomfort of the suffering this pandemic has created rather than seeking the normalcy that allows us to avoid pain and pursue a comfortable life. We want life to return to normal, just like the disciples returned to fishing.

The forces of consumerism as well as our own desire for comfort will push us to imagine the pandemic never happened. They will want us to make us so busy and preoccupied that we ignore the disturbing shadow-sides of our country and get back to pursuing whatever we take to be the American dream.

But there can't be a true return to normal after walking with Jesus. I hope that we don't just go back to normal after this coronavirus pandemic, when there is a decisive opportunity to follow Jesus in new ways through this time.

Let's return to the place where we first heard the call to follow Jesus. Put ourselves in the position to hear the commanding voice of Jesus, saying "You follow me!" Let's follow Jesus through this pandemic.