

This last chapter of the Gospel According to John is a delight – a repository of at least four interwoven post-Resurrection stories that could easily be mined by a careful preacher for a month’s worth of sermons. I’m not going to take that route. This morning, I want to touch very lightly on three of what I see as those four sections and go more in depth with a theme suggested to me, as you might have guessed, by Brian McLaren in his book, We Make the Road by Walking.

The first fourteen verses of chapter 21 are a wonderful miracle story. It’s a great story to tell to kids – the familiar locale of the Sea of Galilee, or, as it’s called here, the Sea of Tiberias, the nighttime fishing trip, the sudden appearance of a mysterious stranger and his odd instructions, the miraculous catch of fish, Peter’s impetuous plunge into the sea, and, of course, Jesus cooking breakfast for his friends. Adults who’ve heard this and other stories quite like it in the Gospels for years should be able to quickly pick up on the symbolism. Jesus is once again presented as Master of the Sea, shown to have the power only wielded by God in the Old Testament. As the One who controls the sea, he is shown not only to be in charge of one of the most awesome powers in God’s creation but, because the sea is so often used in the Old Testament as a symbol of chaos and evil, Jesus is seen here as the One who has come to heal all of creation as well as the broken humanity for whom he died. His intervention to provide the fishermen with an enormous catch on a night that had previously proven barren is in harmony with the other feeding miracles. Where Jesus is, there is abundance. A life of spiritual hunger and thirst is satisfied by the One who produces Living Water, the One who called himself the Bread of Life.

Verses 15-19 are generally remembered as the reconciliation scene between Peter and Jesus. As we recalled just weeks ago, Peter, previously the leader of Jesus’ disciples and the one who promised most vociferously to be loyal to him, in fact publicly denied even knowing the Prophet from Nazareth when the chips were down. As Jesus had predicted, Peter denied knowing him three times in the courtyard of the High Priest, before the sun had even risen ending the night when Peter promised to be faithful. As Peter denied three times, so Jesus asked him three times if Peter loved him. Three times, Peter answered in the affirmative. Three times, Jesus told him to feed his sheep. We love this story because it reminds us that the love of Jesus is forgiveness, even when we fall short multiple times. I find that tremendously comforting. Of course, there is also a challenge implicit. If we love Jesus, we act out of that love. Simply saying we do won’t cut it. I’ll come back to this in a few minutes.

Finally, in the last two verses, we get a clue to one of the persistent mysteries of the Gospel According to John: the identity of the Beloved Disciple. Actually, that might not make a great sermon, but it makes a terrific lecture or paper for New Testament scholars looking to stir up a controversy. Six times in John’s Gospel, but in no other, there are references to “the disciple Jesus loved.” The first is at the Last Supper, when it is this disciple who is reclining next to Jesus and asks, at Peter’s behest, who it is that will betray Jesus. From the cross, Jesus gives his mother into the keeping of this disciple. It is the Beloved Disciple who races Peter to the Empty Tomb after Mary Magdalene’s report and the Beloved Disciple is named as one of those present in this chapter. At the very end of chapter 21, which is the end of the Gospel According to John, it is revealed that the author of the book is the Beloved Disciple, which should put to rest any controversy since tradition tells us that the son of Zebedee did indeed write this gospel. But, oh, no... that’s not how things work in the world of New Testament Studies. Since the connection to

John is not explicitly made, in the words of the book itself, all sorts of theories have been floated as to the identity of this disciple. I'll let you look up those yourself for your own amusement.

Now, you may have noticed that I've skipped over a few verses. My focus for this morning is in the end of verse 19 through verse 22. "After this (that is, after telling Peter to feed the sheep), (Jesus) said to him, 'Follow me.' Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!'"

"Follow me!" What power in those two words! They are not a request, they are an imperative, an order. "Follow me!" This is how the journey with Jesus began for Peter, when Jesus found him for the first time in his fishing boat, at least in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. "Follow me!" This is how we still begin our journeys with Jesus when, for those of us raised as Baptists or in other free church movements, we take that long walk up the aisle to commit our lives to following Jesus and are received by the church in baptism. "Follow me!" But perhaps we need to think from time to time about what those two words really mean. How is it that we, separated by just shy of two thousand years and six thousand, seven hundred miles from that Galilean prophet on the shores of the lake, can follow Jesus?

We start, of course, with faith, or to step away from any theological language, trust. To follow someone means to trust them. When I was in grade school, I read a book, probably in a Scholastic Books edition, that has stayed in my memory over the years. It was called Follow My Leader, by James Garfield (not the President). Maybe some of you read it, too. It's about a young boy named Jimmy who is blinded in when a firecracker thrown by a friend explodes in his face. The book takes the reader through Jimmy's journey to self-sufficiency and forgiveness. He must learn to navigate his world without seeing it, how to locate food and drink set before him, how to make change, how to walk with a cane, and how to partner with a guide dog, named Leader. The book stayed in my memory in part because of the theme of forgiveness but also because of the very practical lessons in dealing with loss of vision, something I who have worn glasses since age six have always feared, and in trust. To work with the dog, Leader, Jimmy has to learn to trust him, just as he has to learn to trust his own senses of hearing, smell, and touch in the absence of sight.

When I got involved in theatre in junior high and subsequently in high school and college, part of the repertoire of exercises used in the training I received were trust exercises. These took a couple of forms. One was not unlike the experience of Jimmy in Follow My Leader. One or more participants in the exercise were blindfolded, then led through unseen terrain by a leader who could see where they were going. It was an exercise in trust, very necessary to the actor who must trust his or her partners, director, designers, and the crew in order to do their job. Another kind of trust exercise was the trust fall, which also taught teamwork. One participant stood in the midst of a circle of other students, eyes closed, arms folded, and, standing stiffly upright, fell, backwards, forwards, or to the side, and trusted their colleagues to catch them. If the falling one fell in such a way as to be between two in the circle, teamwork came into play as well as trust. An advanced version of this exercise was the ladder fall. In this one, the "trust-er" climbs a ladder to a height of about 4 feet, then, again with eyes closed and arms folded, standing

stiffly, falls back and is caught by the others. These are wonderful exercises to build teamwork and trust, scary at first, later exhilarating. It's been a long time since I've played "Trust" and I wonder if I still have the wherewithal to do so.

My point, of course, is that following Jesus requires that kind of trust – the trust that a blind person has in their guide dog, the trust that allows an actor to pitch backwards off a ladder into the arms of fellow cast members. Our reality in life, and I think this is particularly true now, is that we can't see the road ahead of us. We need a spiritual guide and the best is Jesus. Sometimes we are going to fall, spiritually – front, back, or to the side. Our lives are better when we trust that Jesus is going to catch us. Nothing, as Paul wrote, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

There's another aspect to following besides trust and that's imitation. It's what those of us who've hung around church for decades might call discipleship. We learn how to be in the world by imitating those we admire and trust – parents, teachers, leaders in our church, Jesus himself. It's how our forebears learned the skills they needed in life on the farm or if they took up a trade. Long before formal educational systems became common, the apprenticeship was the way in which young people became adults with the skills to make a living. A certain number of years were set aside to work for a master or mistress of the field, to receive room and board from them in return for working as an assistant while learning the craft. There aren't many apprenticeship programs now other than with certain unions but those of us who are fortunate can point to mentors in our given field who have taught us "the tricks of the trade," encouraged us, corrected us, and helped us along our way. In my first career, as an actor and director, I was blessed to have mentors like Dave Houghton, Kathi Kern Luljak, Sandy Havens, and Bobby Lewis. When I moved into theatre administration, I learned from folks like Marilee Hebert-Slater, Sandy Speer, and Jon Jory. When I moved into the pastorate, I depended on my memories of the many great preachers I'd known but had real-time help from more experienced friends like Tim Phillips, Curtis Price, Dennis Plourde, and Marcia Patton. I wasn't a disciple of any of those mentors – our relationships were far more egalitarian than that. But it helped that the vast majority of them were, along with me, disciples of Jesus. It meant they were oriented to the discipleship process.

We respond to Jesus' call to us, "Follow me," by trusting in him and by doing our best to imitate him. But this takes us back to my earlier question: how do we follow a first century peasant from Israel/Palestine? Our situations are so different! I think the answer is summed up by what Jesus himself said about what was most important in life. In each of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Jesus is asked what is the most important commandment of all. He, or in Luke, his interlocutor, responds "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

How do we go about following these commandments in our real, 21st century American lives? For the first, loving God, we may ask ourselves in any given situation, "what might God's will be in this situation?" We will not always know the answer to this perfectly, but I think that anyone listening to me this morning probably has a good enough understanding of the Scriptures

and what is taught by the Church to have a pretty good shot. If nothing else, we can rely on the simple formula taught by Micah: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

As we seek to love God with all our hearts, we might also ask ourselves, “how can I honor God in this situation?” Giving thanks to God and showing gratitude is certainly part of that. We also can honor God by honoring God’s creation. I was glad to find here at Good Shepherd a congregation who take creation care seriously. From our chemical-free gardens to our upgraded lighting, you all have consistently taken steps to be good stewards of our physical world. As we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Earth Day last week, we’ve certainly been made aware of threats to our ecology posed by those who are more concerned with a quick buck than with the sustainability of our environment. It’s important that we continue to do what we can do, to lovingly encourage others to do what they can do, and to let our political and business leaders know that we are aware of what they do and will vote and shop accordingly. Loving God’s world is an important part of loving God.

And, loving God means seeking God’s presence. Many folks find God best encountered in the great outdoors, which is another important reason to safeguard the beauty and well-being of our landscapes and the creatures who live in them. Some find God’s presence in the beauty of the arts and music. We need to remember that our artists, musicians, and the institutions that serve them have been badly hurt by the pandemic, as their ability to earn decent livings or to welcome visitors has been curtailed. I encourage all of us to give as we can to our favorite arts organizations and to those that benefit artists. And, of course, some find God’s presence most easily through worship, prayer, and meditation. We know that Jesus attended religious ceremonies in the Temple, went regularly to synagogue, and took time regularly to pray and to seek God’s presence. This is another important way in which we can follow him.

And just as important as loving God, Jesus said, is loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Let’s start at the end here. Before we can properly love anyone else, we must love ourselves. Be gentle with yourselves, my friends. This is a stressful, grief-filled time in our lives. Be sure you are eating well. It’s possible, even with social distancing, to get enough exercise by walking or riding a bike – just maintain good social distance. Care for your spirit as well as your body by doing the things that bring you pleasure, insofar as it’s possible. With your own physical and mental wellness restored, you can look at being gentle with others, too. Remember, we are all under stress these days. I saw a lovely post on Facebook this week, reposted from the page of St. Alban’s Episcopal Church, El Cajon, California. It read, “God, / Keep my anger from becoming / Meanness. / Keep my sorrow from collapsing into / Self-pity. / Keep my heart soft enough to keep / Breaking. Keep my anger turned / Towards justice, not cruelty. / Remind me that all of this, every bit of / It, is for love. / Keep me fiercely kind. /Amen.”

In loving others, we can also follow Jesus by imitating in our own way his actions. Jesus was a healer, who restored people to community out of the alienation of illness and death. In the same way, we should seek to bring people together, not push them apart. Let us remember in these difficult times that politics works best when it is based on kindness and mutual respect rather than anger and divisiveness. We need not return evil for evil, indeed, we have been taught that it doesn’t work. Jesus taught others about God’s love. I think this is more at the core of his instructions to Peter to “feed his sheep” than any notion of a physical feeding, although that’s important, too. But, again, we best teach about the love of God when we love, when we are kind, when we are forgiving. And we love others, as Jesus taught and finally exemplified in dying on the cross, by taking up our cross, by putting the needs of others ahead of our own desires. We follow Jesus by looking out for

those who are weak and being willing to give up something of ourselves to help them, whether that is time or financial resources or effort. When we follow Jesus, we do our best to love others as he loved them.

Over my shoulder this morning, you can see a piece of art that usually hangs on the wall of my office. It's an old fundraising poster I designed in my days at Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children. It was meant to encourage people in the Baptist churches in Kentucky to give to KBHC so that we could maintain our ministries of providing services for children and families in that state. You may be able to read the words at the top, "Feed my lambs." It is, of course, drawn from Jesus' words to Peter in this chapter. I keep it because it reminds me that Jesus, in his calling to love God's world, looked at the crowds who came to him and "he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." As we work to answer Jesus' call to us, to "follow him," we, too, must have compassion for all of those who are lost, hurt, or straying, those who are like sheep without a shepherd. Loving them and bringing them to the love of God is the most important thing we can do to follow him, wherever he leads us. Hear the words of Jesus to us all: "Follow me!" For the love of God, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God. Amen.