

John 21: 15-22 (NRSV)

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he 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 remains until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!'

## **SERMON**

Christmas, 1987 I think, we were just married, and had received tickets to a George Winston concert at Wolf Trap - a really cool concert venue outside of Washington DC. My brother had given us the tickets, invited us to come early to their house for supper, and then we'd go together. We left early, map and written directions in hand, long before the time of GPS in our car. We both had a good sense of direction.

We got down to the beltway around DC - you know how it's marked, sometimes it's north 495, then it's east, it's hard to know which way you're really going. Am I going east or north? Well we got lost. REally lost. Sam was driving, I was navigating, map and directions spread across my lap, becoming frantic as the exit signs were indicating that we were way off course. We drove and drove, getting on and off, so tangled we didn't know which way we were headed. We finally stopped at a payphone -

remember them? I couldn't tell my brother where I was other than the cross street where I was standing, I was so confused. I didn't trust myself to write down directions and find our way. Can you just come meet us here and we'll follow you? I pleaded.

We're returning to a scripture of the post-resurrection Jesus. Jesus has been gone from their lives. And so Peter and his buddies have returned to the life they used to know. The 'before times' - before Jesus first showed up and said 'follow me'.

Fishing. That's the life they've known. Alone now,  
They're trying to find their way.

Fishing was a way of providing for the community and their families.

It was what they knew how to do. It gave them structure. That along with faith in Yahweh, the One who Rescues.

I wonder, how had their faith in God changed, with Jesus gone?

In this gospel, Jesus appeared twice after his death - suddenly appearing to the disciples as they gathered behind locked doors. Did he stay long? We're not sure. But whatever those appearances were like, right now, it seems like his followers are lost. Not sure what to do or where to go.

Jesus was gone, time to return to the old ways...

Life was empty - no fish, no purpose.

Jesus shows up on the beach, gives them a few directions, and has a charcoal fire waiting for them when they come ashore.

Not just a fire - the gospel writer tells us it's a charcoal fire. The Greek word for charcoal fire, *anthrakia*, (an-thrack- ee-ah, emphasize the ee) appears only one other time in the New Testament, and that is in the account of the arrest and trial of Jesus, when Peter denies being a disciple.<sup>1</sup>

Here we are, again around a charcoal fire.

What a different setting.

The other charcoal fire was a place of questions too -

That one was back outside the courtyard of the high priest, where the gatekeeper asks Peter:

'Aren't you one of this guys' followers?' (John 18:17)

And then, around the fire, others ask:

Aren't you one of his disciples?

Didn't I see you in the garden with him?

Around this charcoal fire Jesus asks Peter three more questions.

Do you love me? Do you love me? Really, do you really love me?

In some ways, these questions are not so different from the ones he was asked earlier - are you one of his followers? Aren't you one of his disciples?

Somehow these questions lead me to more questions.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.samford.edu/news/2007/Symbolism-in-Gospel-of-John-Explained-in-Samford-Lecture>

And underneath them all is my unspoken question - why? Why follow Jesus?  
Peter, James, John - why did you choose that way?

Not *how* do I follow Jesus, but *why*?  
Why do I choose to answer yes - yes to my flawed attempts to be one of his disciples?  
Yes to: do you love me?

Let's take a moment and look a little more closely at that series of questions. Three questions. Three, that symbol of completeness - the trinity, three. Jesus, Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration, along with three amazed disciples - three. Jesus, dead, in the tomb for 3 days. Three.

Three is a sign of something coming to fruition; complete.

This gospel ends with 3 questions.

Do you love me?

The first two times Jesus asks that question, he uses the Greek word *agapē*, *for love* and Peter answers with *philos*, *another word for love in Greek*. 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Jesus asks, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you', Peter responds. Theologian Frank Crouch writes that we're often taught that agape is the highest form of love, the pure, selfless love of Creator God, and that *philos* is somehow second rate - a love between friends. However, in his third time of asking Peter, Jesus changes the terminology, asking Peter finally, "Peter, do you love me (*philos*)?" and Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you (*philos*).” You know everything.  
Everything.  
You know that I love you, as friends love one another.

Here and elsewhere in John, the understanding of *agapē* and *philos* do not fit the expected scheme, suggesting, perhaps, that the long-standing interpretation falls short.

While in John's gospel, Christ's love is often expressed as agape - a love that comes from God and leads to life, it is also used in ways where love becomes desperately distorted, directed toward things that turn us away from God.

Here, in this passage, when Jesus himself clarifies the highest form of *love*, he does so in terms of *philos*. Love for friends is no second class love here. Earlier Jesus told his followers - "No one has greater love (*agapē*) than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (*philos*)" (15:13). Jesus goes on to define his relationship with his disciples in terms of friendship—"I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends (*philos*)" (15:15).

Here, in this passage, Peter says 'you know everything'.

Jesus knows everything about Peter, AND he renews and restores the relationship, by inviting Peter through love. Through the commitment of love, Jesus invites Peter to a new kind of leadership. Fisherman no longer, Peter is called to feed Christ's sheep (verses 15-17) and because of that feeding, eventually to die.<sup>2</sup>

Why?

Why, after standing around that other charcoal fire, did Peter say yes to that call to restoration, to relationship?

Jesus tells Peter it's going to require everything he has. Even his life. Peter responds, 'yes Lord, you know that I love you.'

And so I come back to the question for us -

Why do we follow Christ?

Why do we stay engaged, even when it's hard?

If my choice to claim to be a Jesus follower is not based on the fear of my destiny of heaven or hell, why follow Jesus?

Pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber talks about how her worst impulses are subverted, overturned, by the mercy found in the stories of Jesus.

That's the Good news of the gospel -

Here, we see Peter, an example of one desperately in need of grace. Just like me. Just like you.

Why be a Christian?

The good news of the gospel is not that if I live a squeaky clean life; a life filled with acts of discipleship that I'll finally be deserving of God's unending love.

No, the good news is understanding how in need of grace I am, and how beautiful it is that God never leaves my side.

The badness of my life, of our life, is not the final word. The Good News is not about me, it's about God.

It has to always go back to grace, Bolz-Weber reminds us. If it's not grace, it goes back to works, and that's not good news.

Jesus shows up where we are - after a long night of trying hard and still coming up empty handed.

---

<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-211-19-2>

Jesus shows up where we are - around the charcoal fires of deceit and cowardice.

Transformation, change, doesn't happen because I try harder.

Transformation doesn't happen because of me. It happens *to* me. It's a moment of grace.<sup>3</sup>

Like Jesus showing up on the beach, building a charcoal fire, and saying, come on in.

You all messed up, big time.

And you know what? I'm still going to feed you.

Not only feed you, but give you work to do.

Not because you've got it right. Not because you understand me.

No, because I (Jesus) see you - know you as children of the Creator God.

You belong.

Jesus offers the grace around the charcoal fires of our lives. The places we mess up. The places where we lose our way.

Jesus shows up to show us the way.

That's Good news.

Why am I a Christian?

Because I get lost, over and over and over.

Because I need a compass.

I need the stars in the night sky.

I need stories that remind me when I forget.

I need more than just being kind. More than just slogans like: do the right thing.

Those thoughts leave me thinking I am the center, in control. Being kind, doing the right thing, that's central to following Christ, but I need more.

No, I get lost way too much. I think I'm the center of the universe.

And so, when...

I look to the stars.

When...

I listen to the cardinal in the maple tree singing his heart out.

I think of psalm 8 - "when I behold your heavens,

The work of your fingers,

The moon and the stars which you set in place

What is humanity that you should be mindful of us?

Who are we that you should care for us?"

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://peteenns.com/interview-with-nadia-bolz-weber-being-a-christian-in-the-messiness/>. 3/8/21.

I remember, just for a moment, I am not the center of the universe.  
The good news is that Christ dwells there. Christ is the center.

That same Christ who showed up on the beach as Jesus, the man.  
The same one who built the charcoal fire, and said this is a different fire. This is a place where you belong. No matter your past.

You belong. You all belong. And there's work to be done.

So how might I begin to answer the question:

Why am I a Christian?

When I get lost - awake in the middle of the night, replaying those less than helpful memories...  
When I get caught up in my own story, believing that what I want is most important...  
When I forget who I am, whose I am, why I'm here.

I remember.

Being a Christian, a follower of Christ, helps me remember.  
Remember that I'm a beloved child of God.  
Remember that you're a beloved child of God.  
Remember that grace is enough.  
Remember that there's a charcoal fire waiting for me - not to shame me, but one where Christ feeds me; nourishes me so that I can share this Good News with others.

I would love to hear why you choose to be a follower of Christ?  
Why have you stepped into this path - one that asks for us to follow?