

‘Feed and Follow’
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based on Acts 9:1-20 and John 21:1-19

Today’s two scripture readings are two of the most famous Resurrection encounters of Jesus in the New Testament...the Gospel story of the last breakfast with the disciples on the lakeshore with Peter’s three-time confession of stating his love of Jesus.

It is a confession that not only redeems Peter from his betrayal at Jesus’ trial but outlines a path forward on the journey to build God’s kingdom on earth.

That ‘path forward’ is often referred to as ‘The Way’.

The second story is the game-changing conversion of the Christian persecuting Saul into Apostle Paul...believer, champion, and follower of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God.

Peter and Saul were polar opposites. One was an eye-witness to Jesus’ ministry and who professed repeatedly to love Jesus; the other was a man who professed a belief that inspired him to persecute and kill those who followed Jesus’ Way.

Leave it to Jesus to figure out a way to bring those two polar opposites into focus for the advancement of the Way, drawing each one closer to living eternally in God’s love.

When I went through my ordination interviews I was asked over and over to tell the story of my call to ministry. More than once I wished for a conversion story like Paul’s. I wanted to impress people with my story of being knocked off my horse; blinded by the light; and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit!

I would have been a shoe-in to ordination.

But most stories of conversion, or call, don’t happen quite that way. God works in us slowly and deliberately...kind of like the way God worked on Peter.

Peter was the disciple who...well, kinda bumbled his way along. He didn’t always think before he spoke; he didn’t always know the right answers; Peter was the every-day, ordinary man Jesus chose to call ‘the Rock’...not because he was strong and mighty...but because he was honest, had integrity, and mostly because he *loved* Jesus.

Whether Paul or Peter...it is clear from these two stories, Jesus calls both the likely and the unlikely to ‘feed’ and ‘follow’.

After confessing his love of Jesus, Jesus tells Peter three times to feed and tend the sheep of his flock...and ends with his command to “follow me.”

I’m trying to imagine what’s going through Peter’s mind. A few days earlier he was running scared from the Roman and Jewish authorities. Jesus had made a

stunning appearance in the Upper Room gifting them with the Holy Spirit...and now, he was enjoying breakfast on a beach with Jesus!

But it was breakfast with a test...he was being grilled for ordination.

Peter...do you love me more than these? Yes.

Peter...do you love me? Yes.

Peter...do you love me? Yes...you know all things. You know I love you.

Jesus' reply isn't thank you...or even, 'I love you too.' His reply was a command to feed and follow. To nurture, nourish, and tend the sheep and lambs of the Good Shepherd's flock...and then to follow the Good Shepherd into green pastures...beside still waters...even into the valley of the shadow of death.

Jesus would be there to comfort and guide.

For Saul, his encounter with Jesus wasn't so much a command as much as instructions on what to do if Saul ever wanted to see again.

Saul, renamed Paul, was chosen by Jesus to be "an instrument who was chosen to bring Jesus' name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel"...Paul would be an insider whose testimony could bear the brunt of theological critique and brutal physical suffering.

The Way would need Paul to spread a message to those who didn't embrace the Jewish faith AND who weren't witnesses to the teachings, healings, and freeing miracles of Jesus...or to his resurrection itself.

These two stories of Peter's confession and Paul's conversion laid the framework for the early church. It would be a foundation that would support both the testimony of witnesses and testimony of converted believers to grow Christ's church.

The Way would not die out as the witnesses died...but live on through those who would come to believe even though they did not see for themselves the physical wounds of Jesus or who were not knocked off their horse by a blinding light.

We are now 2000 years removed from those who struggled to build the early church. We are 2000 years away from having our hands or feet cut off as a form of persecution for claiming Jesus as our Lord. We are 2000 years away from sacrificing everything we owned in the belief Jesus' way was not only the better way...but the only way.

How do we as 21st century believers reclaim that commitment to 'feed' and 'follow' in the footsteps of Christ? What does it mean for us to feed and tend the sheep of the Good Shepherd's flock?

What Way does Jesus lead us today?

Yesterday was the 71st anniversary of the execution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer...a German pastor who vocally opposed the expansion and reign of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer was also a theologian who proclaimed Christ crucified and disavowed any theology that made Christianity a passive faith or a faith that distanced itself from human suffering.

Indeed, it was Bonhoeffer's theology of suffering that allowed him to be a part of the suffering of those who resisted Nazism.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer *loved* Jesus.

Bonhoeffer died on April 9, 1945; hung from a tree...for what many have come to believe was his integrity in speaking Christ's truth to power.

In years hence Bonhoeffer inspired such social justice movements as the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., the anti-communist democratic movement in Eastern Europe during the Cold War; and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa.

It is Bonhoeffer's theology that helps Christians to not fear suffering.

In the 7th chapter of Matthew there is a brief two verses that says, ¹³“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” [Matt 7:13-14]

For Paul, Peter, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer...they found and entered the narrow gate and walked the road that led to life.

The gate, or road, that beckons us to answer Christ's call on our lives to “feed” and “follow” is narrow and hard; but the reward...or blessing...or experience of grace...whatever you want to call it...is great!

Peter knew it. Paul knew it. Certainly Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew it.

We know it too. Now we just need to live into our call.

One of my favorite contemporary theologians (PD Prewer) puts it this way:

Christ asks if we love him?

If we say yes, he says; “Then care for one another.”

This is our opportunity to make a difference, to live lovingly on the frontiers of his bright new world.

We cannot promise to do it perfectly, but we can give it a go, relying on his abundant wisdom to take our small love, and fit it into a larger pattern of good for all creation.

May God bless the world in which you move, and bless your home and bless your friends.

May God bless the eyes with which you see, and bless the ears with which you listen.

May God bless the way you use your hands, bless the way you employ your tongues.

(From a Celtic prayer)

...as a bonus from the living God in Christ Jesus; grace mercy and peace will be yours, today and always. Amen.