

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – August 18, 2019

John 21:15-19

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Note: This is NOT one of the assigned texts for this week's lectionary, but was chosen thematically for our worship

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on John 21:1-19

(From *Homiletics*; “The Hefted Shepherd”, May 5, 2019)

Fairly early in the course of their respective narratives, the synoptic gospels portray Jesus seeking out fishers to be his first disciples (Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 1:16-20, Luke 5:1-11). But the gospel of John draws no connection between fishing and discipleship — nor refers to any disciples fishing for a livelihood — until the closing chapter. Consequently, whereas Matthew, Mark (factoring in its add-on endings) and Luke conclude with apostolic commissions that direct the disciples to reach out to the nations, the circumstances surrounding the commission in John present imagery reminiscent of the initial stages of discipleship found in the synoptics. Verses 3-8 particularly echo Luke 5:4-7 with respect to the call of Peter, James and John corresponding to the extraordinary haul of fish that follows Jesus telling them where to cast the net.

True enough, on a symbolic level, there are suggestions of a more apostolic, go-to-the-nations thrust in the last chapter of John. For instance, referring to the Sea of Galilee as the Sea of Tiberias (v. 1) points to a readership larger than a Jewish Christian audience. No matter how one interprets the exact count of 153 (v. 11), the vast volume of fish netted implies an expansive mission. Then again, given Jesus' earlier mention of having “other sheep that do not belong to this fold” (10:16), his reference to lambs and sheep in verses 15-17 may well assume shepherding that ranges far afield.

Nevertheless, the explicit emphasis of today's text has more to do with learning to follow Jesus than it does being sent forth by him. This is reinforced in verses 15-19, where the dialogue between Jesus and Peter highlights the cost of discipleship in a way that recalls synoptic accounts of Jesus cautioning the all-too-often obtuse disciples that greatness has to do with being servants who fully comprehend the gist of Jesus' predictions about the price of his own passion (see especially Mark 8:31-37; 9:30-37; 10:32-45). Every time Peter says he loves Jesus in verses 15-17, Jesus responds by placing a servant's task before Peter. All this is underscored as Jesus predicts Peter's martyrdom, concluding with the firm summons, “Follow me” (v. 19). It's as if Jesus is giving Peter a remedial course in discipleship formation.

It may well be that distinguishing between discipleship and apostleship in this passage is splitting hairs. But perhaps imagery so obviously associated with being introduced to, and getting a handle on, discipleship is there for a reason, namely, that the crux of the text is the restoration and renewal of Peter's discipleship that unfolds in verses 15-19.

With the exception of Jesus ordering Peter to put away his sword when Jesus is arrested (18:11), the questions and answers in verses 15-19 comprise the first direct exchange between Jesus and Peter since Peter swore to lay down his life for Jesus (13:37). And we all know how well that turned out for Peter.

In light of Peter's denial and abandonment of Jesus leading up to the crucifixion, the simple fact that Jesus now engages Peter in an earnest conversation already indicates that the disciple is receiving a second chance. As the two talk, Jesus is depicted as speaking in terms of divine love (*αγαπη*) the first two times he asks if Peter loves him (vv. 15-16). Meanwhile, Peter can speak only in terms of human love (*φιλια*); all three times he answers that he loves Jesus (vv. 15-17). Jesus eventually speaks in terms of human love when he asks the third time if Peter loves him.

Much is made of Peter not responding to Jesus with *agape*. But in the long run, Jesus doesn't tell Peter to "forget it" but to "follow me." And, although his questioning is pointed, Jesus is clearly giving Peter a shot at redemption. Forgiveness emerges from Jesus' willingness to assign Peter the task of shepherding, despite Peter's earlier betrayal and present failure to love as profoundly as Jesus can love. The good news for Peter and us is that Jesus summons disciples and works with them, even in their imperfection.

Given that verses 1-19 record a post-resurrection appearance that serves as the gospel lesson for the Third Sunday of Easter, the preacher may want to consider the restoration and renewal of Peter's discipleship — and ours — in relation to the resurrection itself. Discipleship is a venture of following Jesus wherein we're called to higher purposes while being empowered from on high. In the process, we're equipped to continue the ministry and mission of Jesus by way of being redeemed from sinfulness; it's reinforced when service includes suffering (vv. 18-19a).

It's worth noting that with each question in verses 15-17, Jesus calls Peter "Simon, son of John," which is often interpreted as Jesus expressing coolness toward Peter that casts doubt on their friendship. But this may more positively reflect a certain solemnity that's comparable in character to the way we formally address people when they take an oath. Good news flows from Jesus' rehabilitation of Peter's discipleship, but this good news starts with a serious encounter in which the dialogue between Jesus and Peter has the tone of a swearing-in ceremony.

Similarly positive is the consideration that, by calling Peter "Simon, son of John," Jesus speaks as one who knows Peter and Peter's people — where Peter comes from. Jesus knows Peter fully in context, fully enough to still entrust Peter to feed and tend the flock in Jesus' absence. We, too, are fully known by Jesus — the One whose risen presence continually rehabilitates our discipleship, so we can be entrusted to feed and tend his flock, the One whose divine love nurtures our capacity to grow in love and service, and the One whose steadfast resurrection power gives us the nerve to follow by casting our nets into the most unlikely waters.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on John 21:15-19

- 1.** “Do you love me?” How do you hear and relate to the exchange between Peter and Jesus in vv. 15-19? Does it make sense in its “plain meaning”, or does it beg to be explained so that it makes sense? Do you identify with Peter? Do you see Jesus as comforting and compassionate to him? Or more distant and demanding? Do you see this exchange as unique to the relationship of Peter and Jesus, or do you sense in this exchange a call to disciples of all ages?
- 2.** We call Jesus the “Good Shepherd.” Read John 10 (from which this title comes) alongside today’s scripture passage. How does this identity as the Good Shepherd interface with Jesus’ thrice repeated instructions to Peter to “feed/tend my lambs/sheep”?
- 3.** How does Jesus’ foreshadowing to Peter in v. 18 (You used to go wherever you wished...but in the future someone else will take you where you do not wish to go) resonate with the tradition of Brethren “Counting the Cost”? Is this a message just for Peter, or for all who would follow Jesus? Is following Jesus in some fundamental way inevitably costly? Is there such a thing as “smooth sailing” when one decides to follow Jesus, or must we as disciples accept a life that unavoidably leads us “where we do not wish to go?”

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?