

John 21:1-19 5.1.25 Bill Uetracht 3 Easter

I have been preaching for many years and have confronted most of the Bible readings that we receive as the basis for our sermons frequently. And yet, often I discover something new in a Bible reading that I never noticed before. And that happened this week as I was confronting the story from John about the resurrected Jesus' appearance to his disciples.

What I never had noticed before in this story was the interesting list of the disciples. The gospel writer John does not give us a list of the disciples, as do Matthew, Mark, and Luke, except here at the end of his book, where we are provided with a listing of only *seven* of them. Hmmm. Weren't there twelve apostles? Have some of them decided to pack up and leave the movement? Was the crucifixion simply too much for some of them, and, therefore, a few decided that they no longer wanted to be in the Jesus community? It's a fascinating wondering.

And of the seven listed, only three of them are given names: Simon Peter, Thomas, and Nathanael. Let's be honest. Thomas and Nathanael aren't really big hitters. They are in some ways disappointing characters. Why list them and Peter? I don't know. What they seem to have in common is that they all had doubts about their relationship with Jesus. Peter denied Jesus three times. Nathanael was the one who said early on in the Gospel of John, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth," referring to Jesus and his questionable working-class roots.

And Thomas is known as the big doubter, as we discovered last week. "Quit your doubting and trust," Jesus said to Thomas on Easter night. "Look at my hands and my side! The one who was crucified is the one who has been raised. And he is right in front of you." Don't doubt; believe.

Hmmm. The ones listed are the doubters, doubters who also at one point offered a confession of faith. Peter: You are the "Holy One of God." Thomas: "My Lord and my God." And Nathanael: "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel." Sometimes they got it; sometimes they didn't. John names these kinds of folks. Oh, I thought maybe he would list only those who were always sure, always got it, and behaved accordingly. No! John seems to focus here on ones who are somewhat mixed.

One of the other disciples mentioned by John who really intrigues me is an unnamed one, only said to be "the one whom Jesus loved." Does Jesus play favorites? Is this disciple the teacher's pet? Who is it? We don't know. But John mentions this disciple on many occasions. Why did Jesus love this disciple so much? It's a mystery. Some folks think that the beloved disciple may be Mary Magdalene. In many places, we experience a special fondness on the part of Jesus toward Mary.

Some folks perhaps think that the disciple whom Jesus loved is the author of the gospel himself. Storytellers often find a way to get themselves into the story. And the way is not always real obvious. The authors hide in the story. Maybe John is hiding in the story through the character of the beloved disciple.

Or, perhaps, the disciple whom Jesus loved is the way that John is putting you and me into the story. Maybe the character is never named so that we could see ourselves as the "one whom Jesus loved."

This Jesus story is one in which we are meant to play a role, intended to participate in. This Jesus story includes us. It is not meant for spectators, who just watch the story take place. In a spectator-sport culture like ours, it is easy to get wrapped up in just watching, spectating. Now I am well aware that age and bodily

condition shape how much we can participate in certain sports. I don't run anymore because my knee won't let me. Yet still, for me, I want to find ways to participate, not just watch. Maybe the beloved disciple is you and me who find ourselves compelled to *participate* in the Jesus story, not just watch it from a distance.

I don't know. It's all a mystery. In many ways, the Jesus story is a mystery. Everything isn't clear. Following him is not a matter of certainty or clarity. There is a lot about it that I don't fully understand. But this I understand, this Jesus story is not a spectator sport. This Jesus story needs us. This Jesus story needs, as our theme for today suggests, all kinds. It needs people who have given up on the movement, mixed, skeptical people, people with doubts, people who aren't sure, people who have lots of questions.

It needs people like you and me, mysterious people, who sometimes get it right and sometimes get it wrong and who are, nonetheless, beloved, loved. What this Jesus movement needs more than anything is loved people, and that is what we all are. We all find ourselves in the story of love. Sometimes, admittedly, that doesn't seem so apparent. Sometimes we doubt that we are included. Sometimes we feel like a hidden character, not always knowing who we are. But that doesn't mean that we aren't in the story. We are. The story includes every one of us. It takes all kinds.

If you don't believe that, you might want to look at what is our first reading for today. Luke in Acts tells us a story about a nasty guy—his name was Saul or Paul—who is bent on destroying the Jesus movement, the movement known as The People of the Way. Saul was a crabby, angry religious man, who spent a lot of time threatening people, desiring to hurt people, overseeing violence imposed on people. In the story, he is on his way to Damascus to continue his reign of terror. And while on his *way*, the leader of the

*new way*, Jesus, disrupts Saul's way and ways. Jesus has a way of doing that, by the way. With Jesus, it's not business as usual, more of the same. With Jesus, the old ways of anger, nasty rhetoric, violence, hatred toward the other, especially the other who is different than you, are transformed by love and compassion. Saul's violence was stopped in its tracks.

Why? Because love needed this man. Because it takes all kinds. Now Ananias, who was called to minister to Saul, initially resisted his invitation to help Saul because he knew of Saul's reputation. "Lord," he said, "I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem." Truthfully, Ananias doesn't want to become Saul's latest victim. But Jesus won't take Ananias' reluctance: "Go, nonetheless, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring *my* name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel."

This is a story not simply about the conversion of Saul; this is a story about the call of Saul, the call of Paul. He not only is changed; he has a job to do. He is being commissioned. And his commission is a big one—to take the gospel to the Gentiles, to those who are not a part of his club.

It takes all kinds. The work of love needs all kinds, including people who have made mistakes, whose history includes crabbiness, anger, and even illegal things. What this Jesus story needs is not perfect people, but honest folks who know that God has the ability to use that which is not perfect for the sake of love. Richard Rohr says that "divine perfection is precisely the ability to include what seems like imperfection." Don't sit around waiting until life's all perfect, or you are all perfect, before you jump into the call to take love far and wide. Perfection is an illusion. As many people have noted, perfection can be the enemy of the truly good. Take who

you are and what you have and offer it to the God who is able to take imperfection and use it perfectly. Saul was no perfect guy. Far from it. But he became the greatest promoter of the Christian faith that the church has ever known.

Megan, Augie, Jordan, Bridget, Connor, Lauren: You are beloved people. You are disciples whom Jesus loves. Yes, you aren't perfect. Some of you have some anxiety. Some of you are prone to a little depression. Some of you are a little scared. Some of you wonder if you are good enough, capable enough. But all of you are very gifted in diverse ways. The Jesus movement, the church, needs you. There's a calling in your life. Don't run from it. The story of love will take your imperfections and use them for the sake of love.

Love has come down to the lakeshore, call it the shore of Lake Michigan, seeking neither the wise nor the wealthy, but only asking for you to follow. Love is looking into your eyes, calling out each one of your names. Hear the call! Join me and Peter as together we go fishing. Love needs you and the people you can touch through your love. After all, the mission of love takes all kinds.