

Fishing with Jesus

April 26, 2020

John 21

UMCG

“Do you love me?” Who among us hasn’t asked these words of another? Who among us, at some point in our lives, hasn’t been asked this question? We need reassurance. Others need reassurance. Who can forget the Russian peasant, Tevye, in the play *Fiddler on the Roof* and the poignant conversation he has with his wife, Golda. Tired and worn, they’d been through so much together in their 25 years of marriage. And as they discuss the upcoming marriage of one of their daughters, Tevye repeatedly asks Golda that penetrating question: “Do you love me?” Tevye wants to know. We want to know.

In John 21, Jesus wants to know. “Peter...do you love me?” And Jesus’s inquiry is certainly understandable in light of Peter’s three-fold denial of him just a few evenings earlier in the courtyard of the High Priest Caiaphus. Jesus has important work for Peter to do, and he needs to be assured of Peter’s loyalty, love and devotion.

With all the emotion surrounding this powerful encounter between Peter and Jesus, we can easily overlook the fact that there are other characters in John 21. In fact, there were six other disciples in addition to Peter, including the Beloved Disciple, John. John the Beloved, author of the Gospel. However, the three main characters on site that morning were Jesus, Peter and John the Beloved. In fact, John and Peter appear together fairly often throughout John’s Gospel...John’s story of Jesus.

Written at the very end of the 1st century CE, the Gospel of John reflects the perspective of the community of faith that John the Beloved led, and wrote his Gospel to. Biblical scholars point out the fact that there were several forms of Christianity at the turn of the 1st century. The four Gospel writers were not writing to the exact same Christian community, but to different faith communities. Two of the major expressions of faith at the turn of the century were Johannine Christianity (reflective of John the Beloved) and Petrine Christianity (reflective of Peter). While both communities believed in and were committed to following the resurrected Jesus, they did have differing emphases.

So...for example, Matthew's Gospel clearly reflects the beliefs and values of the Petrine community. Only in Matthew's Gospel does Jesus declare that Peter is the rock—the solid foundation upon whom Jesus will build his church! The Gospel of John, on the other hand, reflects the perspective of the Johannine community and lifts up John as hero of the early church. (1) That's why it's so important to look carefully at the passages in John's Gospel where John and Peter appear together. What's going on between these two? And their relationships with Jesus? And how does this apply to us today as we relate to Jesus and one another?

In looking at John's Gospel, some scholars attempt to pit John against Peter, seeing them as antagonists. These folks suggest that John's Gospel is vividly anti-Petrine...anti-Peter. Others say "no," hold on...a closer look at the interaction of John the Beloved and Peter in this Gospel does not portray John and Peter as bitter antagonists...but as disciples on more friendly terms who differ in the manner of their discipleship, and their key roles as leaders of the early church.

John's Gospel portrays John as the ideal disciple to emulate. That's the perspective taken by P. J. Horton in his article on the relationship of John and Peter in the 4th Gospel. (2) His thesis is that, and I quote, "In the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple no hint of rivalry or opposition between them is expressed. The point at issue is their discipleship" and the differing roles they play in the early church. And so a picture of these two disciples comes into clearer focus as John's Gospel unfolds. Let's look at that developing picture!

In John chapter 1, unlike the other Gospels, Jesus chooses John the Beloved before he calls Peter to discipleship. In chapter 13, the scene of the Last Supper, only John and Peter interact with Jesus over the question of the identity of Jesus's betrayer. The Beloved Disciple is reclining at a meal with Jesus, close to his breast. Peter, some distance away, must go through John to communicate with Jesus. John's discipleship is one of *deep love and intimacy*.

In John 18, the scene of Peter's denials of Jesus at the High Priest home, only John the Beloved is allowed to accompany Jesus inside the courtyard. And it is John who convinces the gate keeper to let his friend Peter into the courtyard. Here, Peter's disloyalty in denying Jesus is contrasted with John's *discipleship of loyalty*.

At the foot of the cross in chapter 19, the Beloved Disciple's presence is key to the story. Where is Peter? Nowhere to be found! And from the cross, to whom does Jesus entrust his mother? To John the Beloved! *Loyalty and trust are marks of true discipleship.*

In John 20, the tomb is empty. Mary Magdalene, first at the tomb rushes off and urges Peter and John to come and see. This sets off a foot race in which...guess who wins? John! While both enter the empty tomb and see the grave clothes, only John sees and believes. Peter is simply befuddled. For John, the empty tomb elicits *a response of faith* in the resurrection; not so for Peter!

In today's passage, John 21, at the scene of the miraculous catch of fish, who is the first to recognize the Risen Christ? John! In fact, he has to explicitly point Peter to the risen Lord! The lesson? *Love for Jesus gives one insight to detect the presence of the risen Lord.*

In short, John NOT Peter is the hero for the Johannine community of faith. Not only was John closer to Jesus, he was also quicker. Quicker in getting to the tomb. Quicker in coming to faith. Quicker to recognize the risen Lord at the Sea of Galilee.

So what lessons can we learn today from John's Gospel? Let me suggest just a few things. For starters, a diversity of expressions of faith in Christ is OK...is normal. Difference does not imply superiority. Methodists aren't better than Baptists aren't better than Lutherans aren't better than Catholics, and so forth. Different? Yes! Superior? Not so!

Second, we all come to faith in various ways, over time, and express our faiths differently. New Testament Prof. Greg Carey points out that in the stories of Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, Thomas and the other disciples in John 20-21, "the Gospel story judges none of these people. John includes their stories without evaluation or assessment. All eventually come to faith. Seeing and believing takes its own shape in each instance." (2)

And finally, the Lord has different roles for each of us to play in the church and the world. The Apostle Peter has a *pastoral* role, a *pastoral authority* to play in the life of the early church. This is why Jesus needs assurance of Peter's love. For John, the Beloved Disciple, his role is that of ideal disciple – a discipleship of consistent love and witness embodied in the Gospel he wrote. Whereas Peter has a primacy of *pastoral leadership* in the church, John the Beloved has a *primacy of love and witness* for Jesus. Both are necessary.

So I ask, "What unique gift or gifts has God given to you...to me...to share in the church? In the world? You are needed! I am needed! All of us are needed to continue Christ's mission in the world today. Amen.

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INTRO TO OFFERING

It is with grateful hearts that we express our love for the Lord by giving ourselves and our gifts back to him...to further God's Kingdom. While we continue worship online...the Lord also continues to work in and through our church as we carry on Christ's ministry and mission. You may give online, by text and by mail....As we continue to worship the Lord through our Prayer of Dedication, the Closing Hymn and the Closing Prayer, I invite you to witness yet another way the Lord is using the United Methodist Church of Geneva to make a difference right here in Chicagoland...and that is through our ministry partner, JFON – Justice For Our Neighbors. JFON is meeting the needs of immigrants and refugees through the legal services they provide.

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- (1) For an overview of some of the major differences between Johannine and Petrine Christianity in the 1st century CE, see Raymond Brown, "Other Sheep Not of This Fold": The Johannine Perspective on Christian Diversity in the late First Century, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (March, 1978), pp. 5-22.
- (2) P.J. Hartin, "The Role of Peter in the Fourth Gospel," *NeoTestamentica* 24 (1), 1990, pp. 49-61
- (3) Greg Carey, "Seeing and Believing at Easter Time," *Sojourners Magazine*, April 14, 2014.