

Renewing Your Commitment to Christ's Call

John 21:1-22

The following is a message that was delivered to chaplains and spouses on spiritual retreat at The Cove (BGEA), Asheville, North Carolina by Dr. Michael Milton, President and James M. Baird, Jr. Professor of Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC.

We all love to beat up on Peter. He is unbridled, braggadocios, embarrassingly bold, and at times violent. But he is also a man who was greatly used of God, to preach at Pentecost, to lead the Church at Jerusalem, to minister to the Church at Rome, to minister to suffering saints in Asia Minor. In other words he is like us. He leans on self to minister at times and then has to turn again, or even be turned by Paul, to lean on grace. He is just a preacher.

My friend, a chaplain who has been deployed twice in three years, a husband, father, godly man, never fails to listen to the soldier who drops in to talk about a family matter, or a job matter, or to just chat about a ball game. He is the kind of chaplain who sees ministry just beneath the surface of the old master sergeant who wants to talk about the Monday night football game or to laugh with the first lieutenant as he recounts his nervousness on his first Thanksgiving with his fiancé's family. He is a good chaplain. But he is wondering about God's call on his life.

"What is God doing in my life, in my ministry? I just don't know." These questions swirled around in his thoughts.

I think that if we admit it, we can identify at some level with my friend. We all, at one time or another, have a Gethsemane moment, when the pressures and the realities of the ministry to which we are called collide with the people we know ourselves to be. Sometimes it happens when friends are killed and we are not. Sometimes it happens when we do our best and get bad OERs (Officer Evaluation Report). Sometimes it is when we are at our best and get a bad MRI.

"What is God doing in my life, in my ministry?" And we say with my friend, "I just don't know."

I would say that "poor-in-spirit" is not a bad place to be, but rather a good place to be. It is a place where God can use us in an even greater ways. But there are things, Gospel things, sacred-encounter things, that must happen in order to hear God's answer to our dark-night-of-the soul plea for understanding.

And where do we turn? I want us to look at the account of Peter's renewal and re-commissioning by Jesus found in John 21:1-22.

John is a Gospel storyteller. He is the one we always point to when we are witnessing to someone who needs the Lord, right? "Just read a little bit of John every night before bed." We know that God's Word doesn't return void. And we know that John will always deliver. For John's purpose statement in his Gospel is clear:

But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. John 20:31

But John ends His Gospel with a story of resolution. The resolution of the call of Peter. And it is here where all ministers of Christ, military chaplains or parish pastors, vicars in country churches and senior pastors of mega churches, and presidents of seminaries, must fall into the arms of

Jesus again. In John 21 the Lord provides a safe haven for pastors to lay down their stoles and listen to the quiet, sweet voice of Jesus guiding us to renew our commitment to our call from Him.

I almost called this sermon *Renewing Your Passion for Your Ministry*. But then the Lord showed me in this passage that this is not really about our passion, it is about His passion for His ministry through us. In fact, Peter's problem and often ours, is our passion for our ministry, rather than our love of the one who so passionately desires to minister His Gospel to the world. So I see in John 21:1-21 how God meets us at the point of our need as ministers to renew our commitment to His call on our lives.

There are four words that I want to use to describe the sacred movements in this passage that bring about that renewal of calling.

1. Reflection

We all know this passage. Peter has blasphemed the Savior, denied Him, run away from Him. And so we find Peter here telling Thomas, Nathanael and John and another disciple, "I am going fishing" (verse 3). It is here that I have sometimes said, "Now, this man who was so foolishly bold at one time, has given up and is just going back to what he knew before. He is giving up on the ministry." I have been in ministry long enough to know that this is not the best way to handle this. To hear this man saying, "I am going fishing" is to hear the echo of his words in my own heart, when a session meeting has gone bad, or my latest, greatest ministry program went sour, or I have ministered so much in my own strength instead of Christ's strength that I am just depleted. "I am going gardening." "I am going hunting." "I just want to get away."

Remember that this Peter who had denied Jesus, after bragging that the rest of the disciples might do that but he never would, is the same Peter who ran with John to see the empty tomb. He saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. He saw the winding sheets all "folded up in a place by itself" (20:7). Peter must have been with the disciples when the resurrected Christ came through locked doors on that first day of the week when He said, "Peace be with you" (20:19). Peter must have heard Jesus say, "As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you" (20:21). And those words must have burned into the core of Peter's soul like a white-hot cinder. For Peter had failed. Ministry was confusing. He had done his all and his all was not enough.

I once heard a prominent minister in a mega church say, "As I look back at my ministry, I realize that most of it has been conducted in the flesh." Peter must have felt like that.

So I don't beat up on Peter anymore when he says, "I am going fishing."

Peter needed time to reflect. He needed time to put all of the pieces together. He was asking the question my friend was asking perhaps. We have a resurrected Savior. And He is calling us to go out and minister. I thought I was doing that. Now I am seeing myself for what I am. I am not sure anymore.

Reflection, as we know, is the beginning of renewal. We all need times of rest and renewal. But maybe you need more. Maybe you are asking, "Lord, what are You doing in my life, in my ministry? Am I still called? Was I ever called?"

To inquire of God is to draw near to God. Spurgeon spoke of what he called the "howling Psalms:" those Psalms that begin, "How long?"

My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD— **how long?** Psalm 6:3

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? **How long** will You hide Your face from me? Psalms 13:1 **How long** must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? **How long** shall my enemy be exalted over me? 13:2

How long, O LORD? Will You hide Yourself forever? **How long** will Your wrath burn like fire? Psalms 89:46

“How long” is the cry of the heart of the minister of Christ who has seen the promises of the Lord meet the pain of living. It is the cry of the soul of the chaplain who authentically brings his burdens to the Lord when all of the ministry tricks he has learned from evangelical magazines and best seller books fall beneath the unforgiving reality of life. And so you cry “how long?” And you go fishing.

But to read on in the text is to be encouraged that fishing can lead to a catch like never before. And reflection on where you have been and where you are going as a minister of the Gospel can also be the starting point for a new catch—a new commitment to the calling you heard so long ago.

In this case I would ask you, “Are you just pressing on to the next assignment? Or would you dare join Peter, admit that ministry is really more than you can handle alone, and get in the boat, and reflect?”

So Reflection is the genesis for a renewal of our commitment to our calling. The second word is what follows when we are in the boat of reflection.

2. Recognition

The scene is amazing. Whether you find Peter to be introspective and reflective, given all that he has seen and all that he knows himself to be, or in fact, you just see him as a washed up preacher, sort of like a crooked televangelist in the floating cell of his own making. (I cannot see this in Peter unless I see it in my own life.) The thing that happens next is nothing short of spectacular.

Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered Him, “No” (21:5).

This is where Peter was. No ministry. No fish. No conversions, but also no satisfaction coming out of time in the boat. He was just fishing. But there were no fish.

He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some” (21:6).

So they followed the instruction of the bold stranger on the shore. And they cast their nets, like they had done so often before. And there was a catch that they couldn’t haul in. I once had a 25-pound catfish on a troutline in South Louisiana. I know how it is! I had to beat that thing in the head with a hammer to kill him to get him in the boat! But they could not get the fish in the boat. And here is the thing: *the sea, the boat, the fishing, the lack of fish, the voice, the command, the result...they had experienced this all before. It is in Luke 5:1-11:*

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on Him to hear the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, Luke 5:1 and He saw two

boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 2 Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, He asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the people from the boat. 3 And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." 4 And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at Your word I will let down the nets." 5 And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. 6 They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. 7

John recognized it. Then Peter. And Peter dove in. He paused to put on his outer garment. There are many interpretations of this, but all I know is that we do weird things when we come into contact with the One we have been dreaming of, thinking of, and when the guilt or confusion or loss of understanding in sacred reflection is met with the voice of Jesus. You grab your stole again. You grab your old torn pastoral robe. You dress up a bit. You are about to meet Jesus. And so Peter swims for it.

I am here to say, "Listen as you reflect." For the one who goes fishing for answers with the Lord will finally hear His voice. You may hear it in this message. Or you may hear it alone with your wife and children on a beautiful mountainous pathway. Or you may hear the voice of your Beloved amidst the ordered chaos of an aircraft carrier, or in the cave of Kandahar. But when you hear, you recognize Him. You recognize His voice.

Maybe you heard the voice of Jesus that called you as a young boy, like Douglas Kelly, one of our professors at RTS Charlotte, who testifies that he heard the voice of Jesus deep in his soul as a five year old boy, calling him to give his life to Him as a preacher. Maybe you heard the voice of Jesus when you sat on the lap of your grandmother and she read a Bible story from one of those little books you see in the dentist's office. You heard His voice from His Word calling you to turn to Him. Or maybe you heard that voice, as I did, as I came in contact with His grace as a young man and knew that all other pursuits, all other ambitions were as nothing before the ambition to preach the unsearchable riches of His grace that I had once run from.

But you recognize. And to reflect is to be in a position to recognize. But that leads to a third sacred movement in this renewal of your commitment to the call on your life:

3. Reassessment

All of us in the military are used to "After Action Reports." And this is one big AAR for Peter. The resurrected Christ waits for the right time. After breakfast on the shore, Jesus spoke to Peter. I imagine that Peter knew this was coming. Jesus knew it had to come.

Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these? (21:15).

He did not call him Peter. He called him by his given name, Simon. He had to get back to the beginning. He had to strip away everything. And Jesus dealt with Peter's love of Him. But when Jesus adds "more than these" He strikes at the heart of Peter's problem. Peter's love was always in competition with others. His relationship with Jesus was, seemingly, as displayed in the New Testament, a matter of performance. It was all about what Peter could do for Jesus. And it was always in the context of "Others will deny You, but I will never."

And now this place of pain where best intentions, made in the flesh, met with worst consequences played out in time, had to be addressed. Three times Jesus asks Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love Me?” Peter’s love was confirmed. But Peter knew now that his love was a love that responded to the initiation of the love of Jesus. We serve Christ because He loves us. He chose Abraham. He chose Peter. He chooses us. And this is not because of our prowess in the pulpit or our gifts or even our willingness to follow Him. He chooses us out of His love. And our love must for Him in return is the starting point for our ministry. Peter needed to know that. I do too.

Three times Jesus told him to feed or tend His sheep. Peter was called. That was settled. But the reassessment was that the sheep belonged to Jesus not Peter. And the ministry was Jesus’ not Peter’s. And in fact, Peter’s very life and ministry were one. He was to feed the sheep of Jesus out of the overflow of love that He knew from Christ. In the end, his life and ministry were in the hands of others.

But here is the reassessment for all of us:

We must minister out of our personal experience of His love, not our strength. Or we could say, in ministry, “Love Alone is Credible.” This was, of course, the Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s, apologetic (Ignatius Press, 2004). And with exceptions taken as a Presbyterian minister with other significant parts of von Balthasar’s theology, I cannot help but say “Amen” to this part. For as Peter had to learn that Christian ministry begins with an experience of mind and heart in love with Jesus, with a sacred encounter with this most beautiful, loving, forgiving resurrected Savior, so do I. Do you?

When you know that love again in your life you have renewed a commitment to ministry in which His passion flows through you. You say like Paul,

I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because He judged me faithful, appointing me to His service, 1 Timothy 1:12 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 13 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 15 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life. 16

And like Paul, your life, overflowing with His love, breaks out into spontaneous doxology:

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. 17

When your vocation becomes doxology, your renewal is complete.

But I have one final word to describe what I see in this text to describe the process of renewing your commitment to Christ’s calling on your life and it is this:

4. Re-entry

For immediately after this ethereal experience, this hopeful renewal and restoration of Simon to the Gospel ministry, after reflection and recognition and reassessment, we see glimpses of Peter, *the old Peter*, once again:

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to Him and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray You?” John 21:20 When Peter saw Him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” 21

Peter had been told that ministry would lead him to death. I don’t know about you, but I might have said the same thing, “What about him?” In Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* his assessment of the call to follow Jesus is always true:

When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow Him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time—death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call.¹

And Peter was renewed, but his renewal brought him on a pathway of growth in that renewal. There would be lapses into the old ways, and face-to-face admonitions by Paul. There would be revelations about the Gospel and the Gentiles. But in the end there would be the man of God, the fatherly pastor, writing to the “elect exiles” these words from his letter from “a Birmingham prison:”

This is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it (1 Peter 5:12).

Conclusion

What is at stake? Your family. Your ministry. Your own sanctification. Your example to your children, and to the children of God who look to us. But the reflection of our calling, recognition of His voice, reassessment of our love, and re-entry into the ups and downs of His calling on our life always leads to His passion being dispersed to others. He could have done it through angels. He could have done it through a single cosmic fiat that brought about a new heavens and a new earth.

*But when He ascended on high...He gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8).
And He gave some to be pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the
work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11b-12a).*

One of those pastors, a giant man of 6’8”, the Episcopal rector of Trinity Church, Philadelphia, was never married except to his calling. It is remembered by some of his people that he kept toys in his study in order to connect with the children of his church, the only children that he claimed as his own. But ministry can be draining. As a single man, with a large parish, with the mundane burdens of Sunday after Sunday bearing down on his large frame and his larger heart, this man must have said, “I am going fishing.” And he went to Bethlehem. And in 1865 as he worshipped on Christmas Eve at the site where Jesus was born, he obviously came to hear a voice on the shore, if not in the crib. It was a voice that led to a hymn that we sing each Christmas, a hymn

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959).

that all of you have sung. And the final stanza of Bishop Phillip Brooks' carol has special meaning when think of our callings before Christ:

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, The great glad tidings tell. □
Oh come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel!

Oh may we too hear that call now in our hearts. The simple call that Jesus gave to Peter in this passage, the beautiful call that you heard so long ago, the call that He still gives to all who will dive in and swim to Him this day:

“You follow Me.”

Please pray with me:

Oh, Christ Jesus, who called Peter, and who reawakened him to see that our ministries must flow from receiving Your love, and loving others out of that love, descend to us, we pray. And renew our commitment to Your call. Reshape us so that Your passion for Your ministry of redemption of men and women and boys and girls, of the nations of the earth, will flow through us. We pray this for Your glory and for our families, our churches, our troops, our nation, our generation, and our eternal good. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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