

ACTS 9:1-20 (p. 817/1075)

MAY 1, 2022

JOHN 21:1-19 (p. 809/1087)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Your Disciples are here Lord, gathered together to learn from your Word. And we ask you to send your Holy Spirit, so that we might do just that. Unclog our ears Lord, and open up our minds. Enlighten us as we study together today. And soften our hearts, please. We ask this in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, Amen.

“FOLLOW ME”

I've been thinking about summer lately, a lot actually, probably because it's clearly not here! Maybe I should say I have been “dreaming” about summer? Summer is fun, right? Summer means doing things, doing things with family, get-togethers, family Reunions! Have you been to reunion lately? They come in all shapes and sizes. On Deb's side of the family, for instance, reunions include lots and lots of singing! Whereas on my side of the family, they include lots and lots of Pinochle and Euchre, and all of the competitive yelling that goes along with it! Some people just sit and talk at Family Reunions. Whereas others try to cram in as many adventures as they possibly can! Like I said, they're pretty diverse! But I've noticed a few common themes. “Returning Home” for example! “Renewing Relationships”! And usually, “Sharing a Meal”!

So, I picture Jesus and His Disciples having a family get-together today. I mean, they've returned home, right, to where it all started, to the Sea of Galilee. This is where Jesus called His first Disciples, ground zero for their ministry, if you will.

Jesus is about to restore things too, especially relationships. And currently, He is cooking breakfast on the beach. I like to try to see myself in the text, when I study Scripture. So, I imagine a family get-together here, sort of like what we are doing.

The Disciples have left Jerusalem, their jobs and responsibilities, to head back to Galilee. Maybe they are feeling a bit overwhelmed right now, or useless, or believe their ministry is over? Maybe they are feeling insignificant, or that none of it matters? Maybe they just don't understand? Which makes perfect sense! They are probably confused, right, disappointed and disillusioned, or downright scared! I know I'd be!

The Romans are looking for them, for all Jesus followers in fact. As far as the authorities are concerned, the Disciples are insurrectionists! So, they are systematically hunting them down. They have crucified the leader, and now it's time to go after the rest! For all intents and purposes their ministry has ended. It was fun while it lasted. Well, maybe not fun. But it was definitely exciting! But now it's over! It's time to move on, right! Or go back! Or something! So, Peter, their impetuous, often overly aggressive leader, the one who sometimes reacts without thinking, who periodically puts his foot in his mouth, says "I'm going fishing"! "The Rock", I think, is starting to crumble!

But here is the thing. Easter happened! The Resurrected Lord, has personally appeared to several of them—outside of the Tomb, on the road to Emmaus, inside of a locked room, two times in fact, in just over a week! Pastor David talked about it just last Sunday. And yet, the Disciples have packed it in, apparently given up!

They've left the city and are headed back north. They are returning to the familiar, the known, their old, everyday way of life! Like many do after Easter, I suppose? And if you stop and think about it, that's huge!

These guys have followed Jesus during His entire three-year ministry! They have seen all the miracles with their own eyes, and heard all the teachings with their own ears! They traveled with the Lord to the Capital, witnessed Him crucified, encountered Him raised from the dead, had the Holy Spirit breathed on them by Jesus Himself! They've been offered His peace! And their response to all of this is, is to go fishing! You might say they have gotten the Holy Spirit, but apparently the Holy Spirit hasn't gotten them! I mean, right after Easter they go right back to exactly what they were doing before the Messiah entered their lives! And clearly, with the same results! What does that say?

Remember back to the Fifth Chapter of Luke, when we discovered Simon Peter and the crew with empty nets? Even though they had fished all night? They were doing what they do best, the thing that defined their lives prior to Jesus entering into it. And yet, they were failing miserably!

According to Luke, it was prior to that beach encounter that Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law from a very high fever, which Peter witnessed! It was before this, that Jesus healed others as well, and did a number of miracles throughout the area, which many saw! He drove out an evil spirit, right before their eyes!

But what got Simon Peter's attention back then, and presumably his loyalty—what actually caused him to drop to his knees in complete awareness of his unworthiness and call Jesus, "Lord"—is when Jesus told these would-be Disciples to let down their nets! With amazing results, I might add! And that's exactly what He does here today too, at breakfast! He called Simon to follow Him back then too, remember? He told Simon that He would make him a Fisher of Men, right, just like He does here! We've come full circle, back to where we started!

They have had a fantastic run. They have experienced extraordinary things, and done some themselves. But as soon as they encounter hardship, they run away. What does that say? What does that say to us? Judas betrayed the Lord, remember? Peter denied even knowing him, three times in fact. And all of the Disciples ended up hiding out in fear. When disappointment set in, when adversity struck, every one of them bowed to the pressure and left their assignment, abandoned their post, and returned to the familiar! And again, it looks like they are having the same results as before! Failure! Can you relate?

I wonder if they considered the phrase "you can run, but you can't hide"? I wonder if they thought about Psalm 139, "O Lord...you hem me in, you are behind me and before me...Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" I wonder what they thought, or if they thought, don't you?

How many times have you done that—gotten on fire for Jesus, decided to turn your life around, made a conscious decision to head in the right direction for a change, to draw closer to God—only to then return to “business as usual” when things got tough? Or how many times have you done just the opposite! During a crisis of some sort, you promised to “let go, and let God”, only to then try to seize the reins of control when the threat was over, and things got better?

I see the Disciples trying to take matters into their own hands, returning to what they know, returning to the normal predictable patterns of human existence! I see them trying to take control! And I think that’s typical, don’t you! Sad maybe, but typical!

And here, is what can only be called “Good News”! The Risen Christ seeks them out anyway! Again! He doesn’t abandon them. He doesn’t give up on them. He doesn’t even scold them for abandoning their mission and returning to the comfortable. He simply feeds them. He prepares breakfast. He provides for them, invites them to eat with Him, to spend time in His presence. And look at the very first word Jesus speaks to them. He calls them “Friends”, doesn’t He, still, after all that! If you need a visual of Grace, here it is!

I have to tell you, this breakfast on the beach passage is one of my all-time favorites! I see forgiveness, complete forgiveness! And I am painfully aware that I need that! Jesus is hosting a meal for the quitters, the dropouts, the cowards, the failures, the sinners—for people like you and me! Like He does each week at this Table.

This is a powerful, non-verbal statement of acceptance, isn't it! Not to mention a clear, abundant outpouring of Providence and Grace! Jesus comes to His followers right where they are, and fills our nets with fish! Fills our bellies with food! And most importantly, fills our hearts with joy! And notice that Jesus gives the man who publically denied Him three times, three opportunities to publically confess Him as Lord! I think that's powerful! Peter, do you love me? Then feed my lambs. Peter, do you love me? Then take care of my sheep. Peter, do you love me? Then feed my sheep. I've heard preachers point out that there are different words for "love" used in this text, which makes for a great discussion. But the point is Peter's restoration, isn't it? It's Grace! Forgiveness! It's our Lord!

I think it's noteworthy though, and maybe even instructive, that in the offering of forgiveness and the offering of food, Jesus also directs His Disciples to service. "Bring some of the fish you caught with you. Come and share what you have. Come and have breakfast together". His Followers are told to fellowship, to participate. Their blessings, the gifts they are called to share, come from what the Lord has provided. What they bring to the table originates through the power of the Risen Lord! But they are called to share!

We too are called to the Table by the Lord. And we too are directed to bring something with us to the Feast, something the Lord has provided. And we too, like Peter, are told that when we leave the Table we are to go and "Feed Jesus' Lambs", to "Take Care of His Sheep", because by this all men will know that you are my Disciples!

It's shocking really, when you stop and think about it, that Jesus would even come to us sinners! Let alone call us "Disciples" and "Friends"! After all we've done! After all we've failed to do! After all the times that we have run away, or hid! But He does! He seeks us out and offers us forgiveness, forgiveness coupled with responsibility. He tells us to spiritually "feed" His sheep, and to look after the other "lambs" in the pasture, and to round up those who have wandered away! Jesus comes to us right smack dab in the middle of our everyday life, the routine, and hands us a mission! He comes to us sinners, wherever it is that we have wandered, and calls us to follow, to do what He did! He does it quietly sometimes, at sunrise by the lake, as with Peter and the others. But sometimes He does it in dramatic ways, in the middle of the day for instance, as with Saul on the Damascus Road! Remember?

Saul was the guy who would later be called Paul. He's the one who wrote a very large portion of the New Testament! He was one of the primary instruments in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world! Much of what we do today as Christians comes from the teachings of Paul! And this, even though we are first introduced to the man standing on the sidelines at the stoning of Stephen, holding clothes! Think about that!

As the first Christian Martyr drew his very last breath witnessing to Jesus, as Stephan turns his eyes heavenward and asks Almighty God to forgive his murderers, we are told in Acts that "Saul was there, giving approval to his death"!

I'd say Saul qualifies as a sinner, wouldn't you! He is the polar opposite of a Jesus Follower. He was on a personal quest, a religious crusade if you will, to stamp out Christianity completely! And he was zealous for his cause! As far as Saul was concerned, the followers of Jesus were nothing more than blasphemers against Almighty God, and therefore deserving of death! He was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's Disciples"! Saul was trying to round up as many Christians as he could find so that there might be even more stoning! You can't get much more zealous than that, or farther from Jesus, can you!

But the Lord comes to him as well, right where he is at the moment, in the middle of the Damascus Road, doing his job! And this encounter dramatically moves Saul from darkness to light! The Lord knocks him off his donkey, in fact, blinds him for three days, gives him a vision of the Risen Christ, sends him a visitor named Ananias who has also had a vision, who then lays his hands on Saul and heals him!

Saul then accepted Jesus as Lord! He was Baptized into His Name, and assumes a minor role in the Church! But eventually, God uses him in powerful ways! Saul wasn't a seeker! Don't miss that! He wasn't longing for God, or trying to fill some kind of emptiness in his life! Saul wasn't a man "looking for meaning"! The only thing he was searching for was more Christians to kill! He wasn't miserable or tormented, spiritually lost, looking for a gracious God! He was just someone who, without any warning, in the middle of everyday life, is encountered by the Risen Christ, and called to follow Him! Can you relate?

Sometimes the Lord reaches out to sinners in almost blinding ways, doesn't He? Like on a mountain top, or in a valley of the shadow, on an otherwise quiet beach, or busy road, when we are searching, or even when we are not! At other times though, He slips in rather quietly. At sunrise maybe, during breakfast on a quiet beach, in the midst of the ordinary, and simply calls us "friend". The Lord comes to those of us who have failed Him, to those of us who have quit, to those of us who have stopped spreading the Gospel, who have just fallen back into the old routine, to those of us who are fishing, but for all the wrong things! He comes and calls us to follow in His footsteps, and to feed His sheep along the way! He calls us! He calls you and me!

Many of you know I like C. S. Lewis. He grew up in his grandfather's church, completely unimpressed, in fact quite negative on the Christian faith! But then, as if out of nowhere, in 1931 God grabbed him! Lewis wrote in *The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves*, "I have just passed on from believing in God, to definitely believing in Christ"!

And in *Surprised by Joy* Lewis writes, "Picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet! That which I greatly feared came upon me! I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed—perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England"!

Lewis was surprised by the Lord, surprised by joy! He wasn't looking. Like Saul on the Road to Damascus, like the runaway Disciples. Lewis was doing his own thing, when suddenly, he was surprised by joy! He then turned to God, and said, "So, it was you all along"! He then began feeding sheep, and eventually became one of the most powerful Christian writers of all time! It seems like there is a pattern here. Can you see yourself in it?

I have to tell you. I'm delighted that the Lord reaches out to runaway sinners. There have been times in my life when I definitely qualified. I am happy that He reaches out and restores us—that Jesus redeems us, and recruits us for service in His Name. There have been times when I needed that. And I am thankful that He comes to those of us who are hiding behind locked doors, as well as to those out in the middle of our everyday life.

And I am especially thankful that He comes to us when we are heading down paths that we shouldn't be on, running away even, offering us "sinners" Forgiveness and Grace, coupled with a Mission! "Follow me," says the Lord! Do what I do! "Feed my sheep"! You're my friends, you know. You are the people with whom I desire a relationship. So, grab your Cross and let's go! Do you love me, Peter? Do you love me, Bob? Do you love me, Michael, Mary, Kate, Kathryn, Sonja, Sue? Then come on, we've got work to do! And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we are here because you have called us, called us to follow you. In your unfathomable mercy, and with unbelievable patience, you have reached out to us and called us to be your Disciples. Please help us now to be faithful in this mission.

We feel unworthy of your trust Lord, for we realize our sinfulness. We feel unqualified and afraid Lord, and know that we don't deserve your Love, let alone your Forgiveness and your Grace. And yet we also know that you have called us together anyway, together to be your Church. So, we humbly bow and thank you for this gift, and acknowledge you as the Lord of Life, the God of Easter, the one who brings life from death, newness from deadness, and something out of nothing! And we proclaim that since you can do that, you have the power to make even us sinners, faithful and obedient followers of the Way!

Lord, as the Author of Life, you hold all life dear. Your desire is that we will all have life, and that we will have it abundantly. It is in faith then, and with conviction, that we ask for this gift right now. Please pour out Abundant Life and Unmerited Grace to those on our prayer list, touching their lives with Health and Healing. Please shower Peace upon their hearts and minds. Please touch their spirits, Lord, with your own Holy Spirit, now and always. And please, Bless those in need. We lift up before you.....

We are proud to be your people, Lord! Honored to be called your "Friends". And we are delighted that you are our God! So, we make these requests and offer this praise in the Name of our Risen Savior, your Son, Jesus Christ, and pray together in the way that He has taught us saying, Our Father...