

Coming to Jesus

April 14, 2013

Shepherd's Grace Church

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ²Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. ⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. ¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." ¹⁹(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21: 1-19) (Also Read Acts 9: 1-9)

If we could hear the story from Acts this morning as the readers heard it the first time it was told, what might our reaction be? This Saul, this person who was first introduced to us just a little over a chapter ago, this control freak who looked on with approval as Stephan was stoned, this zealot against Jesus and "The Way," now has the support of the high priests and the Roman government! Who is this man and

why are we following him on the road to Damascus? Why should we care that this man is going out to martyr the brave men and women who willingly risk their lives to follow "The Way?"

The truth is, we cannot hear the story in the way it was told the first time. We can only hear the story the way it has been told to us. We know we are on the road with Saul and we know lightening is about to strike!

Saul has been persecuting the ones who follow Jesus because they threaten his way of life! They represent change and change is uncomfortable. Saul has grown up in the Jewish tradition trained by the best rabbis and Pharisees. The rabbis have taught him that there is an order to life. The work of God comes because we follow certain rules. The law, the Torah has been handed down, they say to him, so we can follow it exactly. There are 613 commandments and each of them is to be obeyed strictly, completely, and without deviation. God is in His heaven and all is right with the world!

The Pharisees have taught Saul that others like the Greeks and Romans will come and try to control Hebrew culture. They have taught him that Alexander came about 300 years ago and tried to institute change by forcing the Jewish people to believe in many Gods. They remind him of the work of Antioches Epiphannes, a puppet king who forced the people to sacrifice pigs in the temple and of the shame the people felt as they were forced to look on at the desecration.

This Saul, from this background now is confronted by what he perceives to be another threat to his Jewish way of life! He will not tolerate it. He cannot tolerate it! It must be put to an end. It must be dealt with swiftly, with strength so there can be no doubt about the true faith of Israel. And so, breathing fire and with murder in his heart, Saul is determined to take on "the Way."

As I think about this Saul this morning, I hear the words from the musical, "The Fiddler on the Roof." My brother Steve played Tevye, the lead in this musical when he was a senior in high school. Regardless of the number of times I see the movie or even another presentation of the play, I always see Steve as the lead. I hear him as he sings the song, "Tradition!" I picture him as I watch the fiddler play along side him as they walk along. Tradition!...Tradition!...Tradition!

The words, the title to this song sum up Saul's position this morning. Tradition! Saul's concern as he takes on "The Way," is not for a people who have suffered slavery and oppression. Saul's concern is not for a people who have wandered for years trying to find a place they could call home. Saul's concern is not for a people who are threatened by foreign influences taking over their way of life. Saul's concern is for tradition! Saul's concern is for the law. He does not concern himself with the poverty that is rampant in Israel because of Roman oppression. He is not concerned with the numbers who die in the streets because they have been born with some kind of birth defect. He looks past those who are broken, beaten, battered and abused! Saul's concern is for tradition!

“The Way” is a threat to Jewish tradition. They follow a leader who has been crucified and is dead! They share their possessions with one another and serve each other out of love! They recognize a new kind of service where love guides their every action and the law takes a backseat! They are not so concerned with keeping the ritual of Sabbath as they are with keeping the spirit of Sabbath. They find their rest and renewal in knowing that God has come near to them! They want to share that kind of renewal with others so that all might know God’s peace!

Saul cannot abide their disregard for tradition! He cannot stand their lack of respect for the things that have always been. He cannot tolerate the change they are bringing to a world that for him is well ordered. He hates what they stand for and he has destruction in his eyes! What has worked for him in his life is threatened and he is afraid! Tradition!

In the “Fiddler on the Roof” when tradition is threatened violence breaks out. The clash of changing cultures causes devastation, destruction and even death as people fight for what they believe to be right. As people fight to hold on to tradition they find resistance from others who fight to hold on to the love they long for in their lives. Tradition bends to the will of love so that people, rather than things can have value.

The world we live in today faces this dilemma constantly. In our own country, people want to come in to feed their families who are left behind. These people are forced to change the tradition of their culture and the way of life that was lived and learned by their families for generations. The struggle with being absent from traditional family values and role models but they are forced by changing circumstances in their own homeland to find new ways to support the ones they love. They migrate to a place where they can find opportunity to support their family and honor that part of their tradition while being forced to leave behind other traditions that they have grown up with and are a part of their culture.

The world has always been this way. In the 1600’s, people living in England and other parts of the world were being denied a way to earn a living and support their families because they wanted to worship Jesus Christ in a way that was different from other people. Because the tradition of “freedom of religion” was more important to them than the place in which they found that tradition, they moved to a new world. There these people found opportunities to continue this tradition and start many new traditions. They made a new life for themselves and for their families and they discovered new opportunities to be in service to God and one another.

Both today and in the past the threat of change has produced fear. What we learn from Saul this morning is how God calls us to deal with that fear. Saul deals with it through threats and violence. He punishes “The Way” brutally and without regard to their right to life. He perpetrates evil and violence against them because he doesn’t want his way of life threatened.

In this morning's passage from Acts, we cheer as Jesus knocks him off his high horse! We think...we know Saul has it coming and we applaud as he receives his just deserts! We never stop to realize that what Saul is doing is the same thing we are doing today as we judge those who would seek a better life for themselves and for their families by coming to this country legally and working honestly in the same way our ancestors have done before them!

Sure, we would want to make the argument that we are only trying to stop those who come into our country illegally but the reality is that we judge people who look differently than we do before we ever start to talk to them, to ask them what they want, to be in dialogue with them about how they came to be here or what their particular situation or circumstance is. We are no different from Saul. We lash out in terror to protect our way of life and we fear anyone or anything that would change the traditions we are so comfortable with. We are afraid!

That fear is exactly where the gospel passage meets us this morning. The disciples have met the risen Jesus. They have met Him twice! He has sent them in chapter 20 to go out to the people and show their love and His in the forgiveness of sin! That is what He told them...told us to do in Chapter 20. Now in chapter 21 they are right back where he found them in the beginning. Out of fear the disciples have ignored Jesus mission for them and have reverted back to what they used to do. They have gone fishing.

There is a problem however! They are not very good at fishing. Fishing doesn't work for them. They have been out all night. They have worked hard. They have caught nothing! It is the same problem for us. When we try to work at our lives in a way that is not consistent with what God calls us to do we are unsuccessful. We may not be destitute or impoverished, but we will not accomplish all we might if we choose to follow God's plan for us. We become frustrated and infuriated with our lives and we live so close to the edge of poverty that we become afraid! Most people who live in the middle class in our country live 1 paycheck away from bankruptcy. That means that most people in our country live in fear!

The disciples reacting, not out of response to Jesus call, but out of fear have been reduced to their own devices and they are unsuccessful. Frustrated and infuriated with their own lack of success, they are open to a suggestion from someone whom they do not even recognize. Given proper instruction, they achieve great success! They cast their net properly and they catch more than they could ever imagine.

God does not want us to be frustrated and infuriated with our lives. Jesus tells us He came that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10: 10) but God recognizes that when we are not satisfied with what we have, that is the time we are most open to change. In moments when we are not able to see economic opportunities for ourselves or for others whom we are close to, we are tempted to lash out at others and blame them for our failings. We are eager to find someone to blame because we are afraid! That is the world's reaction.

Our reaction as people seeking “the way” should be different. Our reaction should be as the disciples teach us. They did not resist the new or try to continue the old when they just kept getting the same results! Instead they listened, they learned and they were blessed. They cast their net differently. How successful are we at complaining and criticizing those who have come here to try to make a better life for themselves? Do you see any of them packing their bags and heading back from where they came? I don't!

As followers of Jesus, what might happen if we tried a different way? What would happen if we cast our net to the “Right” side of the boat? Would Jesus bless us as He blessed the disciples? The disciples hauled in a catch more than they could even bring on to the boat because they were willing to break with tradition. Saul was knocked from his “high horse” because he was not! God does give us a choice!

Peter, when he learned that it was the Lord inviting him to respond differently put on his clothes and jumped into the lake! There he received his baptism. He went under the water a slave to his old way of life. He went under the water fearful and frightened because he had abandoned Jesus and all he had been taught. He went under the water as a fool unable to comprehend all that God was calling him to do, but he came up a new man!

Peter came up filled with the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus had breathed on him back in chapter 20. He was so filled that while the rest of the disciples brought the boat ashore but were unable to bring the net on board, he, by himself was able to bring it as the Lord ordered! In that moment of instruction, Peter believed and was transformed from a person slave to traditions to a person freed to live and love in God's grace and glory!

None of the disciples had to ask who it was that had spoken to them. They knew who it was. They were embarrassed that they had not listened earlier, but now they were redeemed! Now they were ready to hear. Their old ways were not working. Their traditions were lacking and their adherence to the law was not bearing fruit. Only their faith in Jesus was producing any measurable result and the result was greater than anything they might have ever imagined. Now, in their willingness to listen and obey they were fed.

God calls all of us to listen. We usually respond as the disciples responded today. As long as things are going along ok for us, we are willing to let things go along. When things start to go badly, we often look for others to blame. Our world teaches us this. Our world lives in constant fear that something will come along and change the status quo. The world does not want that change. The world is happy with the way things are going. In our current situation, the wealthy get wealthier and they point fingers at who is to blame when others do not!

It is only when we are truly desperate that we are open to doing things differently. Are you desperate today? Are you willing to cast your net in a different direction or do you want to continue to live in the world where fear and frustration are the normal way of life?

Peter, after his baptism, now has this choice to make. Jesus asks him, "Do you love Me?" He asks three times. Each time Peter answers yes! After the third time, Peter is hurt. He wants Jesus to take him at his word and let that be sufficient. Jesus, however wants to know Peter's level of commitment. Peter has denied him, abandoned him, ignored him before. Now Jesus wants to know if Peter will be true to him!

God asks that of all of us as well. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. None of us is worthy of the salvation God offers in Jesus Christ, however Jesus has made this salvation available to each and every one of us. Because of the work He did on the cross, once and for all time, God's grace is poured out on us with incredible abundance. That is the promise available to all who will believe in His name! While this is enough for salvation, Jesus hopes for more.

Salvation was never and is still not a matter of individual acclamation! Salvation is and always has been about the redemption of all of God's creation. John 3: 16 says that God so loved the whole world that He gave His only son! John 6: 37-39 says that God's will is the redemption of the entire world, all that is created in it. Jesus wants those of us who are willing to change our lives to share our lives and the "Good News" with others. To those who love Him, he asks, in spite of our denial, our betrayal, our past refusal, "Do you love me?" When we answer as Peter answers he says, "Feed my sheep!"

We are not the shepherd's, but we are called to share the food! Others will come to us, strangers who look differently from us and we are called to share the food! People who speak different languages, eat different foods, have different customs and traditions will come to us and we are asked to share the food!

It will not be easy! When Peter put on his clothes in the boat, the Greek word is he "Girded" himself. He braced himself for his baptism, considering all he had done and all he was about to do and he make a commitment, once and for all time to "Follow the Way!" When he jumped into the lake he was girded for what ever questions Jesus had of him and he was prepared to commit to what ever Jesus demanded of him!

After Jesus accepts Peter's love for him, he tells him what will be required. He tells us as well! He says, when you were younger you could dress however you wanted. You could even be naked in the boat, but just as you girded yourselves for death in baptism, so now others will gird you for a death that will serve to glorify God. If you make a commitment to follow me, that is what awaits you!

The world we live in today is more than willing to crucify us for our belief in Jesus. We are frustrated that we as Christians do not seem to have the same kind of influence we have enjoyed in past generations. We do not have that influence because we have become frightened and fearful as we have gained wealth and possession. We do not want to lose what we have because we are afraid our comfort will be threatened. Jesus tells us that all who would keep their life in this world will lose it, but the ones who would give up their life in this world for His sake will save it even up to eternal life. We do have a choice!

Our forefathers made the choice to forsake their traditions for a better life for themselves and for their posterity. They came to the new world! They came to Jesus! We too have a choice. We can breathe the fire of Saul, or we can preach the gospel of Paul. I have decided to follow Jesus! Amen!