

“How Do We Go Forward from Here?”
April 25, 2021

John 10:11-18
John 21:15-25

How do we go forward from here?

That was the concern of the early Christians as they moved into the post-Easter world, with Jesus no longer physically present.

That is our concern as a nation in ongoing need of justice and reconciliation after Derek Chauvin was found guilty in the death of George Floyd last week.

That is our concern as a global community as the pandemic continues with the supply of vaccines outstripping the supply in some places in Iowa and the rest of the United States while Covid cases set new records in India and in Brazil tens of millions are dealing with hunger or food insecurity as the Covid crisis continues.

How do we move forward from here?

Let's start with that story that concludes the Gospel of John.

There is Peter.

Some time earlier, under the cover of night, he stood with others around a charcoal fire, seeking some warmth in the chilly weather. Jesus, who had called Simon from his fishing nets and had given him a new name—Peter, Jesus, to whom Peter was so close, he was a part of his inner circle, Jesus was being interrogated by the authorities. He would soon be abused, tortured, and then crucified.

Peter turned his back.

Maybe he feared for himself.

Maybe he didn't know how to respond to the suffering going on so close to him.

Maybe he just wanted to avoid it all, forget it all, and get back to the life that he once knew.

Whatever the reason, Peter told those around the fire that he had no idea who this Jesus was. The fate of Jesus was none of his business. He did not know him.

We can close our eyes.

We can turn away.

We can deny the pain around us and within us.

But it remains.

It returns.

There is Peter—on the beach, by another charcoal fire, with this same Jesus, once again revealing himself as alive and indeed as the Lord of life.

Jesus addresses Peter by the name he had before Jesus called him to follow, asking: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

And when Simon Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” Jesus gives him a new charge: “Then feed my lambs.”

This is the same Jesus who once said, “I am the good shepherd.”

Several times in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells us who he is—although not in any direct way.

“I am...” Jesus says. And he doesn’t say, “I am the second person of the Trinity.” He doesn’t say, “I am the Son of the living God.”

He says, for example, “I am the good shepherd.”

He gives us pictures. He tells a story about shepherds and sheep. The sheep know the voice of the shepherd and follow the one who calls them by name.

Whenever Jesus says, “I am,” it is always connected with the life that Jesus is and the life that Jesus gives. Jesus calls this “abundant life.” Abundance is a difficult word for many people. It suggests an overflowing—more than enough. My dictionary says that while “plentiful” implies a great or rich supply, “abundant” suggests an even greater or richer supply.

Life to spare.

Life to give.

This seems to be what Jesus is about: Giving us life that overflows so that even in these days we can live fully and out of that abundance love our neighbor as ourselves.

To Peter, who earlier denied three times that he even knew Jesus, the good shepherd says: “Feed my lambs.”

This is a gospel moment. If you know this story well, it is easy to miss the astonishing new thing that is happening here.

The resurrected Christ does not shame.

The resurrected Christ does not hold the past against us or even bring up the past.

The resurrected Christ does not allow us to settle into a comfortable guilt or regret over what we did or failed to do.

Instead, we hear a new call and a way forward.

After feeding his followers, the risen Christ sends them out to feed others—in any way and every way possible.

Jesus tells Peter—and at the same time seems to be telling us: “If you love me, show love towards those whom I love. Seek the well-being of those who are following me. Act in ways that will build up the community of the faithful. And reach out beyond that small community recognizing that I have other sheep who are not of this fold.”

We are not asked to *believe* statements about Jesus. We are invited to follow. We are called to love. The shepherd puts us to the task of feeding the sheep, tending the lambs, doing those things that bring abundance to the world.

To those of us in the Congregational United Church of Christ, the words of the risen Christ are both comforting and challenging. We have learned from Jesus to be more concerned with how we act toward one another in this congregation and toward our neighbors beyond this congregation than with what we say about Jesus. We have learned from Jesus that loving God whom we cannot see is about loving those human beings whom we can see.

With Peter, we have heard the call to show love—to feed and tend the sheep.

Three times—in spite of his past—Peter is given a new calling.

Jesus is the One who will let neither our past nor our present get in the way of the future that God is making in us and through us. “Following Christ” means that we will move forward after failure and sin. We will not let all that we have done and failed to do that separates us from God and one another keep us from still seeking to love others as we have been loved.

In Douglas Coupland’s short story *Life after God* a woman in her early thirties says: “I woke up really early this morning and I thought to myself—‘So, girl—this is it? Forty more years of this?’ Something’s got to change. I need something.”

Maybe that’s it. We need a life and the risen Christ continues to be the one who offers life abundant when we know that something’s got to change.

We need a life—and we’re not going to get it by avoiding all the pain in the world and in our city and in ourselves. We’re not going to get it by hoarding and holding what we have.

We need a life and we will find it by following the way of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd who gently and insistently keeps telling us: “Feed my sheep.”

Looking around, Peter sees another disciple and asks: “What about him?”

And Jesus replies: “What is that to you?” I’m talking about *your* life. Follow me!

How do we go forward from here?

In the Gospel of John, we encounter a Jesus who goes away—who *must* go away—so that his followers in all generations can live into the unknown future with confidence, hope, and courage. This Gospel is more concerned with what might be than with what has been.

Having known the care of the Good Shepherd, those who follow are now charged with tending the lambs. Having been fed by the risen Christ, those who follow are now charged with feeding

the sheep. We love others, remembering Cornel West's words that "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Our work towards justice—especially as a predominantly White congregation in White state—our work towards justice will be done with humility that grows out of our sense of our failures, our sin. But will also be done through the resurrection power that is forgiveness—the ability to turn in new ways—God's ways—at any time.

Our work towards wholeness—especially as a well-off congregation in a well-off nation—will be done by generously sharing the resources entrusted to our stewardship. We will be aware that these are not just our personal resources but the abundance of our nation that might be used to address global inequality.

Peter comes out of the evening shadows into the morning light. There he is fed. There he is forgiven. And from there he goes forward with a new call.

The good news is that this is not Peter's story alone.

It is the story of all who hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.

It is the story of all who follow in the way of the risen Christ.

It is our story as we live it.

It is our way forward.

Let us pray: Eternal God, may we listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd calling in the wilderness of our lives. Feed us and we shall be satisfied. Heal us and we shall be made whole. Lead us in paths of righteousness that we might follow in the way of Jesus Christ all our days. Amen.