

“Follow Me”

This week was a big week for marriage and marriage preparation. We had the wedding of Hannah Wine and Keegan Thompson here yesterday. Another daughter of the parish Leah Dodson was married to Austin Graham yesterday on the Eastern Shore. I also had a premarital counseling session with a couple who will be married here in October. As part of that counselling session we talked a lot about reading the Bible.

Indeed, there are many ways to read the Bible. The Bible is a collection of books in many different literary styles—poetry, song, narrative, history, letters, genealogy, apocalypse, visions, prophecy, aphorisms, and much more. One way to read it is to read each book just as a piece of good literature. One can read the Bible as a faith book, the way we read it most of the time in a church context. Then we are reading it for what it tells us about God and God’s relationship to us.

Some people read the Bible like a self-help book. They look for phrases that will help them live their life. Others read the Bible as a guide to the ancient world. They are trying to figure out with the help of other written resources and archaeology what the world was like in the Ancient Near East. We can spend a lot of time naming other ways that the Bible is read and used.

I think that the epilogue to the Gospel of John, which is what chapter 21 is, invites us to read it in many ways, some of which are more useful than others. Scholars are quite certain that this chapter of John was added by another author. Chapter 20 finishes the Gospel just fine. There is no need to continue, but someone felt it necessary to add a chapter that includes another sighting of Jesus post-resurrection. It tidies up some of the loose ends that we might feel anxious about. Such as what the disciples did after they left Jerusalem, what Jesus directed them to do, and what happens to Peter after he has denied Jesus three times on the night of his trial. All of that is interesting, but if that is all there is then so what? This brings me to another way of reading scripture. That is, reading the scripture and asking ourselves, “What does this mean for me today?”

When we read scripture solely for historical value, literary value, or other intellectual reasons the scripture becomes ossified. It becomes like an archaeological dig which it teaches us something about the past. Reading scripture in this manner actually protects us from experiencing the transformative power of scripture. It keeps us safe in our comfortable cocoon and shields us from the metamorphosis that changes us from caterpillars to butterflies.

If we look at the passage with the eyes of a reader seeking transformation, we might see invitations and intimations to something more powerful. For example, when the disciples see Jesus on the shore of the lake, they do not recognize him at first. They, like Mary Magdalene in the garden, did not have eyes to see Jesus. We too might be in the same situation. We do not expect to see Jesus in the world and therefore we do not see him. The invitation here is to look with fresh eyes for Jesus. Since Jesus dwells in the hearts of all of us, if we are looking for him we might see him in the kindness of someone or the pain of another. We might see Jesus in the one calling out to us for friendship. We might see Jesus in the one whom we believe is our enemy, but is crying out to have us recognize that

she is in pain and not a threat. And like Peter we frantically race to them instead of stay far off.

Another invitation is to sit and be fed. Without this chapter we might think that the Last Supper, which we reenact each week, is the one way we meet Christ in a meal. Yet here we have the disciples meeting him informally, on seashore, and part of the meal is fish that they caught. It is nothing fancy. It is not part of a Holy Day; it is the simple act of feeding and being fed with no pomp or ritual involved. It is rather like sitting down to supper at home. We can meet Jesus at that table as well as the one in the church.

One of the powerful parts of this chapter is, to me, one of the most emotionally powerful parts of the Bible. When Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him we see Jesus transforming a failure. Peter does not understand what is happening because he is a little thick. He even feels hurt by the third question because he does not realize what Jesus is doing.

Just a few days before Peter who said he would die for Jesus denied even knowing Jesus. He denied him three times. Jesus by asking the love question three times is giving Peter the opportunity to repent for each of those three denials. The poignancy of Jesus' care for Peter and the gentleness with which he gives Peter the opportunity to atone breaks my heart each time I read it. Jesus gives us that opportunity to repent as well. He also sets the example for how we are to forgive. We do not need to rub the nose of our violator in the stench of their hurt in order to gain true repentance. We just need to ask, even in an oblique way for them to offer their apology.

As we near the end of this passage Jesus with only two words offers us the words of life. They are the only words we need to heal our hurts, strengthen our souls, reform our spirits, and remake our lives for the rest of our days. Those words are—“Follow me.” That is all the instruction we need to live a life worthy of our creator. Follow the teachings of Jesus.

While we might find great intellectual reward from doing serious exegetical, historical, literary, sociological, and contextual study on a passage such as this one, we also need to do what Martin Luther called plain reading. This is not so much taking the text at face value, as it is reading the text for what it teaches us about life, our lives, and following Jesus. That is how we get out of our heads and into our hearts, something Jesus was trying to do with every parable, teaching, sermon and miracle, because, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly.” It is only with the heart that we can give ourselves over to the Prince of Peace and the Good Shepherd.

There are many ways to read scripture, but when we read with our heart we get closest to the heart of the one who makes his home in our hearts asking that we do only one thing, “Follow me. Follow me.”