

Belonging and Purpose

John 21:1-19. (May 1 2022)

John 21:1-19

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."

Historical Context

This "epilogue" to John's dramatic and symbolic Gospel, while perhaps not part of the "original" Gospel, nevertheless does not disappoint. Indeed, it provides a clue not only to the questions and fate of this early Christian community but sheds light on key elements of our life as disciples today. Scholars have posited a variety of reasons for this additional chapter: questions about the fate of the "beloved disciple," the need to rehabilitate Peter as the Johannine community moved closer to other communities more familiar with Peter's significant role in the early church, and the need to "position" this Gospel among the other stories of Jesus circulating at the time.

Theme: Belonging and Purpose

Jesus offers Peter what many modern psychologists contend every one of us needs: a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose.

First, a sense of belonging. We all need to feel accepted by a larger group in order to have a stable identity and sense of self. This goes against what may seem like common sense – after all, our culture regularly posits that identity is an individual affair, something we carve out for ourselves and by ourselves. But it turns out that the gift of identity is given to us by those around us, as we see ourselves through the eyes of those closest to us. And, just so we're not confused, belonging is different than fitting in. Indeed, it is the exact opposite. Fitting in is changing yourself to be acceptable to the group, whereas belonging is being found acceptable by your group just as you are. We all need to belong.

In this scene, Jesus asks Peter three times whether he loves him. Jesus is not testing Peter but reinstating him to the community of believers by allowing him to confess faith the same number of times he denied faith earlier. Jesus is drawing Peter back into a community to which he belongs and accepts him for whom he is.

Second, we all need a sense of purpose, the belief that what we do matters, that if we did not show up people would notice. Purpose is one of the great motivators in the world. More powerful than money or fame or power, believing that you have something of value to contribute draws us again and again into challenging circumstances with joy.

In response to each of Peter's confessions, Jesus responds by giving him good work to do: feed my sheep. Be a leader. Look out for these others. Devote yourself to this community. Peter is reinstated into the community of the faithful and given a sense of belonging, and then he is given good work to do and given a purpose.