

Sermon: Vision & Faith

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

5 May 2019

Based on **Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19**

Introduction: Today's two readings give us contrasting views on how Jesus calls us to faith. Sometimes we need a gentle reminder and at other times, it seems as if only a symbolic 2x4 straight between the eyes will do.

Trouble in the text: So, beginning with Acts: What's Saul's problem? His persecution of the early church began in chapter 8 when he approved the killing of Stephen. On that day, a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem. Saul himself went from house to house, dragging off both men and women, and committed them to prison. How did it get like this?

In chapter six, Luke writes that, 'The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7).

Then Luke tells us that, 'Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people' (6:8). Some who belonged to the synagogue stood up and argued with Stephen, 'but they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke' (6:10). So, unable to refute Stephen, they lied about him and spread the rumor that, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God' (6:11).

That's how easy it was to turn the people, the elders, and the scribes against those who belonged to the Way. All it took was one lie, repeated often.

But is Saul zealously defending the faith against these heretical Christ followers? It seems doubtful, since one of God's commandments brought down by Moses states, 'Thou shalt not murder.' So, it seems that Saul, a Jew, had no faith at all.

It turns out that Saul was a marked man, without knowing it. Because he was so vicious, people were out to get him. Shock of shocks. Religious leaders in Damascus and in Jerusalem wanted him dead. After his conversion, none of the other disciples trusted him either and rightly so, forcing him to tell of his conversion often.

Now the situation in John's Gospel is very much different. In the previous chapter, Jesus had appeared once to Mary at the tomb on Easter Sunday and twice to the disciples in the house in Jerusalem. Then John signed off by writing,

'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'

Fini.

But someone added the epilogue we heard today. Here, Peter and the disciples are back in Galilee, back to being fisherman, back to doing what they were doing before Jesus called to them to follow him. We have to wonder, what's up with that?

John uses some subtle symbolism here. They can't catch any fish on their own, but when Jesus arrives, suddenly the nets are full. Peter is naked, which may mean that his faith has been stripped from him, possibly because he had denied Jesus three times. But when he heard that Jesus was on the beach, he got dressed, symbolically putting on his faith, and then he dove into the water, in what might be a symbolic cleansing.

So, the readings contrast a man of no faith, Saul, with a man whose faith seemed a bit shaky: Simon Peter.

Trouble in our world: Our daughter graduated from college yesterday, which got us thinking about lots of things, but mostly, we reflected on the path we have walked in the years since she was born. Everyone lives their life differently, of course, but, speaking only for myself, I can state confidently that I never planned any of what has happened to me at any point in my life. It's all just come at me, in a sense.

But many people, I am sure, have a plan of some kind. They think it through: 'In thirty years, I want to be retired, living comfortably in a place where the winters are mild, the summers are awesome, and there are no biting insects. So, in order to get there, I have to do this, this, and this.' And then they go out and do it.

One of my high school classmates worked for Kraft Foods as a middle-manager for thirty years, retiring at age 55. Good for him. Even though those thirty years were hell, he said, now he could do whatever he wanted. Would he do things differently if he could? Do we want to be unhappy in our work, even if the reward is great?

So, my question is, how many of us planned for the faith we're living now? Over the years, depending on our circumstances, faith might ebb and flow, change shape, grow or fade, in different ways for each of us as we experience God's presence in our lives.

Do we know people like Saul, the man of no faith who disparages the faith of others? How many have faith similar to Peter's, a faith we set aside when we're feeling down or lost, and take up again only when we have Jesus in sight?

Grace in the text: Luke and John wrote about two different things for two different audiences. In writing about Saul's dramatic, life-changing conversion, Luke showed how we can receive from Jesus the same lessons that the disciples learned directly from him during his ministry, because that's how you keep the church alive.

Oddly enough, Christianity's spread throughout Asia is due to Saul's – now Paul's – tireless efforts at reaching out to gentiles and proclaiming Jesus to them. It's not what anyone expected from the man who wanted all Christ-followers dead.

The best part of John's story is, for me, the fish fry on the beach. Breakfast with Jesus in an ancient form of tail-gating. Just a bunch of people gathered in friendship to share a meal, some stories, and brotherly love. Sharing meals in friendship is a hallmark of Christianity, and it makes sense that God is most present with us when our most basic needs are being met.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell a story about a great catch of fish, but they all put it early in their Gospel accounts. Only John's Gospel ends with a meal, perhaps to show that it is indeed Jesus who provides abundant life, or perhaps this scene serves as a bookend to the beginning of John's Gospel, at the wedding at Cana, when Jesus created hundreds of gallons of wine from purified water. Add the bread and we're reminded of the time when Jesus fed five thousand people with a few fish and a few loaves.

When he saw Jesus standing on the beach, waiting for him, Peter re-discovered his faith. He immediately reconciled with Jesus and all was well.

Then Jesus asked him, three times, mirroring the earlier three denials, 'Do you love me?' In John's Greek, Jesus asked Peter if he loved him like a brother, and did he love him deep down inside, and did he really love him? And Peter said yes, each time. And Jesus said, then you can express your love by caring for the flock; it's all yours.

Grace in our world: Butch Cassidy, played by Paul Newman, once said to the Sundance Kid, played by Robert Redford, ‘Boy, I got vision, and the rest of the world wears bifocals.’ Butch was always pretty confident in his own abilities, even when he had no clue what he was doing. He just somehow knew it would all work out.

A skeptic might say, well, he was an outlaw who died in a hail of gunfire in Bolivia, but that’s not the point. He saw possibilities that no one else could see.

The Gospels constantly remind us that we’re meant to do our best, and if life causes us to stumble or drop back a bit, that’s okay, because Jesus will always be waiting for us, wherever we happen to be. His focus on love and redemption enables us to go and do more than we ever thought possible on our own.

When we talk about the incarnation of God, we see that God is most present where life’s basic needs are being met. This is why we support the food pantry, Father Bill’s, and transitional housing for those recovering from addictions. It’s why we support the Child Fund and the fuel assistance program. It’s why we do potluck dinners.

‘Follow me,’ Jesus said. He calls priests and tax collectors, deniers and doubters. He calls people who can love and who can see possibilities beyond today. He calls on us all to care for one another and to shine a light in the darkness. The story is not over. That’s the meaning of resurrection.

Amen.