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“Following: Peter, the Rock”

John 18:15-17, 25-27 and 21:15-19

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Our mission statement here at Second is “Finding direction by following Jesus.” As disciples, we feel like it’s our goal to do our best to follow the one we call Lord. It sounds so simple, doesn’t it? Simply, follow Jesus. But for those of us on the Christian journey, we know it’s easier said than done. Following Jesus in a place and time that praises power, wealth, and control can be one of the most countercultural choices we could make.

When we think of the first disciples, it’s easy to assume their way may have been easier. After all, we are 2,000 years removed from the miracles and teachings of Jesus. They got to experience it all firsthand. They saw the water turned to wine, the multitude fed, the sick made well, the dead raised to life. But when we study their stories in the New Testament, we see they wrestled with faith every bit as much as we may – perhaps more. Their way was not smooth either.

Our first window into “following” is the Apostle Peter. Originally called Simon, Peter was a Jewish fisherman. Matthew, Mark, and Luke imply he was married and that his brother Andrew was another of the twelve who followed Jesus. Jesus gave Simon his new name, Cephas, Peter, which means Rock. In Luke, Peter owns the boat that Jesus uses to preach to the multitudes who were pressing on him at the lakeshore. Peter and his brother Andrew caught the amazing catch of fish, and left it all behind to follow Jesus. Peter is the first to call Jesus Messiah. In Matthew, Peter



is the only disciple bold enough to walk on water toward Jesus, but he begins to sink when his faith waivers. In John, at the Last Supper, Peter initially refused to have Jesus wash his feet, but when Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me,” Peter asked Jesus to wash not only his feet, but his hands and head, as well. Peter was all in. He was the rock, he wanted to live up to his name. He said he’d never deny his Lord.

And so, we finally come to our first passage, from John 18. Jesus has just been arrested. Peter cut the ear off the high priest’s servant who was with the posse to take Jesus away, and now he’s followed the guards who carried Jesus to the Sanhedrin.

John 18:15-17, 25-27. ¹⁵ Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, ¹⁶but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. ¹⁷The woman said to Peter, ‘You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?’ He said, ‘I am not.’

²⁵ Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, ‘You are not also one of his disciples, are you?’ He denied it and said, ‘I am not.’ ²⁶One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, ‘Did I not see you in the garden with him?’ ²⁷Again Peter denied it, and at that moment the cock crowed.

We know what came next. In the morning, Jesus was crucified, he died, and he was buried. And then on the third day, Jesus rose again. What comes next is Peter’s opportunity for redemption. The risen Jesus meets Peter on the lakeshore. Peter has denied him three times, and now three times, Jesus gives him the opportunity to redeem himself. Skipping ahead to John 21, we find Jesus on the beach with Peter and some of the other disciples.

John 21:15-19

¹⁵ When 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.’



I was intimidated to start middle school. I'd just moved from an elementary school where I knew everyone to a sixth-grade class filled with kids from all over. It was the first time I'd really met any actual "mean girls." I figured out who the mean girls were early, and I did my best to stay out of their way.

Every day after gym class, we'd sit on the bleachers waiting for the bell to ring. It was the worst time of day—free time. The "cool," mean girls sat at the back, top row of the bleachers, the rest of us sat in descending order down the rows. One particular day, Jennifer was sitting alone down near the front. She was a sweet girl, with long, dark curly hair. Jennifer had Down syndrome, and gym was the only class we all shared with her.

Because she was alone, Jennifer became their target. Slowly, they started to toss little wads of paper into her thick, beautiful hair. She didn't notice at first, but my friends and I did. We sat frozen, as the girls in the back row started laughing, tossing more paper, and mocking Jennifer. It was horrible. I wanted the girls to stop, because surely Jennifer could tell what was happening by now. But I didn't know what to do.

It was only a moment before my friend Kimberly stood up, marched down the bleacher to Jennifer, and sat down beside her. She put her arm around Jennifer, and shot a look back up at the girls above. Within moments, Kimberly had Jennifer smiling and talking again, as she gently picked the tiny wads of paper out of her curls.

I still feel shame about that moment. Why didn't I stand up right away for my classmate? Why didn't I simply go and sit beside the girl like Kimberly did? That's all I had to do.

What is it that makes us chicken out—whether we're 11 years old, 41 years old, or 81 years old? Why are we afraid to speak up? To live what we claim to believe? What is it that makes us vulnerable to this kind of behavior—the kind of behavior Peter shows on Good Friday? The kind of statements Peter makes in the courtyard that night?

I think about this sort of thing. What does it mean for Jesus to deal with people (like us) who are so deeply flawed?

It's late, and Peter is cold. It's been a long night already. He's fallen asleep in the garden, and here he stands in another garden with the very people, or kinds of people, slaves and police, who brought Jesus in.

In John 18, Jesus is finally saying in public *who* he actually is. Just inside from Peter, he is testifying "I am," while outside Peter is denying, "I am not." Jesus is on trial before the high priest



and the people who matter—Peter is on trial before slaves, the people who matter least and can't even bring charges against Peter or testify against him in court.

What's the worst that could have happened to me that day in middle school? Those girls could have turned their ire on me, but the bell would ring, and I had friends who were just as loyal as those girls were mean. I have no idea what became of half of them, or what even became of Jennifer. I don't know if she still remembers or ever thinks of that day. But I do. I think about it often. When I start to feel proud or judgmental, when I start to get a little too big for my britches, God brings Jennifer to mind. And I remember how I hesitated. I ask myself, how long I would have waited to do something? What is it that makes us turn away? What is it that we're so scared of, really?

During the pandemic, George, Rachel, and I had to decide on a dime how we would do worship online. Should we follow our traditional order? Should we simplify things and cut a few parts out? And then, when we reemerged to in person worship, George, Ben, and I discussed what was worth keeping or tweaking from those days. We wondered whether we ought to get rid of the confession and assurance of pardon each week. Is this just some old tradition we don't want to let go of? Is it confusing to folks? Why should we still do it anyway? It's no surprise to those of you here that we chose to leave it in, of course.

Confession is an act of truth telling about who we are in relation to others and to God. John Calvin said we confess at the start of worship because we need to acknowledge that there is a God, and we're not it.

To consider the story of Peter and Jesus in light of the confession and absolution is dynamic. One follows the other; confession and absolution go together quite intimately. In John 18, Peter is disclosing more about himself than we would want to know. "I am not," he says as he turns away. Peter is probably telling the truth. In that moment, he doesn't want to believe—he's being honest.

Jesus, on the other hand, testifies in the court before the high priest that he has been speaking openly, nothing is a secret here in John. "I am," he says, knowing full well what would await him—knowing full well his friends would desert him.

We stand in the role of Peter, a follower coming to terms with who we are with all our flaws. But that doesn't diminish who Jesus is. Perhaps because of the failings of others around him, the promise of life becomes all the more compelling.

Peter, the rock. Even for him, following wasn't easy.



Three times Peter denies Jesus in John 18. Three times in John 21 on the shores, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” Confession and absolution. A rhythm, an equation, a grace that goes hand in hand.

Peter’s Passion scene begins with shame so thick it makes me cringe. But Jesus doesn’t leave Peter there. Jesus doesn’t avoid the hard conversation He doesn’t pretend the denials didn’t happen or didn’t hurt. But Jesus also doesn’t preach or condemn. He surrounds the heartbroken disciple with tenderness, inviting him to revisit his shame for the sake of healing and restoration: “Do you love me?” he asks. “Feed my sheep,” he says.

Peter emerges from his fear and denial, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Jesus knows we are more than the worst things we’ve done (or left undone). He knows we are prone to choose wrong, and we are prone to shame and self-hatred. He knows how to meet us, to build the fire, and prepare the meal that will heal and restore.

In the days after the resurrection, Jesus doesn’t waste a moment on retribution. He spends his time feeding, restoring, and strengthening his friends. He heals what is wounded, he speaks his disciples names, he prepares breakfast for his hungry, hurting friends. He focuses on relationship. He focuses on reconciliation. He focuses on love.

Peter’s shame meets Jesus’ grace. As Brene Brown says, “Shame cannot survive being spoken.” When shame encounters the God who is love, love wins. Grace wins. That’s the good news of the gospel.

In Acts, it is Peter who is the rock. This frightened and fearful disciple is the one who founds churches, welcomes the Gentiles, and grafts us into Christ’s church. Tradition tells us that though Peter was too afraid to follow Jesus to the cross in Jerusalem, he did follow him all the way to his own cross in Rome. Flawed and imperfect, Jesus saw something more in Peter than he could have ever seen in himself. Peter had to learn to be brave enough to follow.

It is that simple. It is that hard.

