

John 18:12-27
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Another Fire

After Jesus washes the disciples' feet and sends Judas on his way, he tells those gathered that they cannot go where he is going until later. At the end of chapter 13, Peter responds:

'Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.'¹

The evening continues and Jesus spends the next three chapters doing everything he can to teach his disciples one last time, to instill in them what it means to be his followers when he is no longer with them in the flesh. He urges them not to let their "hearts be troubled" and promises that he will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit to guide and encourage them. He urges them to stay with him, to abide in him, like branches of one holy vine. And then in chapter 17 he prays for his disciples, asking God the Father that they—and we—be one. After concluding the prayer, Jesus and the disciples head to a garden. Judas arrives still in the dark with an entourage of Roman soldiers and religious guards who are armed with "lanterns, torches, and weapons." Jesus steps forward to

¹ John 13:37-38

offer himself. Peter slices off the ear of a man enslaved by the Chief Priest, and Jesus tells Peter to put his sword away, “Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?” [John 18:12-27]

Three times. Three times Peter is asked if he is one of Jesus’ disciples, and three times he says he is not. John’s telling is a bit different from the other gospels. In those stories, Peter denies knowing Jesus. In John’s telling he denies being one of Jesus’ disciples, meaning he not only denies knowing Jesus and following Jesus, but he also denies his very identity and vocation. Peter’s life has been utterly transformed since Jesus gave him his new name and identity just as Jesus’ ministry was beginning. He has spent three years following Jesus, walking alongside him, asking questions, learning from him, and loving him through every challenge and every miraculous sign. When many of Jesus’ followers fall away in chapter 6, too daunted by Jesus’ difficult teachings, Jesus asks the twelve if they want to leave, too. And Peter responds, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”² Peter has now witnessed Jesus being welcomed by crowds waving palm branches and he has seen the religious leaders’ anger and frustration up close. And in the midst of this tender final night together, Peter has heard his beloved rabbi tell him that he will deny Jesus three times before sunrise. I can only imagine the thoughts racing through Peter’s mind as he does everything he can to warm

² John 6:68

himself by that fire in the courtyard, shoulder to shoulder with some who recognize him and most who do not. I would wager that Peter hardly recognizes himself when that rooster raises his voice to herald the morning.

I've been there. Maybe you have, too. Times when I turned my back on this vocation, my core identity of being a follower of Jesus. Times when I've laughed off a hateful joke. Times when I have chosen not to press the point of what Jesus would actually do or say rather than what the loudest and most hateful voices want to claim he would do or say. Times when I have gotten too big for my britches. Times when I have been dismissive, boastful, petty, spiteful, selfish, or rude. Times when I've shrugged off vindictiveness or meanness or honest-to-God untruths for fear of ruffling feathers or rocking the boat. Maybe I haven't distanced myself out loud, but I have distanced myself nonetheless. *Didn't I see you with Jesus? No, not me. Aren't you one of Jesus' people? No, you must have me confused with someone else. Weren't you just with him? No. No. No.*

Yes, I have found my calling as a minister, and I cannot imagine my life without doing what I do, but I have belonged to Jesus far longer than the 30 years I have served in ordained ministry or the 35 years since I found myself filling out applications for seminary. A few years ago, I found my baptism certificate nestled in with my baby book and discovered that I was baptized on March 2, 1969, just over 57 years ago this past

week. On that day, wearing the same baptismal gown that my brother, my daughter, and my nephews also wore, I was sprinkled on my carrot top head as my mother and my father watched. On that day, the pastor declared out loud what had been true long before I was a glimmer in anyone's eye, that I belonged completely to the God who loved me far more than I could ever comprehend. In that moment, I was commissioned for discipleship and called to follow Jesus. I've never heard Jesus predict in so many words that I would blow it. I've never heard an actual cock crow when I have let Jesus down, but I have felt it in my gut. In those moments, I have looked in the mirror and struggled to recognize the person staring back at me. *Who am I? Where did I lose my way? Why would I turn away from Christ like that? How could I deny being his?*

I think that's why I'm so sympathetic to Peter. Yes, he made big promises to follow Jesus no matter where, no matter what. I have too. And I can imagine how chilled to the bone Peter is as he huddles by that makeshift charcoal fire, shuddering under the weight of what he has done and not done. Peter leaves the stage after this. We see him again as he races to the empty tomb on Easter morning, but we don't hear from him again in John's gospel until a few days after Easter. In chapter 21, John tells us that Peter decides to go fishing and invites some other disciples to join him. It makes sense, really. When you can no longer really see yourself as a disciple, you go back to what you know and how you are known. Peter knows fishing, or at least he thinks he does, but he doesn't

have much luck with that, at least on this one day. Then someone on the shore tells him and the others to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and they pull in almost more fish than they can carry. Peter figures out that the person on the beach is Jesus and he can't swim to him quickly enough. The catch of fish is miraculous, of course, but I am struck by something more mundane: another charcoal fire. Yes, it serves a practical purpose. They need a way to cook the breakfast they've caught, but there's more to it than that. By that fire, Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him, not once but three times. And three times Peter responds, "Yes." Each time, Jesus responds to Peter's *yes* by telling him to feed his lambs or tend his sheep. In three quick denials, Peter loses his way and himself by that earlier fire. And then, in three swift and powerful exchanges, Jesus gives Peter back his identity and commissions him once again to feed and tend the Good Shepherd's sheep. Jesus still sees Peter as a disciple, even when Peter cannot see himself as one. Yes, Peter blew it by that first fire, and yes, in seeking Peter out again, Jesus offers forgiveness and makes it clear that there is still good and holy work for Peter to do in Jesus' name.

One scholar I listen to fairly frequently is quick to say that he doesn't like talking about the season of Lent as a journey, since Jesus has already made that journey to the cross and beyond. Instead, he understands this season between Ash Wednesday and Easter as a season of renewing discipleship, an opportunity to hear the Good Shepherd's

voice again and to respond to the abundant grace he offers by recommitting our lives to following him. We can't do what Jesus did, because we aren't Jesus and we never will be. We can, however, listen for Jesus' voice and do our faithful best to follow where he leads. When I do not recognize the person I have become, Jesus still knows me by name. When I have let Jesus down, when I have gotten too big for my britches, when I have been petty, dismissive, selfish, spiteful, or rude, when I have lost my nerve and lost my way, this second charcoal fire gives me hope. There is grace and forgiveness with Jesus. And there is still good and holy work to do in his name. Peter will not do that work perfectly, nor will I, and yet, in his endless mercy, Jesus refuses to give up on Peter or on me or on any of us. In love he calls us, feeds us, and re-commissions us, over and over and over again, as many times as it takes, to feed his sheep, to tend to one another and to every beloved child of God in his name. There is always another chance. There is always another fire.

Thanks be to God. Amen.