

*A sermon delivered by Alex Throckmorton, seminary intern, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 2, April 14, 2013.*

# **“Shepherds for the World”**

## **John 21:1-19**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

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I would like to start by thanking all of you for the many wonderful opportunities I have had here at First Church. I have been the student intern here since September and I have loved getting to know you and working with you. Thank you all for supporting seminarians like me and for doing all the good work that is done here.

When I was younger I remember being able to do whatever I wanted within reason of course. My parents were wonderful and went out of their way to make sure my brother and I were happy and entertained. When we went on trips my parents would sneak in as quickly as they could things that they were interested in and then the focus was back on us. If I wanted to play outside I did. If I wanted to build legos, that’s what I did. If I wanted a grilled cheese, that’s what I asked for and since my mother was always so loving, more often than not that’s what I got. It was all about me, me, me as a child.

As I grow older I find that it is less about me, me, me. It’s harder to find time to do what I want to do. There are so many more demands on my time. I have so much more responsibility.

Just the other day I just wanted to sit back and do nothing. It had been a brutally busy week and I just wanted a day to relax. It was not meant to be, though. Taxes needed to be filed, my cats needed attention, there was this sermon to write and a myriad of other duties called for my time.

As we grow older other people need our attention as well and the focus is put on them and not on ourselves. Sometimes it seems like as we grow older everyone else seems to push and pull us all over and we don't feel like we have any say in the matter. Jobs can be terribly demanding, sick family members take up our free time, dogs need walked, dishes need to be done, the house needs to be cleaned, children need to be taken to practice, and dinner needs to be made. Some days all we want is to get home and put our feet up but there's always something else to do.

What's the point of doing all this work? Why shouldn't we go back to that childlike mentality of me, me, me? Jesus gives us a good reason in today's scripture. When Jesus pulls Peter aside and has a heart to heart with him he reminds Peter what it means to be a good disciple. Jesus says that Peter needs to care for Jesus' flock. Jesus says to Peter "Feed my lambs," "tend my sheep," and "feed my sheep" (John 21:15, 16, 17). And then Jesus says to Peter, "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" (John 21:18). I find this quote striking. There's so much truth in it. Peter is called to care for Jesus' flock and in doing that he will be led where he does not want to go. What is important is that Peter continues to follow, despite where he might be led.

Why does Jesus say all of this? Why aren't they talking about all the evil that has happened over the last week or so? Why aren't they talking about the miracle of the resurrection? Jesus ignores all of those things because discipleship is what matters in this moment. So much has happened, Jesus has fulfilled his role as the messiah, but the disciples still don't get what it means to serve the people of the world. Jesus is saying to Peter, "You still don't get it.

You still aren't living up to what it takes to be a disciple. You seem so excited to see me, but remember how you denied knowing me a few days ago? Remember that when it really mattered you failed? You let me down. When I'm gone for good you can't do that. You have to be the one to stand strong. When the going gets tough you can't take the easy road and pretend you don't know me. Follow my example. Follow me." What a hard message to hear. Peter had the chance to stand by Jesus, to stand up for what he believed in, but he didn't do it. He fell back into the me, me, me mentality. Peter was unwilling to be led where he did not want to go.

Are we really so different from Peter? How many of us would stand up for Jesus in that situation? There Peter is, surrounded by guards and people that want to kill Jesus and who could easily kill him as well, being asked if he knows this man they are going to put to death for spreading a message they don't believe in. He takes the safe route and says he doesn't know Jesus. Who can blame him? He was thinking about protecting himself and probably saved himself a lot of pain. But here Jesus is, confronting Peter and reminding him that what he did is not good enough. Peter put himself first. Jesus never put his needs over anyone else's. Jesus never abandoned his mission.

As followers of Jesus we are called to care for Jesus' flock. Even when the going gets tough we have to be present and spread Jesus' love. Following Jesus means that we will be led where we do not want to go at some point in our lives. We will have to put our desires behind the needs of others. Like Peter, we may find ourselves in a hostile environment but we must look beyond ourselves.

In January, I went to Cuba with 17 people from my seminary. All students are required to go on a cross cultural trip and mine took me to Cuba. While we were there, we spent a lot of time studying the repression of religion that went on for about 50 years in Cuba. People that practiced religion openly were harassed, discriminated against, and even beaten and arrested. Cuba was a very hostile environment for religious people in the 70s and 80s.

There were those that kept going to church, though, despite the danger.

We visited a Presbyterian church in Varadero and heard a story about one of these brave members. Her name was Rita Rodriguez. During the height of religious discrimination the church Rita attended lost every member but her. Over time people gave up attending. It wasn't worth the risk for anyone but Rita. Brave, beautiful Rita still came every single week, though. She had her own private service with a pastor from another church nearby who agreed to come and worship with her once a week. Even her own pastor had left. It was just Rita and the neighboring pastor for months.

Despite all of the outside pressure from friends, family, strangers, and the government, Rita kept going to church by herself every week. She kept that church alive singlehandedly. When Rita was backed into a corner she continued to follow Jesus. I'm sure she felt like she was being led somewhere she never wanted to go at times, but she stayed true to God. Like Peter, she found herself at the gate, surrounded by hostile people, but she did not waver. She cried loud and clear that she was indeed with Jesus and would be for all of her days.

Today that church has more than 200 members again. Without Rita they would have faded into history. Do we have the courage to be like Rita? When we find ourselves at the gate like Peter, being led somewhere we don't want to go, do we have the courage to follow Jesus? Do we have the courage to put our own needs aside and focus on continuing to spread the love and grace of God?

Not all of us are Rita Rodriguez. We may never find ourselves in her situation, but that doesn't mean that we don't have the same inner strength that she does. There's a man at my home church whose wife has severe dementia but he still brings her to church every Sunday. They come early so that she doesn't get confused by all the people and they leave during the last hymn so that he can get her out easier. This man has given up his life for his wife. He

can't leave his home because he cannot leave her unattended. He gets what it means to follow Jesus and be led where he does not want to go.

So many families give up their time to care for sick loved ones. Families with children who have mild to severe disabilities live this challenge every day. The parents may yearn for some time to themselves but they give that up for the good of their child. This church has lived Jesus' call over and over. I wasn't here when the open and affirming statement was adopted but I will go out on a limb and say that made a lot of people very angry and drove some people away from this church. I'm a minister's son. I know what that issue can do to churches. That was not the easy path to take. No one wants to be led down a path that will drive people apart, but this church allowed itself to be led that way because it was the right thing to do.

We may find ourselves in difficult situations but we can find the courage to follow Jesus. We may much rather watch the final round of the masters than visit someone in a nursing home this afternoon but going on that visit is following Jesus. It's easier to mind our own business when we witness abuse or bullying but following Jesus means standing up for the victim. We find ourselves standing at the gate like Peter all the time and it is important to do what is right and not what is in our best interests.

Often when we look out at the world we see a world descending into darkness. Night is falling. When we find ourselves huddled around a fire and we are asked what we believe in, what will we say? Will we take the easy road and protect ourselves, denying Jesus in the process? Or will we stand strong like Rita Rodriguez? Will we find the courage within to stand for what is right, even if that means standing totally alone? Issues like marriage equality, gun control and health care need people who are willing to stand for what is right, even when that stance is unpopular. Jesus reminds us that to be a disciple is to tend the flock that is all of creation. We do that by following Jesus. We follow Jesus by spreading love and justice. That means caring for those that are marginalized and oppressed and who have no voice.

That means that we will find ourselves being drawn down a path we do not want to walk, but we walk it anyway. Jesus taught us how to walk that path.

In the end we are never alone. Even if we look around and see no one else standing with us like Rita, we are never alone. Rita was wrapped in God's embrace. Jesus was standing with Rita and Jesus is standing with us, especially when we allow Jesus to lead us down the more difficult path. Jesus calls us, but we must be the ones to stretch out our hands and allow ourselves to be led where we do not want to go because when we do this we are truly disciples. May God bless us with the courage to stand alone, and by our example lead others down Christ's path as well. For when we stand for what is right, we are never alone. Amen.

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