

"Chaos and Commitment"

May 5, 2019

John 21:1-15

Have you ever noticed how clarity is borne out of chaos? When we are at our worst, God has space to help us see the best of what we can become. Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church in John's Gospel, Chapter 21, verses 1-15:

Jesus appeared again to the disciples, this time at the Sea of Galilee. This is how he did it: Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed "Twin"), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the brothers Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter announced, "I'm going fishing."

The rest of them replied, "We're going with you." They went out and got in the boat. They caught nothing that night. When the sun came up, Jesus was standing on the beach, but they didn't recognize him.

Jesus spoke to them: "Good morning! Did you catch anything for breakfast?"

They answered, "No."

He said, "Throw the net off the other side of the boat and see what happens."

They did what he said. All of a sudden there were so many fish in it, they weren't strong enough to pull it in.

Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Master!"

When Simon Peter realized that it was the Master, he threw on some clothes, for he was stripped for work, and dove into the sea. The other disciples came in by boat for they weren't far from land, a hundred yards or so, pulling along the net full of fish. When they got out of the boat, they saw a fire laid, with fish and bread cooking on it.

Jesus said, "Bring some of the fish you've just caught." Simon Peter joined them and pulled the net to shore—153 big fish! And even with all those fish, the net didn't rip.

Jesus said, "Breakfast is ready." Not one of the disciples dared ask, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Master.

Jesus then took the bread and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus had shown himself alive to the disciples since being raised from the dead.

After breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Master, you know I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Early on in my life I knew that having children was not part of God's plan for me. Don't ask me how I knew it; I just did. And fortunately, by the time my adulthood came along, it was acceptable (mostly) in our society for women to choose not to bear children. It wasn't that I chose a career over having a family—I just don't have the genes for childbearing and child-raising.

So how did I get to be a grandmother of 6? And before that, a stepmother of 3? Chaos. It's the only explanation. My neatly-tailored life became chaotic with the addition of all these kids and grandkids to love and care about. Chaotic...and committed.

You see 5 of our 6 grandchildren pictured on the front of the bulletin. From left to right, they are: Roen, age 6, Corbin, age 6 this coming week, Nixon, age 2, Adelyn, age 6, and Brecken, just turned 4. Our baby grandson was sleeping in his mother's arms elsewhere. These little guys are our Dawson-Hogan gang, aka "Chaos." One on one, they are manageable, sweet, lovable little guys and girl. Get them all together, and it is sheer bedlam. Screaming, crying, racing around, five small voices calling my name every minute or so. The baby crying as well, wanting to be fed or changed or just to have attention. The dogs, too, barking and playing and running around in the sprinklers and then shaking themselves off on me. Not orderly. Not quiet. Not the

peaceful way I like to have my life. Grams has to summon every ounce of patience and endurance she has to weather these times where all my nice, neat, well-managed conventions of life go out the window.

I imagine this is like what the disciples dealt with after Jesus was taken from them. Robbed of their leader and teacher, they bickered, and they jockeyed for position within their ranks. They likely screamed and they certainly cried a lot. They wandered aimlessly about Jerusalem, grieving the loss of their Shepherd and their old life where everything made sense.

Even their remaining leader, Peter, is not able to rally the disciples to carry on the work of discipleship. Peter has publicly and vocally let down Jesus after his arrest, denying him three times. The disciples are all aware that in their time of chaos, Peter has not been able to be strong. On the morning of the crucifixion, he is frantic and confused, and that is just days after he had boasted about how loyal he would be to Jesus. Peter is well aware of his chaos, and in the aftermath of those awful days, he is no longer feeling like he has the right—or the heart—to lead his faith brothers and sisters. His sense of commitment has waned. He is a living disaster.

Jesus, however, has another viewpoint. John imagines Jesus reappearing to the disciples after his up-rising. Three times he appears to them, but in this third encounter, he focuses in on Peter. Sensing the chaos of his heart, Jesus confronts Peter, not with judgment or recrimination for his past failings, his chaos, but rather, with a renewed sense of purpose and commitment, a *mission*, a mission to build up the faith and change lives in the name of Christ.

I love the imagery John uses as following the death of Jesus, Peter and the disciples are out on the Sea of Galilee in their boat. They are half-heartedly returning to what they know best—fishing, their former vocation. They aren't having much success out there. Time and time again, they drop their nets and haul them back on

board their boat, hoping against hope for some fish amongst the seaweed and refuse. Chaos. No luck. No hope. No commitment.

Then a stranger calls out to them from the shore, "Are you having any luck?" When they reply glumly in their disappointment, the stranger, who we are told is the risen Christ, says, "Drop your nets over the *other side of your boat and see what happens!*"

Drop your nets over the *other side*, he says. Commit to a fresh, new course of action and see what happens. Of course, we know from the story that *abundance* happens. Success. An end to the chaos.

Jesus approaches the men. The text is rather unbelievable in this regard, because except for Peter, the disciples act like it's no big deal that Jesus appears alive to them after being crucified in front of them. The text says, "They knew who he was, so they said nothing."

On the other hand, Peter throws himself into the sea. Perhaps he is embarrassed to be seen by his Lord. Perhaps his throwing himself into the water is a ritual cleansing. We are not told. Either way, he reacts strongly to seeing Jesus again.

Jesus has a purpose for engaging directly with Peter.

"Do you love me?" he asks his wet and shivering disciple. "If you love me, feed my lambs." He repeats this exchange three times. He says, in essence, "If you are my disciple, make it your calling to *change lives*. That is your purpose now." John ends his *Gospel* with this story. He ends his story of Jesus with a call to discipleship. He is not content to leave the narrative in chaos; it is commitment he is after. John ends his story with a call for action to all who know Christ, and we pick the story up from there in what becomes Christianity. The constant throughout the chaos of the next two thousand-plus years is the Holy Spirit's calling on believers to commit to discipleship in Christ's name, to change lives in the *Gospel* message of love.

This is a great message for our church to hear at this time in our own story. The chaos of distant years is but a memory. We have stability, we have a solid core family that is growing, and we have the future open to us. Our purpose—our *mission*—has to be that we are changing lives in the name of Jesus. Otherwise, we ignore his call to feed his lambs. Otherwise, we are not his disciples. As author and church vitality advisor Clif Christopher writes to the churches, "...you are not in business to balance budgets or manage money. You are in business to change lives for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ—that is it. You have no other reason to exist. If you are not doing that, then get out of the way and let someone else have your spot."

John's Jesus puts it simpler still when he tells Peter, "Feed my lambs." Church is not about having flashy electronics or the best picnics. It is not about how many people are in the pews or how many buildings we can own. It is about changing lives. Period. Changing the chaotic to the committed.

This month you will have many opportunities to join in dynamic conversations with other UCC Parker Hilltop partners about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, what it means personally for you, and what it means as a church. These conversations will help us re-imagine a simple mission statement that will tell the world what we are about. This exchange of ideas and Spirit-promptings will shape our future as a community of committed Christians. Our collective work will transform the way we think about our sacred covenant in all its aspects. How can we be *better* involved and committed in the life of this church? Notice I didn't say *more involved*. Commitment is not about chaos. It's about focus and purpose, not about filling your calendar.

Changing lives in covenant with others is about shouldering as a whole body the work of this church and all that it needs to fulfill the mission: investment, service, and vision, what we might better know as money, time, and talent. Be ready for the paradigm shift that comes

with this focused discipleship and commitment; church communities cannot thrive in the model your parents followed decades ago in their home houses of worship.

The Long-Range Planning and Vision Team, the Covenant Commitment Team, your Moderator, Church Council, and I all urge you to sign up for *at least one* of these small-setting conversations. Feel free to sign up for more than one. You need not be a formal member of the church to attend them. Children 10 and older, as well as Confirmed kids slightly below that age, are also encouraged to participate. It is a community discussion.

Chaos visited the disciples. But Jesus was not satisfied leaving them in a place of confusion and lost direction. They had reverted to what they knew best: fishing in the old, unproductive way. Jesus came back into their consciousness and invited them to approach their work with a new eye and a new mission. "Drop your nets to the *other* side of the boat," he said, and the fishermen-disciples hauled in more fish than they could carry on their boat. Chaos is the confusion; commitment is the discipleship. Brian McClaren invites us to think of ourselves as those disciples. He writes,

You can imagine the honor, for uneducated fishermen like us, to sit at the feet of the greatest teacher imaginable. And now, we feel it is an even greater honor to be sent out to teach others, who will in turn teach and train others in this new way of life. The revolutionary plan of discipleship means that we must first and foremost be examples. We must embody the message and values of our movement. That doesn't mean we are perfect—just look at Peter. But it does mean we are growing and learning, always humble and willing to get up again after we fall, always moving forward on the road we are walking. As Jesus modeled never-ending learning and growth for us, we will model it for others, who will model it for still others. If each new generation of disciples follows this example,

centuries from now, apprentices will still be learning the way of Jesus from mentors, so they can become mentors for the following generation.

To my grandchildren, I say, "Be patient with me, my Lovelies. I adore being your grandparent and one of your mentors. I willingly immerse myself in your wonderful chaos, because my love and commitment are stronger than your unsettling of my well-ordered life." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Committed discipleship is that simple—and that chaotic.

It is so.