

“Remember Who You Are”
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First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Acts 9:1-20

John 21:1-17

Will Willimon is the former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, and is now a professor of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School. He is one of my favorite preachers and I’m not alone in that. A Pew Foundation Survey said he was one of the two most frequently read writers by pastors in mainline Protestantism, and so you probably have heard a few of his stories. In his book *Remember Who You Are*, he writes that when he would leave his home to go on a date while in high school, his mother would bid him farewell with these words, “Don’t forget who you are.” He writes:

“You know what she meant. She did not mean that I was in danger of forgetting my name and my street address. She meant that, alone on a date, in the midst of some party, in the presence of some strangers, I might forget who I was. I might lose sight of the values with which I had been raised, answer to some alien name, engage in some unaccustomed behavior.” (p. 105)

That is the temptation we all face, from time to time. When in a situation where something or someone is calling on us to be someone we are not, we are sometimes tempted to forget who we are.

That is perhaps something of what was going on with the disciples on the day we just read about. John tells us that there were seven disciples gathered together. Now this is after the resurrection and after Jesus had appeared to them twice while they were behind locked doors – the first time without Thomas, and the second time with him, as Chuck talked about last week. And now, the disciples are not sure what to do. John tells us that Peter said, “I am going fishing” and the others said “We will go with you.” And it is at that time that perhaps the disciples forgot who they were. Some of them had former careers as fishermen, and so maybe they were just returning to their old jobs. How can I say that they had forgotten who they were if they were just going back to work? I say so because Jesus had given them *new* jobs. He told them to follow Him and they would be fishers of people. In returning to their old job, they were forgetting their new identities, given to them directly by Jesus. They were no longer to be fishers of fish, but fishers of people! When they went on the journey with Jesus, their lives were changed, and the same is true for us. Our identities are not the same – we are no longer the same people we once were. We are like Saul, later known as Paul, who encounters the risen Christ and is given a new job. He is not who he once was. He no longer preaches against Christ and Christians, but instead is the one who Jesus chooses to carry His name forward. Like Saul, we take on new identities in Christ Jesus, and we are to remember who we are!

Confirmands: you have been on a journey of confirmation over the last nearly seven months. Jesus is calling you to a new job. You are no longer who you once were. *You* are fishers of

people. Your life is not your own. In the clip we watched from *Les Miserables*, the bishop said to Jean Valjean, "I've ransomed you from fear and hatred, and now I give you back to God." The world around us seems to operate on fear and hatred, but *you* do not belong to fear and hatred. You belong to God, the God who, as Carter Lowe wrote in his statement of faith "created everything," as Grace Rispoli wrote "is personal" and "is an artist," and as Jack Born wrote "loves us unconditionally." You belong to God, and God has given you a new job, to fish for people, so remember who you are.

And so Jesus reminded the disciples who they were. On this occasion, the fishing is not going so well for these guys. John tells us that they caught *nothing* all night. Maybe this should have been a sign that they were forgetting who they were. Nonetheless, Jesus shows up after daybreak, and tells them "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." Now, I'm not much of a fisherman; actually, that's quite an understatement. I can probably count on one hand the number of times I've been fishing in my life, but I do understand that *location* is important in fishing. Today's fishermen often use sophisticated fish finders to locate schools of fish swimming far beneath the water. The disciples didn't have that kind of technology, but really, what difference could it make if they didn't move their boat at all, but just put their nets on the other side of the boat? Surely the fish could swim right *under the boat* to reach them on the side they were already fishing on. Maybe if Jesus had pointed them to a nearby cove, or had told them to work their way down the shore a few hundred yards, but just the other side of the boat? Still, they did as he said and when they did, the net was so full they could hardly bring it in.

I don't think which side of the boat they were fishing on was really that instrumental. I don't think the fish were already there, just taunting them from the other side of the boat. This story tells us much more about Jesus than about the fish. This is the Jesus who, as Destin Lembelembe wrote, "save[d] my life and tells me who I am," as Kam Wilson wrote "saved the world," and as Rick Loma wrote "cares for everyone."

And this Jesus is recognized by one of the disciples, who says, "It is the Lord!" And at that, Peter could not wait for the boat to get to the shore. He instead jumped into the water and swam to Jesus, who was waiting on the shore with a charcoal fire going.

At this point, some strong parallels in the recent life of Peter show up, for it was standing over a charcoal fire that Peter denied knowing Jesus. Peter denied Jesus three times, and here, over a charcoal fire, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. It seems so redundant with Jesus asking the same question three times. And John tells us that Peter even got hurt at Jesus asking three times. But Jesus gave Peter a chance with those three professions of love to wipe away the guilt and pain of his three denials.

Those professions of faith did not stand alone, however. Each was followed by a command. If you love me, Peter, then here's how you show it.

There's a line originally by Oscar Hammerstein that has found its way into many songs over the years. It is this: "Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn't love till you give it away."

That's what Jesus told Peter that day. If you love me, then you've got to give that love away. If you love me, then you've got to feed my sheep. If you love me, then you've got to take care of my sheep. Love for Jesus is yet again tied to taking care of others. This is such a common theme in the words of Jesus. Jesus tells us time and time again that it is our calling to care for others.

And we are equipped for this calling of service to others by the Holy Spirit, whom Carter Lowe says "prays for and guides me," Kam Wilson wrote "gets into my heart," and Jack Stickels wrote "will guide you through your faith step by step."

Jesus calls us to feed His sheep, and His sheep are all over the world. Jesus' sheep are people who look like us, and people who look very different. They are people who believe like we do, and people who believe very differently. They are people who have had many opportunities in life, and people who have had very few. We cannot limit our feeding of Jesus' sheep to just the sheep that are like us because that is denying the call of Christ. Just a few chapters back, in John 10, Jesus says "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." We are to seek out the sheep who need to be fed.

That is part of what we come to church to do – to learn how to reach out to the world. The church is, as Rick Loma wrote, "a community of people, expressing their love for the Lord." It is, as Jack Born wrote, "where people come together as a community and worship God." It is also, as Grace Rispoli reminds us, "the values of the community that you take with you every day; the values of faith and salvation and honoring his grace by the good actions and spreading God's love, and the connection we have to him." The church is not simply a place we go to. It is who we are, both in this place and when we go beyond these walls. Jack Stickels wrote that, upon going around the buildings and looking at signs for church activities, he "realized that a Church wasn't a brick building, or lots of pews, or even stained glass windows. A Church was a group of people, big or small, that shared the same faith and wanted to share their faith with others as well." I believe our Confirmands get it – that the church doesn't exist just to preserve itself. It exists to share God's love with others.

There's a story that illustrates this point well. Years ago, a pastor named Stan Bailey sent this story around in his church newsletter. It's a story about a visitor to a heavy-duty grease factory. He says the visitors were ushered into a large room and a tour host introduced them to the company history and the number of employees at work producing the best machine lubricants in the world. They toured the noisy factory, with lots of machinery and wheels whirling, mixing, packaging. There was incredible activity everywhere.

As the tour ended, one of the visitors said, "I didn't see a shipping department." The guide responded, "Well, we don't have a shipping department because it takes all the grease we make to lubricate our equipment and keep the wheels turning."

Bailey concluded: Friends, the Church is the best lubricated grease factory in all of history. What's missing is the shipping department. The church does not exist for itself; it exists to bring others to a commitment to Jesus Christ.

That *is* why we exist. That is why we are here, week after week. Not just to be fed by the words of Christ, but to go out and likewise feed others. It is how Jesus said we show that we love Him. We come here to worship and to learn, and then we go forth to serve. We cannot keep what we do here only within these walls. Love isn't love until you give it away. Let us give away the love that God through Jesus has so freely shared with us. Let us remember who we are – children of the covenant, children of the living God, and let us feed the sheep of our God wherever they may be. Amen