



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - April 22, 2007 Now What?

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## John 21:1-19

### **Jesus Appears to Seven Disciples**

*21 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.*

*<sup>2</sup>Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. <sup>3</sup>Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.*

*<sup>4</sup> Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.' <sup>6</sup>He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. <sup>7</sup>That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. <sup>8</sup>But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.*

*<sup>9</sup> When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' <sup>11</sup>So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. <sup>12</sup>Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. <sup>13</sup>Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. <sup>14</sup>This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.*

### **Jesus and Peter**

*<sup>15</sup> 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.' <sup>16</sup>A 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.'* <sup>17</sup>He 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. <sup>18</sup>Very 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.' <sup>19</sup>(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

It had been a three year pilgrimage of ambiguity. To be sure, there had been moments, days, maybe even weeks, when the disciples seemed to get it. There had been times on the road, at the Last Supper, certainly after the resurrection, when they recognized that to be in Jesus' presence was like, well, like being in the presence of God. But, then again, there had been the doubts, the misunderstandings, and, finally, the outright denials and desertion. In the end, God had resolved the ambiguities with the triumph of the resurrection. In chapter 20 of John's Gospel, God's love proved more powerful than death, forgiveness canceled out sin, and Christ commissioned his joyful disciples as his church.

That was chapter 20; but now, as we turn to chapter 21, it is several weeks later and the disciples are by the Sea of Galilee. There is now no talk of commission, no sign of church, and the certain triumph of the resurrection seems to have faded. Peter leads an aimless, dispirited bunch of disciples back to life as they had known it, back to fishing - back to a long night of pulling on the oars, casting out the nets, and hauling them back in.

I imagine there was some comfort in the rowing and casting and hauling: Peter and the boys were back to familiar routines, back to well-honed habits and skills, and the sheer pace of their labor kept their minds off their Jerusalem failures. But what about those interludes drifting as the nets set? Did Peter's mind drift back to his three denials of Jesus? And what of a pre-dawn dark that brought only hunger. Now what? Now what that their time with the "light of the world" had given way

back to darkness? Now what that promises of life in abundance had given way back to scarcity and hunger? Now what? Had the resurrection really changed anything or was it just yielding back to the same old same old. Now what?

“Now what?” is our question this morning as well. I mean it’s the question you and I are meant to ask this morning. It’s the question all Christians are meant to ask this morning. Now what? We have walked together through our Christmas celebrations of Christ’s birth and ministry, through our Lenten reflections and Good Friday sorrows, and through our celebration of Easter morning’s triumph. Trumpets, lilies, soaring voices, as we sang together, “Love’s redeeming work is done, fought the fight the battle won.” [Charles Wesley, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, *Pilgrim Hymnal*, at Hymn 182.]

And then came Monday, April 16. Just eight days after Easter, we, too, were dragged back to a world of darkness, scarcity, and enduring evil. If 30 dead kids is what “love’s redeeming work is done” looks like, then we’ve got some serious work to do deciding what the definition of “is” is. Did Easter really change everything or are we just sliding back to the same old same old? Now what?

I don’t think it’s too much to say that Jesus appeared on the shores of Galilee that day just so he could answer Peter’s “now what?” question; that John tacked his account of that morning on to his Gospel as an encore just so he could answer the “now what?” questions of his post-resurrection church struggling with persecution and schism; or that Jesus’ answer to Peter’s “now what?” question might also be his answer to ours this morning.

I don’t doubt that Jesus could have delivered a penetrating theological discourse that day on the Galilean shore. He might have taken Peter aside and explained how the resurrection defeated death and evil in principle, warranting trust in a final victory in Christ’s second coming. He might have offered sage political wisdom on dealing with Roman persecutions. He might have lectured on marshalling energy for evangelizing new members. But it doesn’t seem to have been an occasion for windy explanations or exhortations.

Jesus begins just by caring for, just by loving his disciples. Do you fear scarcity, I will be with you to show you where to cast your nets. Are you hungry? I will feed you when you break bread together in my name. Are you shadowed by guilt for your backsliding? My forgiveness will always outrun your failures. Three times he asks Peter if he loves him, three times Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to undo his three denials in Jerusalem, three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus, three times Peter embraces his forgiveness.

It doesn’t seem to have been an occasion for windy explanations or exhortations. There are in the entire chapter only five words of exhortation. Jesus tells Peter to “feed my sheep” and, in so doing, to “follow me.”

John was a master of Greek thought forms and Gnostic prescriptions and mystery religion rituals. But John wasn’t placing his bet on words; John was placing his bet on love. Feed my sheep, love my people. Follow me, love my people as I have loved you.

“Now what?” for Peter and the disciples? Now it could be seen how the Resurrection had changed everything. Yes, there was still darkness. Yes, there was still hunger. Yes, there was still human failure. But now Christ’s love was present to his people through the body of Christ that was the Church. The love that is Christ was still present to God’s people in the flesh, but now it was through Peter’s flesh, and John’s flesh, and Thomas’s flesh. As they had followed Jesus over the roads of Palestine, so they were now to follow Jesus by loving his people. And that changed everything.

Isn’t Jesus’ answer to Peter’s “now what?” question his answer to our ‘now what?’ question as well? Of course we will need to have national conversations about mental health policy, and gun control laws, and violence in the media, and campus security and so on . . . all in their time. But this morning doesn’t strike me as a time for windy explanations or political exhortations. I am convinced that the first word God wants God’s church to speak into this tragedy is God’s word of love. God wants us to bear love to the parents who lost children, bear love to our own children anxious about leaving for college, bear love, yes, even to troubled young people who may commit crimes like these.

Scholar N.T. Wright put it well in a sermon on John 21 he preached several years ago:

*“The word became flesh, said St. John [but] the church has turned the flesh back into words: words of good advice, words of wisdom and encouragement, yes, but what changes the world is flesh, words with skin on them, words that hug you and cry with you and play with you and love you and rebuke you and build houses with you and teach your children in school.”* [N.T. Wright, “The New Creation” in The Crown and the Fire at 61.]

“Now what?” for those poor parents who lost children at Virginia Tech? Our offer to them is Christ’s love. The all but unbearable pain of losing a child is compounded by a sense of being cut off – not only cut off from the child but also cut off from cherished assumptions about life itself, even cut off from a world that can’t possibly understand what you are going through. To them we say, whether from near or far, we are with you. We may not be able to fully understand your loss, but we stand by you, we suffer with you, we love you.

Darrell Scott, the father of Columbine victim, Rachel Scott, was asked what he would say to the families of the Virginia Tech victims, he said, “I hope these parents can be aware that there are thousands of parents like them out there, like me, who stand with them silently, invisibly, and support them with our hearts and whole being.” Our “now what?” for the parents of Virginia Tech students is to stand with them and support them with our hearts in any way that we can. The risen Christ told us to feed his sheep. God’s love with skin on it.

“Now what?” for our children newly anxious about going away. Our offer to them is Christ’s love. Every child setting off for college must work through the anxiety of facing the mounting challenges of college life while separating from the support of parents, friends, and community. To them we say we are with you. Our love goes with you to school, and you are still a cherished part of our community here. We love you. You are not alone. Jesus told us to feed his sheep. God’s love with skin on it.

And finally, “now what?” for the troubled young people spiraling a downward course of mental illness and increasingly prone to harming others. Yes, our offer to them, too, is Christ’s love, but here is the most important part of the sermon, not just as we see them brushing by us dressed up like Rambo. Not

even just as we pick them up on the radar screen of campus mental health clinics. We need to be loving them in Christ’s name when they are 6 and 8 and 10 and 12 years old.

Perhaps you’ve seen Dr. Richard Kadison making the network interview rounds this week. Dr. Kadison is the Chief of the Mental Health Service at Harvard University and the author of College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It. Dr. Kadison’s 2004 book opens with some terrifying statistics: he writes,

*“This is a book about the extraordinary increase in serious mental illness on college campuses today and what we can do about it. If your son or daughter is in college, the chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function; one in two that he or she will have regular episodes of binge drinking (with the resulting significant risk of dangerous consequences such as sexual assault and car accidents); and one in ten that he or she will seriously consider suicide. In fact, since 1988, the likelihood of a college student’s suffering depression has doubled, suicidal ideation has tripled, and sexual assaults have quadrupled.”* [Kadison at 1.]

Dr. Kadison uses these statistics to argue forcefully for increased funding for campus mental health services and for training mental health professionals. These are worthy proposals, and we should be having a national conversation about mental health care for our young.

But Dr. Kadison’s proposals remind me of the story about a town that found an unidentified body in the river that ran through the town. Townspeople generously took time off from work to construct a coffin and conduct a funeral. It was the least they could do. A week later, however, they found another body in the river, and then another and another and so on until, finally, the town was just plain worn out by all the coffin construction and funerals.

So one day, the constable decided to take a hike up river to see what was going on. Two miles up stream he found a small footbridge washed out and footprints indicating that travelers had been trying to get across the river without the bridge and were being swept away by the current. The town spent a morning putting up a new foot bridge and solved the problem forever.

Of course we should be attending to mental health services on campuses, and campus security, and gun control. But how can we read Dr. Kadison's deeply disturbing statistics without heading upstream to see why so many of our young people are becoming ill in the first place.

This was the approach taken by the Dartmouth Medical School and the National Commission on Children at Risk in 2003. [Hardwired to Connect: The New Case for Authoritative Communities.] The commission assembled a blue ribbon panel of 33 of the most distinguished professors of child psychiatry and research at Dartmouth, Harvard, Yale, U Penn, UCLA, NYU, and the like.

The commission's starting position was that their waiting rooms were already overcrowded and that they couldn't possibly train up new child psychiatrists fast enough to keep up with the epidemic of mental illness among our young.<sup>1</sup> Their approach was to conduct and review neuroscience research seeking to determine cultural causes of this epidemic upstream and to fashion recommendations about how we might change the way we are raising our children.<sup>2</sup> Their diagnosis and their recommendations sound as if they were lifted from the 21st Chapter of John's Gospel.

The Commission first concluded that the human brain is what they called, "hard-wired to connect." That is, the brain is genetically predisposed to develop organically in an environment conducive to meaningful relationships with others. Reduce the relational opportunities in the environment you will get structurally different brains with increased dispositions to mental illness.<sup>3</sup> As the Commission reported, "In large measure, what's causing the crisis in American childhood is a lack of connectedness. We mean two kinds of connectedness – close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning." [Hardwired at 5.]

The Commission then undertook to describe the environment that furnished opportunities for the human and spiritual connectedness required for healthy brain development. They described the healthy environment, what they called "authoritative communities" in terms of 10 characteristics:

1. It is a social institution that includes children and youth.
2. It treats children as ends in themselves.
3. It is warm and nurturing.
4. It establishes clear limits and expectations.
5. The core of its work is performed largely by non-specialists.
6. It is multi-generational.
7. It has a long-term focus.
8. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
9. It encourages spiritual and religious development.
10. It is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the love of neighbor.

Sound familiar? My friends, our country's best child psychiatrists have already been upstream to see what's going on in the mental health of our children. After 2,000 years of scientific development and millions of dollars of neuroscience research, their advice to us is familiar: feed Christ's sheep. Welcome our young into loving communities of unconditional acceptance and connection. Break bread with them and invoke Christ's name of love. Feed Christ's sheep.<sup>4</sup>

"Now what?" this second week after Easter, 2007. Now we know that Easter doesn't mean the end of struggle with evil and failure and ambiguity. But now we also know that we will never face this struggle alone, for the love that triumphed over death is with us. And just as and when we feed Christ's sheep, the truth and meaning of his resurrection come clear. For it is Christ's love that moves with and for and through us. And that changes everything. "For not with sword's loud clashing, Nor roll of stirring drums, But deeds of love and mercy, The heavenly kingdom comes." [Ernest W. Shurtleff, *Lead on, O King Eternal, Pilgrim Hymnal* at Hymn 375. **Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Like Dr. Kadison, the commission reported disturbing statistics regarding the state of mental health among our young: "Scholars at

the National Research Council in 2002 estimated that at least one of every four adolescents in the U.S. is currently at serious risk of not achieving productive adulthood. According to another recent study, about 21 percent of U.S. children ages 9 to 17 have diagnosable mental or addictive disorders associated with at least minimum impairment. These numbers appear to reflect actual increases in these problems, and not changes in methods or rates of treatment.” Hardwired at 8.

2 As the commission described the crisis: “The first part is the deteriorating mental and behavioral health of U.S. children. We are witnessing high and rising rates of depression, anxiety, attention deficit, conduct disorders, thoughts of suicide, and other serious mental, emotional and behavioral problems among U.S. children and adolescents. The second part is how we as a society are thinking about this deterioration. We are using medications and psychotherapies. We are designing more and more special programs for “at risk” children. These approaches are necessary. But they are not enough. Why? Because programs of individual risk-assessment and treatment seldom encourage us, and can even prevent us, from recognizing as a society the broad *environmental* conditions that are contributing to growing numbers of suffering children. Hardwired at 5.

3 As commission member Allan N. Schore of the UCLA School of Medicine put it, “The idea is that we are born to form attachments, that our brains are physically wired to develop in tandem with another’s through emotional communication beginning before words are spoken. . . .If these things go awry, you’re going to have seeds of psychological problems, of difficulty coping, stress in human relations, substance abuse, those sorts of problems later on. Hardwired at 16.

4 In her book, Postmodern Children’s Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church, the Rev. Dr. Ivy Beckwith noted at p. 99, “. . . churches are in wonderful position to be these authoritative communities. As communities of faith we already believe in the importance of relationships and belonging. We have the chance to connect our children with others and across generations in meaningful ways. In doing so we affect not just psychological health but spiritual health as well. The relationships children find in a community of faith are crucial to their spiritual development. These relationships are integral to their ability to find spiritual meaning in a life with God.” Certainly this is what the young people of our church tell us themselves when they give witness to their experiences of Youth Group on Youth Sunday:

“Through YG, the ink of the Word means more than letters forming simple phrases, for we can see the deeper connotations that we have longed for so long. At the end of our last mission trip, we came back tired, we came back sick, we came back physically broken, but we all came back with something we couldn’t fit in our bags - one another. [“Reflection” by C.P. Allen.]

“I found out the real reason for this mission trip feeling, it’s no drug, and despite what a lot of people think, no, it’s not

brainwashing. It’s very simply. Love. Love for one another, love for people that you’ve never even met before. Regardless of color, race, ethnicity, and religion I have seen every last YGer here love with all their heart. I’ve seen them sweat, for their love, I’ve seen them bleed for their love and I’ve seen them get really really really sick for their love.

And this is where I see god. I see god in their faces and in the eyes of the people that we serve. In Chicago this past march I have experienced love and god in no way I have ever before. Our final worship with them, exploded in love, as they stood before us singing “thank you” we came forward, arm in arm, until the music didn’t even matter anymore we just stared into their eyes and them right back, you could feel the love in the room, you could see god’s presence there, and then we all broke down. Embracing each other, and basking in gods presence. When I think of the words “Kingdom of Heaven” that’s what I think of. People pouring themselves out for each other, and in turn being filled right back again. [“Reflection” by Morgan Flagg.]

“I know this is not something that every senior feels he or she must do but these last four years of YG have inspired me to stand before you today. I bring to you a message of unconditional love. Throughout my time here, I have felt this amazing love and in the short time I have up here today I want to thank you all for providing me a means for me to feel this way.

So I stand before you all today, having experienced this pure love that I’ve found through YG, humbled and transformed. I want to thank you all for the support you have shown for me these past four years. I have learned more about myself and my faith through God’s work in YG and these mission trips. From the bottom of my heart, I say again, thank you. These four years have been the most important of my life due to every single person I have interacted with through YG.” [“Reflection” by Geoffrey Stafford.]