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Back in the Boat

They say you can’t go home again, but I did. I went home, back to my hometown, back to my parent’s home, back to my home church. I had been away about ten years. I had said I would not go back, (other than to visit family). I felt my home church had no place for me, as a woman. They had given me so many opportunities to grow and take responsibility as a youth, but now I had learned that they had issues with women in leadership. It felt like a betrayal. But after years away, studying at Bethel and AMBS, followed by four years of voluntary service in Oregon, I went back. I went back to reconnect with family. I went back to make my peace with my home church.

I went back and I stayed for three years. I went back to my teaching degree. I took more classes, I did substitute teaching and tutoring, I volunteered at the local battered women’s shelter, and I got involved at church. I taught youth Sunday school and a women’s class. They asked me to direct the Christian Education program. And we talked about women in leadership, not to change minds, but to understand each other. And it was good. For me it was a time of transition, transition from my years in voluntary service with a church that I loved, transition to whatever came next. And I wasn’t sure what came next, just that for the time being I needed to be home.

Transition is defined as the process of adapting to a new situation, moving from an ending to a new beginning. It involves grieving, letting go, and building hope and learning that leads to revitalization and recommitment. In our text today, the disciples are also in a time of transition. They have followed Jesus throughout Galilee and into Jerusalem, listening to his words as he taught and told parables, watching as he healed the sick and invited people back into community. They were shocked at his death on a Roman cross, frightened for their own safety, and amazed at the empty tomb. Although Jesus has appeared to them, even explained things to them, as he did for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, it is different now. Jesus appears and leaves at will. They cannot follow him physically. Perhaps they even feel a bit lost. So they have returned home, to Galilee, to their old occupation. The fishermen are back in the boat, out on the lake. They are fishing again, and they have caught nothing.

Like the disciples, we, too, are in a time of transition. We know things change. We live in a time of deep political division. We have watched as hate groups and conspiracy theories have gained a following. We saw immigration policies that separated children from parents at our border. On our media we have watched episodes of racial injustice. We saw the assault on our nation’s capital.

The media brings us awareness of struggle beyond our borders. We witnessed the turmoil in Afghanistan as U.S. troops were withdrawn. We worry about climate change and how that affects not only us, but all of our neighbors around the world. We grieve the Russian invasion of Ukraine and all the lives that have been lost and families who have been separated and displaced.

We know change happens, but we are also dealing with the psychological effects brought on by the corona virus. Covid brought social isolation as all but essential services were shut down. We have seen argument over mask wearing and vaccination. We have lost loved ones and experienced fear for the safety of ourselves and others. Cyberbullying and outbursts of anger seem to have increased. We may feel helpless, hopeless, and in despair. Things are not how they used to be.

We are in a time of transition. We meet again in person, only our worship now is hybrid. Our choir is singing again, though rehearsals are not as they were before. We had a church picnic again, though it was on our church grounds, not out at Riverview School. Many, perhaps most of us, are vaccinated; mask wearing is optional now. But it is a time of transition. We don’t know exactly what is coming next. We may need to put masks back on. We are learning to live with a new reality. We are in transition.

This text speaks to us because in some ways we are in the same boat as the disciples. In our church year we are in the period between resurrection and Pentecost. Just as the disciples were not sure what comes next, we don’t know exactly what might come next. We don’t know what turn covid might take, we don’t know the outcome in Ukraine, we don’t know what our next election here might bring. Even here at church we are in a time of transition, as we learn how to be a worshipping community in light of the demands that covid and our times place upon us.

For me personally, that time of transition many years ago taught me that we could talk about difficult things with respect. It taught me that I could hold pain without bitterness. I learned about the cycle of domestic abuse that destroys so many families. I learned how to use the skills I had been taught. I gained new skills. And I rebuilt a relationship with my home church, based not on agreement but on respect and love. And after three years I received a call from the Bethel College Church in North Newton, Kansas. They were looking for an assistant pastor to work with the Christian ed department, and my former debate coach from Bethel had given them my name. I accepted that call and my home church, though leadership there still had issues with women in pastoral roles, supported me with a shower of gifts to help me set up my own home in Kansas.

In our text today, the disciples in the boat are met by a man on the shore. He asks them if they have caught any fish. They tell him, “No.” He tells them to cast the next on the other side of the boat. When they do so, they catch so many fish that they cannot haul the net back into the boat. And they recognize Jesus. Peter jumps overboard in his haste to get to Jesus. When they arrive Jesus offers them breakfast, giving them bread and fish. After they have eaten Jesus takes Peter aside.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ Peter replies, “Yes, Lord. You know that I love you.” Jesus replies, “Feed my lambs.” Then he asks Peter again, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Once again Peter responds, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus answers, “Tend my sheep.” A third time Jesus asks Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter feels hurt, that Jesus has asked again. He replies, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus responds, “Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were young, 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.” Then Jesus gives the command, “Follow me.”

Sometimes translation doesn’t catch the nuances of a conversation. It doesn’t catch the different words for love that Jesus and Peter use. We could explore that, or the differences commentators have discussed about feeding lambs, tending sheep, and feeding sheep. But that is for a different sermon. What I want to emphasize today is that this time of transition leads to a commissioning. In this conversation Peter is forgiven for denying Jesus three times, and he is given work to do. He is given responsibility. He is given a task. He is invited to follow Jesus, not only in life and work but even to the end of his life, when he will follow Jesus to the cross.

What about us? What is our calling in this time of transition? How do we live with pandemic, with turmoil, with division? To live for self is to live in fear; to live for others is a source of hope.

In Jesus’ sermon on the mount in Matthew 5, he teaches, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven.” I grew up in the Texas panhandle, on land so flat that at on a clear night you could see the lights of town twenty or more miles away. I believe Jesus calls us to be that community of light.

As our world comes out of social isolation and division, it desperately needs community. It needs a community of people who care for one other, who truly love one another, who welcome the stranger, who care for the earth. It needs a community of people who live for others instead of for self. It needs a community of people who speak truth instead of lies, who seek justice for others instead of comfort for themselves. It needs a community of people who make peace instead of seeking retribution. It needs a community of people who commit themselves to stop the cycle of violence, who refuse to use coercion, who are willing to face differences and speak truth in love. It needs a community of people who are patient with one another, who are willing to listen instead of speak, who are willing to do what’s right instead of what is easy. It needs a community of people who are willing to suffer when living God’s way puts them in conflict with the powers and systems of this world.

Jesus calls us to be that community of healing and hope that our world so desperately needs. Its not something we can do alone. We work at it together, with each other. We work at it together with other communities also called by Jesus to follow. We work at it as God’s Spirit guides us, moves among us, empowers us, comforts us. Jesus said, “feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep, follow me.” It’s time to get out of the boat and follow.