

April 15, 2012  
The National Presbyterian Church

## Minding Your Own Business

John 1:1-18; John 21:20-25

Dr. David Renwick

Over the last eight months together, my preaching has focused on the story of Jesus as recorded for us in the gospel according to St. John.

As many of you know there are four accounts of Jesus' life and ministry in the pages of Holy Scripture (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), and each of them is distinct. They are like portraits painted by different artists of the same person. They are taken from different angles; different shades of light come on this same person so that we see different facets of Jesus' life.

- If we had one gospel account or view of Jesus, people would say that there has been collusion and corroboration in the account: what's the real truth?
- What we have, however, are four accounts, that don't always fit neatly together – and so people still complain! – this time, that they're not accurate!

I, of course, would argue, that God has chosen the latter course, with four distinct accounts, precisely to avoid the accusation of collusion, and precisely because no single account or portrait could encompass the life and impact of this enormous personality, no less than the Son of God. Through these accounts he continues to come to us and can speak to us to this very day, just as he has done with people from generation to generation. With these accounts we can look repeatedly at the same figure we have seen many times before, and by the illumination of God's Holy Spirit see new and different truths and insights enabling us to join with millions of others throughout history who have sought to honor Jesus faithfully, no matter what day and age they've lived in.

Of all of these four accounts, John's account is the most distinctive. He focuses especially on people whose lives intersect with Jesus' life, whose lives cross path with Jesus' life and their lives are changed by that intersection. Some of these people are rich, some of them are poor, some of them come from the city, some from the country, some are educated, some are not educated, some are powerful, some are powerless, some are male, some are female. They come from all walks of life and John brings them into his story as if to say to you and me, his readers, that he wants to pull us into their stories too, so that we too may find ourselves confronted by this Jesus, meeting with him as these ones met with him while he was here in the flesh, here on earth.

John tells many stories that are similar to stories in the other gospels. But he also tells many that are distinct, and at the end of his gospel in the very last chapter in the very last verse (21:25), and in the closing verses of the second last chapter (20:30-31) he tells us a little about the process of his choice. He says, "You know, there are so many stories of Jesus out there that if I were to tell them all, well, all the books in the world could not contain them." It's a wonderful little vignette, which reminds us that we shouldn't be taken surprise if archeologists digging in the Judean desert find other stories of Jesus! He says it clearly: there are other stories out there, but I've chosen these quite specifically, he says (20:31), because through these stories I don't just want you to know about Jesus, but through these stories I want you to come to believe in him just as I have come to believe in him, that "he is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that in believing you may have life in his name." This is John's passion. This is John's desire: that you and I may meet this Christ, and do so through what he writes, that we may believe in him and find life – the best life, the life of God; life that he calls abundant (10:10), and eternal (3:16). This is what he wants for us – bringing our lives into touch with this Jesus whom he has known and seen, one whom he had met in the flesh.

He has chosen these stories on purpose for you and me. And *it is the fact that John has been purposefully selective that makes his final choice in the very last chapter of the gospel to be so interesting and intriguing . . .* because the final choice of these stories is a story about Jesus meeting his leading follower, Simon Peter, and Peter being "shown up," not with all his goodness, not with all his greatness, not with all his saintliness, but with all his flaws and weaknesses! The very last story is about Jesus and one of his followers who is patently weak and flawed. This is the story that John wants us to remember, the conclusion, the last word, the epilogue: Jesus' relationship with somebody who is obviously flawed.

Now why is this? What in the world is going on here? Let's think just a little bit about this story, our chapter, our scripture reading and where it fits into the story of Jesus and how it too might intersect with your life and mine. Let remind me of the background for our passage in John 21 where Jesus meets his friends, including Peter, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after his resurrection. The event takes place maybe two to three weeks after Jesus' disciples first see Jesus alive again after his death by crucifixion. They have seen Jesus body on the cross, and they have seen him die. And they have seen Jesus alive again in the body after his death and this is dual experience is overwhelming. And as they begin to think about what it all means, they find themselves on an emotional and theological roller coaster, like being way down in a pit and then rising way up high again as they think not only about the significance of Jesus' resurrection, but of his death.

His death! It seems like absolute disaster.

- Jesus has claimed to be the Son of God but he dies, he fails to lead his people to victory, or so it seems to them. Maybe – maybe he’s not the Son of God after all?
- Jesus has performed all these miracles. It seems as if good will triumph over evil, but he dies, for goodness sake – maybe good will not triumph over evil after all?
- “We tried to persuade Jesus not to go to Jerusalem. We told him that if he went there it would be dangerous, that he would be put to death. And he is! He dies! Is his death just another meaningless event in a sequence of meaningless events, painful, suffering events in life? Is that what it’s all about?”

And so his disciples are wrestling with those questions as they watch Jesus die. And then time goes by, not a great deal of time, 36 to 40 hours goes by and there are ones who are down in the pit, down at the bottom of the roller coaster, all of a sudden are whisked up to the top when Jesus rises from the dead . . . and they see him with their eyes! And they’re now having to process it all again.

Asking “What in the world does it mean that Jesus dies and that he rises? What’s the significance of it all?” . . .

- Well maybe this person whose life touched ours really is God’s beloved Son as the voice from heaven declared came at his baptism (Matthew 3:17), the one, the true man?
- Maybe the resurrection is like God’s shout to get our attention? This one is the One who is at the focal point and center of my attention; and God is saying, “Listen to him!”
- Maybe the triumph of the resurrection over the crucifixion means that in the end, even though it doesn’t seem like it at times, good really will triumph over evil.
- Maybe God’s raising Jesus from the dead is God’s affirmation, a deliberate demonstration of God’s power that says, “You know, the end of the story is not bleak but good, and if that is true for this bleak story, then it will surely be true for all of history’s stories.
- Maybe Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is God’s affirmation that when Jesus died his death was not meaningless and insignificant, but it had meaning . . .

And maybe that’s what John the Baptist was trying to say at the beginning of the story (John 1:29) when Jesus comes to him for baptism. John the Baptist looks at Jesus and says “*Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” Maybe this death - - maybe this death really is a sacrificial death for sins and that Jesus really is a “Lamb of God,” one who takes away the sin of the world? So, maybe

the resurrection is God's affirmation that this death is not in vain. A death, perhaps *the* death, a sacrificial death to end all sacrifices, so that no matter what sin we commit, Jesus' bears it in his body on the tree, so that our lives can always be reconciled in God, and serve him from this moment on, knowing that "*Nothing*," as the Apostle Paul would say, "*Nothing ever again can separate us from the love of God made known in Christ Jesus, our lord.*" (Romans 8:28).

So, with Jesus' death, Jesus' disciples rapidly descend emotionally. Their minds begin to swim with the events and significance of all the things that they have seen and heard... and then this new event, the resurrection, rushes into their lives. And as a transition takes place from being down in the valley to being up, as it were, in glory, we surely could imagine those disciples getting together again and saying,

*"Listen, there is one thing we need to do at this moment and that is to stick together as our risen Lord would want us to do. There is one thing we need to do. He is going to rely on us from this moment on and we must be more faithful than ever as his followers, as his servants from this moment on and always."*

You might well expect them to say that "even though we don't understand it all; at the very least as we are dependent on him, he should be able to depend on us." But none of this is to be! None of this is evident in the very last story that John chooses to place within his gospel account! Nothing could be further from the truth.

- We don't find the disciples hanging in together.
- There are eleven left: Judas has betrayed Jesus.
- We find seven of these disciples going off by themselves and we find Simon Peter, the leader of the disciples, the unquestioned leader of the disciples, not only not leading those disciples to be more faithful to Jesus, not leading them forward but leading them backward. They all head off to Galilee (as Jesus told them to do!), where they expect that there they will see him again. But as they go to Galilee they are not, at least, in our story waiting for Jesus patiently and faithfully. That's not what we find. They are back on their home turf, *and instead of waiting* for Jesus faithfully and patiently, instead of moving forward they move backwards. They move back into their home turf. They move back into their comfort zone. They move back to do the things that they have always done. Many of them had been fishermen and Simon Peter says,

*"Let's go fishing! Let's go back! Let's do what we've always done, what we know about, fishing! Let's do it again."*

And even when Jesus does turn up, as he does, on the rocky shore of the Sea of Galilee, Peter doesn't turn to Jesus and say, "*Jesus, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for what I've done. I'm so sorry that you caught us doing the wrong thing.*" Instead, we

find Peter throwing a hissy fit because it seems that Jesus loves one other disciple more than he loves Peter! And Peter is jealous and envious, and he opens his mouth and blurts out something to Jesus, and Jesus more or less tells Peter to get over it .. as if to say, “mind your own business and focus on your own calling” in the days ahead. Let me read some of those verses again, put them back in our minds: (21:1-3)

*After these things, after these initial resurrection appearances of Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias [‘Tiberias’ is another name for the Sea of Galilee] and he showed himself in this way; gathered there together with Simon Peter, Thomas Paul the Twin, Nathaniel, Andrew in Galilee, James and John, the sons of Zebedee and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter says to them, “I’m going fishing,” [and they chime in pretty quickly]: ‘We’re going with you!’ And they went out and got into the boat.*

They all go fishing! And then later, after Jesus turns up, Peter turned and saw the disciple who Jesus loved following them:

*(21:20-23) When Peter saw him he said to Jesus, ‘Lord what about him?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Peter if it’s my will that he remains until I come again, even if this man lives forever what is that to you? You follow me.’ [i.e., You focus on me! Literally, mind your own business and you follow me. That’s the only thing you need to worry about. Focus on me, not on someone else, not on yourself, but on me.]*

And here it is in a nutshell: the reason for John’s choice of this particular story, as his very last word, a story precisely about Peter’s faith~~less~~ness, precisely about his weakness, precisely about his flaws, because Peter’s faith~~less~~ness stands in sharp contrast to Jesus faith~~ful~~ness to Peter’s. Jesus’ persistence, Jesus’ patience stands in sharp contrast to this same Peter who has previously been ashamed of him, running away, fearing the worst, down in the pit. Jesus saying,

*“Peter! It’s you that I want to lead my people. Yes! You! Now get on with it! You mind (take care of!) your own business, the business, the job that I have given to you!*

Let me put it like this. Simon Peter has all the right experiences, amazing spiritual experiences, he’s been given everything. He’s been on the mountain top with Jesus. He’s seen Jesus’ miracles, one after the other. He is among those who set his eyes upon Jesus risen from the dead. He was a leader among his peers. And now he probably even believes the right things that he can check off his list:

1. Jesus is the Son of God. 2. Good will triumph over evil. 3. God has the power to bring meaning and purpose out of suffering. 4. Jesus’ death is the death of a sacrificial lamb for our sins. 5. I know that my sins have been forgiven . . . and so on . .

He’s believes all this! He’s experienced all these things. BUT despite it all, he *still* messes up! He still cannot trust Jesus fully. He still cannot get his life completely together. ***But! Yet!*** Jesus! – Jesus *still wants him*; still wants him as he is, wants him passionately, persistently.

Jesus wants him! And says to him repeatedly "You follow me!" Not just 'Follow me!' But you do it! You are the one that I want. And he adds to that, I don't just want you to *follow*, I want you to *lead* my people. I want you *as the leader of my flock*! Three times Jesus says it;

A reminder to Peter (and Peter gets it) of the three times where he has denied Jesus (18:15ff), Jesus sees straight through him. He knows everything about him and, as it were, takes a dig into Peter just a little bit, causing pain, not willing to allow any sugar coating to obscure the contrast between the grace of the call and fallibility of Peter.

Jesus digs into Peter, telling him three times to feed or tend his flock – as if to say:

*"Lead my people! You're the one I want . . .*

*Even though you keep on putting your foot in your mouth,*

*Even though you get caught up in all these petty issues,*

*Even though you want to retreat rather than move forward.*

*Even though you want to live in your comfort zone rather than where I want you to be.*

*Even though you fled from me in my moment of need.*

*Even though you denied me three times,*

*. . . you are still the one that I want, the one that I call, the one that I need to take over in my place here and now in the flesh, in the body when I and the body am no longer here.*

What a moment! But not just for Peter! Surely, if Jesus was that way with Peter, what I think John wants to say *to each of us* as he concludes this story, is this:

*"That it's true for you my readers as well, whatever generation you live in!*

*If Jesus was this way with Peter, then this is how he wants to be with you. I want you to find your place in this story as well, for this Jesus is as alive today as he was then and calls us - - us to follow him.*

The most influential man in my life (apart from my father) was a man who was deeply flawed! He was my minister when I first came to this country in 1971. His name was Herbert Mekeel. Dr. Mekeel could not remember anybody's name if you paid him. On Sunday mornings he taught a College Sunday School Class of which I was a part. Most Sundays there were maybe ten to twelve students present, and Dr Mekeel could rarely remember our names. He would ask us questions – by name, but as he did so, he might well call us by the wrong name, and if he assigned that name to us at the beginning of the class, then that was our name throughout the rest of the class. Let's say he called me 'Michael'...well other students would mutter to him that my real name was David; but it would make no difference! He would just keep on saying, 'Michael.'

And this was not his only obvious flaw.

Dr Mekeel wasn't the greatest preacher either. He wasn't eloquent, though he was passionate and he was powerful. And he certainly wasn't the

greatest counselor. I mean, it was public knowledge that you never went to him for counseling. The word was out on the street. If you went to Dr. Mekeel for counseling and wanted a sympathetic ear concerning some problem or another, he'd tell you to shape up! Just shape up! Get over it! No sympathy whatsoever.

He was deeply flawed and we all knew it . . . **and we all loved him** **because despite his flaws, and perhaps because of his flaws, he could see beyond our flaws to what God could do within and through our lives.** Over a period of 30 years he challenged countless men and women to think about using their lives for God. People who had looked at other people, compared themselves, like Peter, with other people, and said, "God, surely not me! Look at them! They're better than I am!" And Dr Mekeel would say "No! Shape up! Mind your own business, you follow the path. It's you Jesus wants." And we'd say "What about my flaws?" "Forget it," he'd say, "Jesus wants you!"

He said this to me! He said this to me! And it changed my life. I often looked at other people and said, "I can't go to the ministry, what about them?" "I did my Peter act – "What about them? They're the ones you want, Lord." But he said, "Focus on Jesus." And eventually I did, after I focused on Dr. Mekeel – saying to myself, "Well, Lord, if you can use me as you clearly have called and used this flawed man for your purposes, then maybe I need to listen. Maybe you can use me too!"

This is what God wants to do. This is the one with whose leadership Jesus builds the early church: Simon Peter, flawed, faithless, trust-in-Jesus-a-little Peter! But wanting passionately to trust and love Jesus more. Jesus sees this and picks him up and through Peter builds his church.

In the end, what a glorious choice what a powerful story to leave to the very end of Jesus' story: the story of Jesus faithfulness with Peter and with Peter's trembling, weak, wayward, faithless life. Jesus, the risen Son of God, Jesus the one who dies for our sins, Jesus the one who can bring, as he can, good out of evil, even in our lives, Jesus the one who will never fail us or forsake us . . . is looking for you and me to share his word, tend his sheep, follow him, and promises that he will never fail you or forsake you.

My friends this is the good news of the gospel. Thanks be to God.

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800