

Sermon for the Feast of St. John – John 21:20-25
In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

St. Peter has just received the hard news that he had to hear. The Lord had just shared with him in a mysterious and encrypted way that Peter would die because he was a follower of Jesus. “Follow me,” Jesus said. And this was not the first occasion. “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” This doesn’t sound so bad. But now for Peter and the others, “Follow Me” took on a new meaning. For Peter, “you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”

Today’s Gospel is Peter’s immediate reaction. “Lord, what about this man?” This is a hard load I have to bear. Does everyone have it as rough as I do? Certainly not! What about Johnny boy here? Oh, I have to suffer martyrdom, but he gets to live out his days full of years? How is that fair?

“You follow Me,” Christ said to Peter, and to us. Every Christian follows Christ. Every Christian has a calling to which Christ has called you. You have a path to follow from God. And on this path, God will surely lay a burden upon you. We don’t ask as to what sort of cross it will be, whether it will be one like Peter’s (an earlier death) or John’s (having to persevere into old age). We leave it to God to handle as He pleases. Let Him worry about that for you. What He wants is for you to follow Him, even though that will look differently from person to person. There is only one faith, but the ways in which that faith is applied are manifold. Yet, we don’t choose our own way.

“You follow Me,” Christ said. Peter immediately looks at others. “Lord, what about this man?” He sets his sites on where John stands. Couldn’t I follow his path? It certainly seems true and steady and easier than mine! Peter has a calling from God, but he doesn’t want to follow it.

“Lord, what about this man?” We’ve all asked that same question at some point in our lives. We look at others. We want to put ourselves in their shoes. Why is their life so easy? Oh, if I had their life, I’d be much better off. Or maybe we like to be the armchair quarterback – “That’s what I would do if I was them.” In such a way, we miss out on our own callings from God. We take our eyes off of Christ in order to follow others, when Christ said, “You follow Me.”

You among God’s dear saints here on earth tread in many different paths in the walks and works to which God calls you. If God has called you to marriage serve your spouse as God commands. If God has called you to parenthood, serve your children as God commands. If God has not called you to these walks, your service is free and wide open to your neighbors in need. “You follow Me,” Christ said – attend to your callings.

One of the most neglected parts of Luther’s Small Catechism is a short appendix after the six chief parts called the Table of Duties. In this very useful section, Luther gathers the most pertinent passages of Holy Scripture for Christians to live by and do. Pastors, hold firmly to the message taught to you and encourage sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. Hearers of the Word, respect those who share the Word with you and live in peace with one another. Citizens, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that belong to God. Husbands, love your wife and do lay down your life for her. Wives, submit to your husband as the church

submits to Christ. Parents, bring up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord. Children, obey your parents. Workers, serve your supervisors not as serving men, but as serving God Himself. Employers, show no favoritism as your Superior in Heaven shows none. Young men and women, live in humility with those whom God has placed over you. Widows, put your hope in God who is your only help. And to everyone, love your neighbor as you love yourself.

God places these callings upon each of us. They are important. And yet our salvation depends on yet another calling: your calling as His baptized child. St. John describes this in a peculiar way throughout his Gospel and his final words once again highlight it. He refers to "the disciple whom Jesus loved." To be sure, this reference is in every way autobiographical—St. John speaks of himself, but it's also a reference to all of us loved by God. Faith does not make for itself any name. All other lives have a name, but faith is completely nameless. We can't give it a title. What do I mean by this? When I ask what a Christian is, I can't say he is this or that. I can't say he wears a hat. I can't say he's married. As Paul would say, there is no man or woman, servant or master, Jew or Greek. It's the kind of thing we can't hear or see. All callings in life have a title and names and works and promotion/demotion, but not with faith. God works His mighty work in Holy Baptism and we are complete. You are Christ's beloved disciple, yes, the one whom Jesus loves.

Finally, Sts. Peter and John were both disciples and apostles sent by God. And still, how different their callings were. St. Peter was called to martyrdom. But St. John was not. And truth be told, St. John had no easy path. We know from the Scriptures that he was exiled from his church and people to the deserted island of Patmos. No doubt many other sufferings and persecution attended him in his length of days. Chief among them was seeing every moment of torture that his friend and Lord endured on the cross unto death. What's more, at some point, he would have had to say his final farewell to Christ's mother Mary who was entrusted to his care. The loss of loved ones can be worse than death itself.

"You follow Me," Christ said. But we don't all follow Him alike. And yet, unless Christ returns beforehand, we will all be called to follow Him into death. As scary as this might seem, it's a great comfort. We are united with Christ Jesus so that we follow all the way through and die with Him since He had taken death upon Himself. When God comes and says, "You must die," you will be ready. It's a path that we don't want to walk. But it's a path we don't walk alone.

Christ Himself dreaded His own death as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. "Father, let this cup pass from Me, not as I will, but as You will." It was not possible for the Father to take this suffering and death from His Son. "You follow Me." It was hard for Peter to hear. "You follow Me." It was hard for John to hear. "You follow Me." It's hard for us to hear. Yet is the best for us to hear. For under our weakness is the strength of Christ Himself for our good. He knows what awaits us as One who has experienced it Himself. In death, Christ bears not only our sins, but also our sadness and fear.

So live without fear and as if eternity is yours, because it is. God's love works love in you. Serve your neighbor as Christ's redeemed child, as God has served you. Serve and help your neighbor in his need. Practice what you hear preached. And Jesus said, "You follow Me." Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠