

Good morning, church. What an honor to be with you. As a pastor ordained in the RCA who grew up in the CRC, now is a good time for solidarity with spiritual communities who long to love God, love each other and love our neighbors, even in ways that may cause some to put us on the other side of a line they've drawn.

I am aware of the news from Synod. In this moment, I would like to offer you a short poem I've loved since high school called "Outwitted" by Edwin Markham :

"He drew a circle that shut me out. Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle and took him IN!"

Sounds like a pipe dream with all the division swirling around us. But the poem has always grounded me in the expansive, inclusive love of God shown to us in Jesus. I don't think we get to decide where that ends – it goes on and on in every direction. How could we not expect to be surprised? Not expect to draw the circle wider? Not expect to have our understanding challenged, our hearts stretched, our ways converted?

The disciples have been surprised almost every step of the journey, whether by whom Jesus included, how Jesus re-interpreted Torah, or what abundance Jesus shared. Just before our text today, the risen Jesus has surprised the disciples again, greeting them with a miraculous catch of fish, and breakfast already cooking on the shore. For them. For the deserters. For the deniers. For the beautiful mess of humans they are.

Then Jesus takes a walk with Peter, perhaps the most sincere but impulsive one of them all, and asks this vulnerable question:

Peter, Do you love me? Feed my lambs.

Peter, Do you love me? Tend my sheep.

Peter, Do you love me? Feed my sheep.

It's almost like what's heaviest on Jesus' heart is this: **What about them?** All the people? All the sheep? So Jesus makes a final plea to Peter, not to control his impulsiveness or watch his language but this: "Please, if any have heard my voice, feed them. If they've been drawn to me, protect them. I've done this for you. Do this for them."

Can you imagine being Jesus, having thousands drawn to grace and mercy in your short lifetime, and then having to leave them in these guys hands? In our hands? Lord have mercy.

But God bless 'em, they try. They welcome and gather and tend. The church becomes more diverse than they could have imagined. Communities with entrenched differences some consider “confessional” decide to open the circle wider because it seemed right to them and to the Spirit. Uncomfortable, but right.

And the surprises keep happening. Stories keep getting written. If you skip down to the very last verse of this entire gospel, the writer, who has experienced so much by the time of writing, sounds like a person throwing their hands up in the air at the effort to contain it all. Verse 25: **25There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.**

What about you, __ What about your story? May you trust that you're one of those unwritten books, a story within God's grand story in which each of us belongs. You can consult others, but you're not a carbon copy. You can seek mentors, but don't think your story is only acceptable if it's filled with approved characters and censored outcomes. Nah, as poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote – *Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his – (lovely) to the Father through the features of (their) faces.* If we don't draw the circle wider, we're going to miss so much of the story.

Now for the harder part of this passage, when Jesus shares with Peter the sobering reality of hardship to come. Jesus describes it as stretching out your arms and being led where you do not want to go - a violent end Jesus knew too well. Peter was in fact murdered in 64, and legend has it that the weapon of choice was crucifixion. While it's hard for us to hear, I don't think it surprised Peter. He knew the risks of following Jesus in the face of religious and political leaders intent on squashing this fresh expression of God's good news.

So Peter doesn't have to ask – **What about me?** He knows in his gut. And I imagine that this moment of solidarity with Jesus strengthens Peter in the future, perhaps allowing him to receive threats akin to 'you and your kind aren't welcome here' as affirmation that he was in fact walking the same path as Jesus. I imagine that on the downward path of suffering, Peter would find inner freedom by clinging to the echo of Jesus saying, Follow me. Keep following me.

While it's not likely that confirming the Christian faith today will lead to a violent end for us, let's be honest. As students of both history and present reality, we see how people and systems resist reform. We know that standing up for one's own humanity can and does in fact lead to a violent end for some, and standing up for others can invite real threats to your acceptability, your friend network, your job security, your upward mobility.

On this confirmation day, I encourage this community to believe it's worth it. To listen again for Jesus' "follow me". To ask whom you are called to stand alongside, how you are called to educate yourselves, vote, join or start endeavors that support the poor, the neighbor, and the planet. Keep asking how you might be called to tell the truth, to accept a lower position for a greater cause, or take a higher position for a deeper purpose, to show love to your enemies, or to sacrifice some comfort or security the culture is selling you for the sake of someone else's good.

And if you experience rejection for it, may it be because you have witnessed Christ play in too many places with too much love, too much generosity, too much inclusion.

What about them, what about you, what about me? And finally, what about him, Peter asks, and looks back at the beloved disciple.

The writer tells us this little exchange is included to correct a rumor among the earliest audiences that John wouldn't die at all before he saw Jesus again. But today, I think it's included for other reasons.

"What about him..." is a question we ask sometimes because we don't want to be alone on what we know might be a hard journey.

What about him? Will he come with me?

Other times, "what about her" rises up in us because we are a little afraid others' path will look like a success when ours looks like a failure.

What about her? Why me?

Sometimes we understand the journey may be hard for ourselves, and we're okay with that, but we just wish we could make it easier for them. "What about them?"

What about my child? My friend? My loved one? Will they be okay?

Friends, when you get anxious and you're not sure who will stick with you on this step you're ready to take, let Jesus turn your attention to a deep, spiritual friendship that will never leave you. Follow me.

When you get caught up in the comparison game, whether by your own inner critic or the judgmental voices of others, let Jesus pull your focus back from others, reminding you, "what's that to you? You follow me. You walk your path. You do you, with me."

And when you deeply love someone, and you look back and feel this overwhelming concern, this longing to know that they'll be okay, Mmmm...

How many of you have talked with God in the night hours about – a child, a friend, a sibling – and you desperately wish you could have answers to what you cannot control, what you cannot predict, what you cannot ensure?

Imagine you are Peter turning to see the one you love... and read vs 20 with me...***Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved***

As we stand in both honor of and trepidation for the journeys of those we love, this must be our greatest comfort: they are the disciple whom Jesus loves. If the unnamed disciple in this is each of us, it is also our child, our friend, our sibling, whom Jesus loves. God's got them, from beginning to end. God knows every hair on their head, their deepest thoughts and fears, desires and dreams. They are the image of God, and God will never leave them or forsake them. Though we know not where the path will lead, they, you, we are the disciples whom Jesus loves. Thanks be to God. Amen.