

“Is that your business, Peter?”  
A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
Edmonton, AB  
by Carol Penner  
April 17, 2016  
Text: John 21:15-23 JB Phillips translation

I picture an old, old man sitting at a table. He sits at a table near an open window. He can see the hills of Ephesus through the window. Another person sits with him, a person with vellum and ink. He’s writing. The old, old man, whose name is John, is telling a story, a story about a Saviour, a man named Jesus. The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

John has spent his life telling stories, telling about meeting Jesus by the sea, the years they spent together, the healings, the miracles, the teaching. The terrible days when Jesus was crucified, and then about his rising from the dead, his appearances.

John has been sitting in this chair, at this table, telling the story for days, weeks perhaps, trying to get it all down. He’s been asked to have this story written down, and for a long time he resisted. He has read the other accounts of Jesus’ life circulating in the churches, all good accounts.

But at the urging of his friends, he finally relented, and he’s telling the story in his own words. And now he’s at the place in the story where the risen Christ is having a conversation with them. John recalls fishing all night, seeing the man on the beach, recognizing him as Jesus, and Peter, first in everything, jumping into the water to get to the Lord.

And then the conversation, where Jesus asks Peter, “Simon, do you love me?” Peter professing his love, and then being told those hard words, “I tell you truly, Peter...when you are an old man, you are going to stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and take you where you do not want to go.”

As the companion at the table writes down these words, John gazes out the window, remembering where he was when he got the news about Peter’s death by crucifixion, during the persecution in Rome. He remembers the other stories he heard, about his own brother James being killed by Herod, about Matthew, Thomas, Philip, Andrew: crucified, clubbed, stabbed, burnt. One by one, all killed, all for their faith in Jesus.

Year by year, the company of disciples getting smaller, and now, if all the stories he has heard are true, he is the last, the last remaining apostle.

“What happens next?” the person at the table asks him, quill poised to write.

“Next? Peter looked at Jesus, and then Jesus said, ‘You must follow me.’ You must follow me. Those long ago words, those words first spoken at the seaside to fishermen with nets in their hands.

And then Peter looked at John and asked the Lord, “But what about him?”

And Jesus saying, “If it is my wish for him to stay until I come, is that your business, Peter? You must follow me.”

John looks out the window as he says those words “Stay until I come.” John had stayed, he had waited. There were many times he thought death would take him. He was tortured in Rome, but somehow he survived. And then he was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he spent long years receiving a revelation from God. And then he returned at long last, here to Ephesus, to dwell with friends, to nurture the church with his memories, his wisdom.

What do you think it was like for John to be the last of the apostles alive? Why did he survive? All the other disciples, traditions tell us, were martyred. John alone lived to very old age, and died a natural death, surrounded by his friends in the church in Ephesus. Each disciple heeded the call, “You must follow me.” But each one had a different path.

What motivated Peter to ask, “What about him?” Some readers of this passage think it was competition, as in “If I die, does he die too?” John and Peter were so often together, it’s John and Peter who go to the high priest’s house, to see Jesus in chains the night before he died. It’s John and Peter who go to the tomb together after the news from the women. John outruns Peter, but Peter goes in first. Or even that morning on the boat; it’s John who recognizes Jesus, but it’s Peter who jumps in the water to get to him first. Is Peter wondering, “Do we have an equal share in the suffering? Will our discipleship journeys be fair?”

But maybe the motivation is quite different. Peter and John have been through so much together...they were the ones with Jesus when he raised Jairus’ daughter, they were the ones on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured before them. Maybe Peter is worried, “What will happen to my good friend, surely he won’t suffer too will he?”

No matter what motivated the question, Jesus’ answer still stands, “What business is it of yours Peter? You must follow me.” Comparing won’t help you. You must follow me.

I think the fact that John remembered this conversation, signals that it was important to him. He had lots of time, the most time, to reflect on the fact that each of the disciples was called to follow in a different way. His call was to remain...to be a long-lived last-remaining-witness to Jesus. He had to wait the longest to see Jesus again. That was his journey. You must follow me.

This warning against comparisons was wisdom that John remembered, that he needed to hear at the end of his life. How would these wise words from John's memory become important in the early church? The persecution that the first disciples faced was just the first wave of persecution. Two hundred years later, in the early 300s, the Roman emperor Diocletian wanted to end the Christian religion. He issued edicts that forbade Christians from gathering for worship. Churches were to be burnt down, and scriptures destroyed. A few years later, Diocletian added to that persecution by issuing an edict that all leaders in the Christian church were to be arrested.

Eusebius, a Christian historian of that time, wrote that prisons were soon filled to capacity with bishops, priests and deacons, so much so that there was no room for ordinary criminals in the jails. A few months later Diocletian decreed that these imprisoned church leaders were to be set free as soon as they had made a sacrifice to the Roman gods.

Some church leaders refused to sacrifice. They were brutally murdered in horrible ways. You must follow me. They were remembered as martyrs.

But some church leaders chose to make a sacrifice to the gods. Perhaps they were afraid of torture, or perhaps they compromised in order to return to their churches that were badly in need of leadership. They were given a certificate saying they had sacrificed, so they would not be arrested again. What did the local congregation do when their minister returned to them with a certificate saying he had sacrificed to the gods?

But it got even more complicated. Some church leaders refused to sacrifice to the gods, but were given a certificate saying they had sacrificed, and were set free. Maybe jail wardens simply wanted space in their jails, or perhaps they were friends with the jailed Christians and wanted to do them a favour. So they hadn't sacrificed, yet the certificate said they had, the certificate kept them free. Other church leaders were dragged to an altar by force and people moved their hands to make the sacrifice, and they were given a certificate too. But they had sacrificed against their will. What did the church do with these people?

I can imagine this little passage of scripture from John 21 becoming very important in the church. The question, "But what about him?" that Peter asks would have been on the lips of so many, as they looked around their congregations in the early 300s. Two people went to prison; your loved one died because they would not sacrifice, and yet here is the other person they were arrested with, back in the church, living their life like normal. They had a certificate protecting them. What about him? It's hard not to make comparisons. Today churches are dividing over issues of sexuality, in the 300s they were dividing over how to treat these people released from Roman prisons. What do you do with people who escaped death, who carried these certificates? Some leaders in the church believed they should be welcomed

back, others said they should be shunned. And then there were all the people who were in gray areas.

John 21 contains Jesus' words warning us against making comparisons. What business is it of yours? You must follow me.

This passage of scripture is so poignant for me, as I think about what church community is about. We all walk such different roads as we follow Jesus, and yet we come and worship in the same church.

I remember Sue, a woman my age from my church community, who was in a terrible car crash. She became a quadriplegic. Sue told me about a conversation she had with a dear aunt of hers. Her aunt said to her, "It's like we were walking on the same road. But I went to sleep, and when I woke up, you were on a different road, you were on the other side of a deep, deep valley that I cannot cross. Our lives are so different now, I can't walk the path that you walk." Sue said that it was true, none of her family could truly understand what her journey was about. It was her own journey. She wasn't sure why God had kept her alive, or what her purpose was on earth, but she knew that she wanted to be faithful, to be a follower of Jesus in the time that remained to her.

I remember going home from that visit very shaken. Sue and I had both been baptized as teenagers, we worshipped in the same church. But her discipleship road was like one uphill mountainous climb. I was the one asking, "But what about her?" And Jesus' reply is, "You must follow me."

Or I remember one of my friends going through one of the happiest times of her life. She had a new baby and was so in love with him. She was enjoying taking her baby out and sharing him with her friends and family, everyone delighting in this beautiful fresh new gift from God. And yet there was a couple in her church who had been unable to conceive, who had been going through fertility treatments with no success at all. And my friend was conscious of this couple as she stood and dedicated her baby, knowing that this couple was in the congregation. "But what about them?" "You must follow me."

Or I think of another couple I knew. They fell in love, got married, like many people. But their marriage was hard, they had persistent, difficult, longstanding conflicts. Neither of them was abusive, but they just struggled to get along. Bitter angry fights that took so long to recover from. It was such hard work. They looked at the married couples around them in church, who enjoyed each other's company, while they spent so much time managing their tenseness with each other. They heard Jesus calling them, "Is that your business? You must follow me"

This week I read a story on the internet of Lauren, a Mennonite woman who was sexually abused numerous times...by boys in her youth group, and then by a trusted person in her church, a Sunday school teacher, who later became a vice-president of

a Mennonite college in the United States. <http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/now-free-2/> In her story, she describes how much she blamed herself, hated herself, thought she was unlovable. Her journey with God involves confronting the fact that she was abused, that she did not deserve it. She is on a long journey of healing, which involves naming the truth, and bringing it to light. Demanding justice. She finds herself on the edge of the church, cautious about trusting anyone, even God.

I think of the kind men in my church who encouraged me on my Christian walk. How would my discipleship journey have changed if one of the men had sexually abused me when I was young and impressionable? But they were all kind, all helpful, all encouraging. And I think of Lauren. "What about her?" The arena of Christian life is not a level playing field. "You must follow me."

The disparities of that playing field were highlighted this week in our Tuesday morning discussion group when Kae Neufeld shared about her recent trip to Rwanda. She told of women whose lives have been massively impacted by genocide, by sexual violence, by poverty. The theology they need to get through their lives seems different than the theology we learn here in Canada. "You must follow me." How does that play out differently depending what continent you are born in?

This scripture passage meets the church where it's at, in all its diversity.

What does this scripture mean for us at Lendrum? I think we are like Peter, we often ask the question, "What about him? What about her?" I think it is very human to compare. From the time we are very young, we are tuned to fairness. We want everyone to treat us fairly. But we are not all the same, our lives are not the same, the challenges we face are not the same.

In our congregation, we need to love each other equally, but that does not mean treating each other equally. Some people need extra help. The most vulnerable among us need extra care. Our natural inclination to compare can be a tool that helps us figure out how to act. Will you find yourself comparing your life with others in your church this week, and will that prompt you to reach out with compassion?

At the very same time, comparisons are dangerous. When you start to compare, it's very easy, especially when you are in a hard place, to be jealous. To ask Peter's question, "What about them?" To dwell on the question, "Why is their life so easy?"

Here in our congregation we have such different journeys that we are on. Some face health, some face sickness. Some face long life, some face grief because people were taken away too soon. Some face employment, some face unemployment. Some face loneliness, some have loved ones surrounding them. Some live with mental illness, wrestling with despair every day, and others have sunny dispositions, because those are the genes they were given. Will you find yourself this week making comparisons

that leave you feeling unhappy, unblessed, or dissatisfied with the road that you are walking?

God calls us to be the church, to worship together. We notice what is happening to our brothers and sisters here, we respond with compassion. At the same time, each of us must resist the temptation to compare, to be jealous, and instead focus on the call that Jesus delivers to each of us, every day, "You must follow me." What does that mean for you? How will we respond to that call?

I want to close today with some lines from a poem. It's a poem by John Milton, who lived in the 1600s. Milton was one of the most talented poets of his generation. He had a towering talent, writing in English, Latin, Greek and Italian. Yet while still a young man, he completely lost his vision. He wondered what his purpose would be in the kingdom of God now that he had lost his sight. As I read it I'd like you to think about the apostle John sitting there by that window, remembering all his friends who had died long ago for their faith, wondering why he alone remained.

"God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
They also serve who only stand and wait."