

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Mourning, Mystery, Mission: Follow Me”
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Psalm 1, John 21:1-19

“I’m just blessed – I can’t explain it right now.” Those were the words of Malcolm Butler, cornerback for the New England Patriots after his win-clinching interception in this year’s Super Bowl. In interviews after the big game, Butler declared his belief in God, saying he had been praying all week and had a vision that he would make a big play. This miraculous catch for a man who just a few years ago was working in a fast food restaurant was not just a game-changer, but a life-changer.

The rookie defensive player is now a sports-world superstar, gracing the cover of magazines, gobbling up endorsements, negotiating for a higher salary. He’s suddenly got more fame and fortune than he can handle, admitting to one news source that “being in the spotlight does take a toll on you.”

But doesn’t this just affirm the words of the very first Psalm, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked...in all that they do, they prosper...the LORD watches over the way of the righteous.” Through prayer and faithfulness, Malcolm Butler was blessed with a miraculous catch.

Just like those disciples. They followed Jesus and did what they were supposed to do, and here at the end of the gospel of John, they, too, are blessed with a miraculous catch...of fish, of course.

Our church has been blessed, too, with a kind of miraculous catch. Today as we confirm 11 young people into the membership of our church, we are blessed with their gifts and energy and faith and joy. Just like Malcolm Butler, and just like those disciples, we must be doing something right.

Because that’s how Christianity works, right? You do the right thing – you believe in Jesus, you trust in him – and good things happen to you – like a miraculous catch. This gospel of prosperity fills football stadiums with believers and is broadcast internationally.

But this isn’t the gospel shared by our Confirmation students in their faith statements. They talked about Christianity as service to others and being together in community. They spoke of Christianity as a personal identity, a way of love and hope, and a path to forgiveness, grace, and affirmation. The Confirmands also described their faith as a means of breaking down the wall between God and humankind, as a source of strength and support in challenging times, and lens for seeing our challenges as opportunities for God to make us better people and the world a better place. Not one of them mentioned being good so that God would bless them.

And that’s why I know God is doing something right. Because our culture would tell these young people, and all of us, that we must pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, that “God helps those who help themselves,” that faith is between you and God, that God blesses us for our efforts, and these young people have resisted those ideas. They’ve heard a different message about Christianity.

And I think they got it right.

Because the disciples were not blessed with a miraculous catch because they followed Jesus and did what they were supposed to do. In fact, they were acting like total slackers. Let's start with Peter, the ringleader, the one who is supposed to be the rock upon which Christ will build his church. He is the one who, after Jesus was arrested, denied knowing him three times. And is he on his knees, asking for forgiveness? Is he rejoicing in the resurrection? Leading the disciples out to spread the good news? Doing good works in the name of Jesus? No, Peter decides to go fishing. He doesn't even invite the others to come. He just says, "I'm going fishing. I'm going right back to where I came from. I'm going to pretend nothing has happened and nothing has changed."

And the rest of the disciples follow along. They listen to Peter's terrible suggestion and fish all night long and don't catch a thing. Their faith is completely bankrupt. And this is right after the resurrection, people! What is going on?

I'll tell you what's going on – the disciples are dumbfounded, and probably a little terrified. They have, for the most part, been pretty awful disciples. Not a one of them understands what's been going on from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. None of them did a great job of standing by Jesus through his crucifixion. And they all find the resurrection entirely incomprehensible. These are not the "righteous" ones blessed by God in the first Psalm. These are men who are completely lost and overwhelmed and have no idea what to do next.

And after their fruitless all-night fishing adventure, we can't even give the disciples credit for listening to Jesus and casting their net on the other side of the boat. Because they had no idea that the man whose instructions they were following was Jesus. As far as they are concerned, Jesus could have been an expert fisherman or just some guy on the shore trying to mess with them after a long night. "Throw your net over there! Now throw it over there! Now haul it in the boat and wrap yourselves up in it!" They didn't know who he is. They weren't trying to follow Jesus and do the right thing. They were humoring this guy. Why not? They've been out fishing ALL NIGHT LONG. There are no more fish on one side of the boat than on the other. But if this stranger on the beach wants to watch them throw their net out one more time, fine.

After their net is filled with fish, one of the disciples recognizes Jesus, and one of the disciples responds by jumping out of the boat and swimming to him. If you're doing the math, that's two out of seven who are in any way faithful to Jesus. But they all get to split 153 fish.

And if this grace wasn't enough, Jesus then takes Peter aside and asks him three times if he loves him. Now, this may not seem like grace, but think about it. Peter denied Jesus three times after his arrest. That would leave a person with a fair burden of guilt to carry around, especially if that person died shortly after the betrayal. But imagine if that person then came back to life, and you actually had to face up to them. Now that's a whole other level of guilt.

But here on the beach, Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to bring his dark secret out into the open and transform his denial into a declaration of love. This is even better than forgiveness. Peter doesn't say, "I'm sorry," and Jesus says, "it's okay, no big deal." Jesus gives Peter the chance to say what he's wanted to say since he heard the cock crow on that fateful morning. He gets to say, "I love you. I love you. I love you." That is grace.

Our Confirmands expressed experiences of this grace, too. They shared how they see God transforming hurtful behaviors in themselves and others. They have felt God's love through their family and Covenant Partners and

classmates on this Confirmation journey. They have articulated a theology of God's activity in Jesus Christ making a way for sinful humanity to say, "I love you, God, more than anything."

And in those words of love is a commitment to love and care for others. "Feed my sheep," says Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to Peter. Our Confirmation class fed people experiencing homelessness in Chicago, taught Sunday school for younger children, and shared their faith with their friends. They have loved and cared for pets, and seen in that experience a metaphor for God's love for humanity. They have cared for the earth and befriended those in need of a friend. They are feeding God's sheep, physically and spiritually. They are those ones the first Psalm refers to when it says that "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither." They are producing fruit. They are feeding sheep.

At the end of this story, Jesus predicts that Peter will suffer and die to glorify God. For those who would believe that Christianity is about being good and getting blessed for it, this is bad news. Christianity, at its core, is dangerous. It recognizes a higher authority than any earthly authority, which tends to make earthly authorities uneasy. It challenges comfortable systems of oppression. It doesn't conform to social norms of acquisition, achievement, and appearance.

Who in their right mind would want to join this movement? You don't get credit for being good, and bad things happen to you anyway. Sounds like a party.

And here we have eleven 8th and 9th graders ready to sign up for this. Why? Because they are no strangers to suffering. They have experienced divorce and death, betrayal and broken hearts. They have been let down and disappointed, and they've messed up and fallen down. They have even stood out in the freezing cold waiting for a bus, and they have gotten totally lost on rerouted L trains.

And so they know that God is with them in their suffering, just as Jesus was with the clueless disciples, standing on the beach, guiding and directing them, even before they knew it. They know that suffering is part of life, but that it doesn't have to define your life. A life defined by grace and love and service is a life that is blessed, no matter what we do, no matter what happens to us.

The last thing Jesus says to Peter in this story is "follow me." We know Peter can't physically follow him much longer as Jesus ascends into heaven shortly after this episode. Jesus' invitation is to follow his way, his ministry, his movement. It's an invitation to suffering and sacrifice, and an invitation to miraculous catches and life out of death. It's an invitation to love and service and grace and peace.

I am grateful today for a miraculous catch, for a group of young people willing to follow the way of God's love in Jesus Christ. We are blessed, not because of our goodness or righteousness, but because of God's grace. We're just blessed. Amen.