

“Disciple” is a word we don’t use too often. “Disciple” makes us think of the Bible and religion. Jesus had disciples. A more normal sounding word for the same thing would be “student.” A student learns from a teacher. Christians are students of Jesus. Another word is “follower.” Many people are followers of certain health or business gurus. The idea is that if you follow these people’s way of life you will be successful.

Thinking about these other ways to understand the word “disciple” can be helpful for what it means to be a Christian. Christians believe that they will be blessed—which is to say, happy—by being students and followers of Jesus. Jesus teaches many things. He speaks promises to be believed in. Anyone who wishes to be his disciple should learn and believe these things.

But being a disciple of Jesus is hard. Sometimes his commands are extremely demanding, seemingly impossible. Jesus said on different occasions: “**Love your enemies. Sell your possessions and give to those who have need. Help the stranger whom you happen to meet by the roadside.**” Jesus’s commands often require sacrifice and suffering. According to our reason, that seems like it must necessarily decrease our quality of life. Whether it really does is another question.

And his promises? Here’s an example of one of his promises: “**In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.**” That sounds nice, but when disappointments, suffering, and sadness come along, it can be hard to believe that Jesus has overcome the world. It can seem as though being his disciple is not worth it.

Many Christians give up. Some do so secretly; others, more openly. Some go through the motions, perhaps attending church even regularly, but inwardly they have ceased being a student and follower of Jesus. Others give up openly, no longer concerning themselves with outward appearances. But whether the outward appearances are kept up or not doesn’t really matter. What matters is the faith within. Are we still a student and follower of Jesus?

This brings us to what we heard in our Gospel reading. Our reading this week immediately follows what you heard last week. Last week you heard about the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples in the upper room, saying “**Peace be with you,**” and sending them on his mission to forgive and retain sins. Our reading comes right after that.

As you heard, Peter decided to go fishing, but this was not like the fishing we might do at Lake Sisseton. Peter went back to his old job. He and his friends toiled all night and caught nothing. This is reminiscent of the time when Peter was first called to be a follower of Jesus. Perhaps you remember that story. Years before this, Peter and his associates had worked all night and caught nothing. The next day Jesus told them to put down their nets into the deep. They caught so many fish that their nets were breaking and their boats were sinking. At the end of that story Jesus said to Peter: “**Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men instead of fish.**” Peter then left everything and followed Jesus.

But in our reading today, a few years later and a few weeks after the resurrection, Peter went back to catching fish instead of men. What is going on here? Different people have different thoughts. Some people believe that Peter essentially quit being an apostle and went back to his old livelihood. Others do

not think it is so drastic. He still believed but was troubled and confused. However you look at it, it's clear that Peter was struggling to be Jesus's disciple. His former belief that happiness and blessing comes from being a student and follower of Jesus was not as clear to him at that time as it had been at other times. He appears to have been believing he would be better blessed by catching many fish.

As you heard, though, that changed in a wonderful way. When Peter realized that it was the resurrected Jesus who was standing on the seashore he jumped into the water and swam. Peter wanted to be with Jesus. Regardless of whatever else might have been going on in his mind and soul, he knew that. He wanted to be with Jesus.

This is a simple way to describe our hope as Christians. We want to be with Jesus because he will set all things right. Now we have trouble. Now it is hard to be a disciple because our faith is so weak. But the main thing is to be with him.

I'm sure Peter was glad to be with Jesus, but as you heard, Jesus didn't leave Peter to his own thoughts and beliefs about how life should go. Jesus taught him yet again—even to the point of producing pain. Three times Jesus asked him: "Do you love me?" To which Peter said, "Yes." Then Jesus said "Take care of my sheep." Life is not just for the purpose of having fun. More important and eternal things are involved. Then Jesus made a prophecy: Peter would die for his witnessing to Jesus. His hands would be stretched out, someone else would dress him, and take him to a place he did not want to go.

This shows us, again, that even after being received and loved by Jesus, being his disciple is hard. Sometimes Jesus's disciples do not love Jesus as much as they think they love Jesus. Sometimes Jesus's disciples stumble and fall into terrible sins. Sometimes Jesus's disciples become deaf to his commands and promises. If this kind of thing could happen to Peter, then it could happen to any of us.

But then we should also apply Peter's restoration to ourselves as well. Jesus does not stand by the seashore any longer because he reigns and rules at the right hand of God, but what is truly important and life giving are his commands and promises. Those remain. You can become a student again. You can become a follower again. You can renew and confirm your belief that you will be better blessed with Jesus than you could be in any other way.

If you believe that, then be encouraged. Maybe you've stumbled and fallen. Maybe you've completely embarrassed yourself like Peter did. Get back up again. Jesus forgives you just like he forgave him.

Then, also, as Jesus said to Peter: "Love Jesus." Don't just take that for granted, assuming that, of course, you have loved him. You go to church, don't you? Also, as Jesus said: "Take care of his sheep." Do your part to help your fellow Christians and those who would be Christians. Help them be students and followers of Jesus, just as others have helped you.

If you do these things then you too will be fishers of men, being helpful even unto eternal life. Also you may be assured that, come what may, things will turn out for the good. Even if you should be crucified upside down like Peter was, so be it. Jesus will be with you and you will be with Jesus. To be with him is peace.