Extraordinary Self

John 21: 2-23

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When I was diagnosed with cancer in January and had to leave my full time teaching job on medical leave, many people asked, “What are you going to *do*?” Knowing that I usually work a full time and a part time job, serve on various boards and committees, go to the gym three or more days a week, and find other ways to keep myself occupied and moving, some folks were worried about the idea of me sitting around, “having cancer”. Me too! But I decided at the outset that if I couldn’t teach and work with students then my “job” would be self-care. I’ve seen my primary occupation to be “wellness” in these days and months since. (And, quite frankly, many were pleased to know I would continue to work with *this congregation:* they were concerned that without you, I just might go crazy without something and someone to think about!)

Focusing on our own well-being, self-care, is not something that gets a lot of support in our general society today. Our communal values, reflected in things like television shows and advertisements, even popular music lyrics, reflect a society that is competitive, envious, and driven in order to be better than, richer than, smarter than the rest. It cultivates an environment where folks are afraid to take days off, to see doctors, to say “no” to work and “yes” to time with family and friends. We are compelled to keep working, keep pushing, keep achieving because we are told that’s the only way to “get ahead”, to “add value”, to “be an asset” to our company, our community, and to the world. But I want to suggest to you this morning that in order for us to become more like Christ, we need to discover a different self of values in regards to our own health and well being. The scripture text this morning points to the starting point and Jesus’ life on earth itself gives us the example by which to live.

Our scripture this morning is a little used set of verses that come at the end of John’s Gospel. In the beginning of the chapter Jesus has joined the disciples after his resurrection while they were fishing on the Sea of Tiberias. After a long night without a catch, Jesus appears on the beach, redirects their fruitless efforts and their nets come up full! Coming ashore, they join Jesus on the beach where he cooks them breakfast and then has an extended conversation with Peter about his new responsibility as one who will “feed my sheep”. Here Peter affirms his love for Jesus and Jesus entrusts him with leadership. Which brings us to the passage we read this morning: full of this brand new endorsement, Peter draws Jesus aside, and pointing to John, says to Jesus, “What about him?”

Peter, having been redeemed from his own betrayal, vested with this new role within the group, immediately looks at John and wonders, “what’s his cut in this?” Peter knows that John seems special to Jesus and so it appears that he is worried, perhaps skeptical, perhaps envious, perhaps untrusting of Jesus’ confidence in him: what about the competition, Peter wonders. Is he in on this? Will I have his support? How do I compare to John?

Peter responds with the same fear and envy and wariness that our own cultural has taught us. What do we need to do to keep up with the rest? To be secure in the pack? To avoid being over shadowed, over taken by another, even a friend? Jesus’ response is very clear: “What is it to you? Follow me!”   
 What difference does he matter to you, Peter? Jesus says to him. Mind your own business! Take care of your own house! Your focus should be on following me, which alone will be enough of a challenge for anyone! “What is it to you? Follow me!” These are the words of Jesus for Peter, but also for us.

For you see, when we look at Jesus’ life, we can see what it means to not just follow him, but to become more like him. We can see that he stayed focused on who and what he was meant to be and do, and that he was intentional about the ways he took care of himself so that he could fulfill God’s mission for his time on earth. Fr. John McKinnon, an Australian Roman Catholic priest, put it in context for us this way: “…the faithful following of Jesus leads to the release of the true self, the self created in the image of God….” Last week I invited you to remember where you came from: you come from the image of God! The closer we come to Jesus’ desires, the more we become like Christ. Our lives become not a reflection of our society’s values but rather become examples of our commitment to love, justice, compassion and peace, beginning with how we treat ourselves.

Don’t worry about what others do and think, Jesus says to Peter, to us; “follow me!” In order to do that, we need to remember what Jesus did exactly to ensure *he* was completely available to the will and way of God. Jesus was the best at self-care! He consistently attended to his own basic needs: throughout the gospels we see him eating and sleeping regularly, and he walked wherever he went! Some of us thing it’s noble to skip meals because we are “too busy”; some of us are proud that we only get a few hours of sleep. But in reality when we compromise our body’s ability to function at its best, we are cheating ourselves and God. How more like Christ we will be if we can honor our body’s need for refreshment, knowing in doing so we are serving God.

Jesus sought the company of friends; no lone ranger here, Jesus surrounded himself not only with the companionship of the disciples, who must have been frustrating at times, but also with the company of others he knew and met along the way. Becoming more like Christ includes cultivating the support and encouragement of others who share the journey and bear the load.

Jesus stayed focused! Many of us are seduced into thinking that multi-tasking has advantages; I know, because I think I am pretty good at it myself. But studies show that in reality our brains can only do one thing well at a time; the other things we think we are doing well really aren’t being given our best attention when we do them alongside something else. Jesus’ focus was one place, one person, one problem at a time. Even he couldn’t be in two places at the same time!

Jesus’ pace of life gave meaning to what he did and said. Sure, he lived in what we consider a “simpler time” but really, is having to grow you own food, raise for your own meat, draw your own water, and walk to wherever you need to go really “simpler”? We don’t see Jesus hurrying, rather we see him linger, hanging out. The control we exercise over the pace of our own lives can reflect our desire to be present to the people and tasks God calls us to.

And finally, Jesus cares for himself by letting go of the outcomes. Here’s where it gets tricky for many of us, myself included. Jesus prays and lets go, entrusting everything to God. The most dramatic example is in the garden: “Not my will but yours”. We become more like Christ when we can do what we’re called to do, say what we’re called to say, be who we’re meant to be and then let God use it all. I can endure my cancer treatment but I can’t change the outcome. I can offer welcome but can’t make another come in. I can speak and act for justice and invite others to join me, but I cannot single-handedly change the world. That does not make me powerless; it makes me responsible to do what I can where I can, and then trust the outcome to God.

What does it matter what other people do or say, Jesus says to Peter. What matters is what *you* do: follow me. Follow my example by living like me so that you can become more like me. By caring for yourself so you are available to care for others. By loving yourself so you are free to love others. By forgiving yourself so you can forgive others. By cultivating your spirit so that the Spirit of God can work through you.

We are created in the image, after the likeness, of God. You are an extraordinary self! Your job is to love that self, care for that self, rest and nourish and bring joy to that self, to focus on your own wellness, just as Jesus did, so that you can be available to love and serve God.

Remember what they always say on the airplane: secure your own oxygen mask first before helping another. Care for your own body, your own mind, your own spirit *first.* It’s not selfish; it’s Christ-like. Only then are you prepared to offer redemption to the world.