

We were here only a couple of weeks ago—or at least, *almost* here. We listened in on John's story of Jesus' encounter with the disciples and then with Thomas in the upper room and took notice of the conclusion to John's Gospel: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe . . . and have life in his name." But today, here we are again, moving from John's concluding chapter to his final chapter. How could that be? More important, *why* this epilogue apparently added some time later? Good explanations for the continuation are out there. This footnote, it is agreed, puts Jesus back with the disciples in Galilee as other Gospel accounts do; and it also seeks to spell out the relationship between Simon Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (traditionally John), which apparently had become a problem in the early Christian community. (Remember the question with which the disciples themselves wrestled: "Who's the greatest?" Well, the disciples of the disciples (think *students*) wrestled with the same question later; and the postscript puts the question to rest. "You're arguing about who's on top?" Jesus asks in surprise. "You want to know whether John will undergo martyrdom like Peter [he didn't]. What is that to you? Follow me!" *That* is where the focus should be.)

If the previous chapter of John provides closure to his Gospel, the last chapter, Thomas Long says, provides *anti-closure*. Directed to early Christians more than a generation removed from Jesus' earthly ministry, it challenges indecision and divisions which seem to be plaguing them. More than any other Gospel, John addresses questions of how Jesus' followers will live in his absence. Throughout the Gospel Jesus addresses issues besetting believers at the end of the century and beyond. Remember his passionate prayer "that they may be one"? It is a part of the longest speech placed on Jesus' lips—his Farewell Address. Occupying a fifth of John's Gospel (chapters 13-17), his farewell message gives counsel on issues his church will confront as it faces into the future. As John draws to an end this second time, the story of Jesus, he is wanting to say, is not coming to an end. Rather than a conclusion, his final story becomes a prelude—a prelude to Jesus' continuing life in and through his church.

Rather than becoming caught up in debates about the nature of Jesus' resurrection, rather than insisting that it must be interpreted in one way and in one way only, the question becomes what does it mean in the continuing life of his church? And that is not a question just for the first century. It is a question for every century, including our own.

The life of the Christian community springs from abundance. The disciples have fished all night and caught nothing, and then "just after daybreak," the in-break of light and hope. Sound familiar? Jesus comes and instructs them to cast their net again, and they draw in a net almost bursting with abundance. The story is reminiscent of the hymn with which John opens his Gospel, celebrating the Light coming into the world dispelling the darkness and empowering all who respond the power to become children of God. "From his fullness," John exudes, "we have all received, grace upon grace." He goes on to show Jesus initiating his ministry in such abundance—turning water into wine—a *lot* of wine—140 gallons of wine(!) and later feeding the 5,000 and ending up with more than double the amount left over that he had when he began. We can quibble about historicity of the events depicted or accepting them as parables, turn to the question of meaning. Life in the presence of Jesus, John is saying to the early church and to us, is not a hand-to-mouth existence, as if we must worry about whether there is enough grace to go around. Life in the presence of Jesus, life serving Jesus, is about overflowing abundance. We do not have to worry about walking in lockstep or wearing a theological uniform. It is about living from grace and toward grace and sharing that grace with one another and the world that God loves.

The story of the Christian community is the story of love—God's love and our love. Following their massive catch, Jesus calls the disciples to break bread and fish with him. The last time, you will remember, John depicts Peter before a charcoal fire, it is in the high priest's courtyard where Peter denies Jesus three times. Fittingly, then, John depicts Jesus three times asking Peter, "Do you love me?" And three times following up on Peter's affirmation of his love, Jesus commissions him, "Feed my sheep." Peter's commissioning, we should not miss, comes couched in Peter's confession of love. John is giving the church of the first and twenty-first centuries a pertinent reminder: Our service, our following Christ, our being Christ's church begins in love and lives itself out in love. Just as John has proclaimed that God's love was incarnate (in-fleshed) in Jesus, he reminds those of us who would assume the work of Christ's church are to be an incarnation of that love. If you want a test for an authentic church, this is it. It is about

our love for one another. “Christ is present to us,” Dominican priest Herbert McCabe insists, “insofar as we are present to each other.” And it is about our love and service for others. God became flesh, Mennonite pastor Isaac Villegas says, “to get as close to us as possible, to be with us. And we find ourselves within God’s life when we are drawn into the lives of others, friends and strangers, neighbors across the street or across an ocean” [*Christian Century*, April 15, 2015, 19] . If we would be diligent about being Christ’s church, we will be diligent in love.

The bond of Christian community is the bond of covenant. “Believing that we have been called of God to gather this community of grace,” our Grace Covenant begins, “we are members of this body of Christ by the bond of covenant—our solemn commitment to God and to one another.” Our commitment is dual. It is about who we have encountered God in Christ to be, and our corresponding commitment to live out that love in relationship to one another and to the world that God loves. Pastor Villegas shares a story about his visit with a member of his congregation who had suffered a serious stroke. With halting speech, the man told him about numerous visits from members of his congregation. Several had brought their hymnals and sung with him. Another had brought his fiddle and played Appalachian tunes. Several had stopped by on lunch breaks or on their way home. “When they are with me,” the man told his pastor, “I know God is with me.”

“We will be priests to one another, ordained by our baptism to the work of a caring ministry,” we promise in our covenant. As was the case with Jesus’ disciples along the seashore in the early morning of the church, there is no reassurance of life without uncertainties and trials. There is, however, the promise and the commission that we can be a community grace, providing a welcome to Christ’s table and a home to all who will come. As Christ’s body, God is made flesh yet again; and we face the future unafraid.