

Called and called back (Acts 9:1-20; John 21:1-19)

Jesus still needs Peter—and us.

by [Kiki Barnes](#)

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If our Acts 9 text reflects a call story, our Gospel reading in John 21 reflects a *callback* story. Often Jesus must call us back to the mission field.

The initial story in the John reading might remind us of numerous invitations to “launch out into the deep” and not to give up “when you’ve toiled all night and caught nothing.” The nets breaking, bringing in the harvest of fish at Jesus’ prompting fill the reader or hearer with excitement at the idea of one more try. Jesus does it again!

But Jesus is not done. The summons to try again isn’t just for the fish in the sea. We rally at the possibility of Jesus coming through when we have tried and fallen short, but what is to be said when we have left the work unfinished? How many “good Christian soldiers” have received the initial call, only to be assaulted by life and circumstances and to go AWOL?

When people discover that I am a minister, the conversation sometimes shifts to a confession of their own, failed dreams of ministry. They felt the prompting of the Holy Spirit to engage the world in some specific way, they may have even begun to do the work, and then, as the commercial says, life came at them fast. Their sense of failure and despair led them to step away from the wreckage of unrealized hopes and to go back to fishing. Sometimes we choose the familiar work over the faithful work, even when it ends up being fruitless toil.

In the assigned verses that follow the haul of fish, the wordplay between Peter and Jesus offers a greater lesson of grace we can all access. The reader can get lost in the meaning of the words Jesus is using for love, or the question of whether Peter is vexed at Jesus' continued querying. But at the heart of the text, Jesus is showing up to re-engage Peter in the work of spreading the gospel message.

Jesus still needs Peter, and so does the church that is to be formed. The upper room of Acts, where a remnant will be gathered in one accord, needs Peter to be there, to lead the charge, to use his brazenness to proclaim that no, we are not drunk. Jesus recalls Peter to the work to which he was originally called, to be that rock upon which a church is built.

God's work still needs us, too, and being ourselves has not disqualified us from the mission. Answering the call to represent Christ in the world can be quite daunting, but Christ calling us back to the job after we have walked away is a true work of love, grace, and restoration. After the resurrection, Jesus models the important concept of retention over recruitment. He doubles back to visit those who have given up, encouraging them back to the fold.

Our actions may confound us, but God is not deterred. Peter is forgiven and restored to move forward in his call to make disciples by pointing to that same Source of grace. The passage reminds us that grace is not for a moment, but for our lives. Conversion does not occur in an instant. We are continually reinvited to show up for Christ, just as we are. Christ offers reassurance that we have not knocked ourselves out of the hand of grace. As Jesus will state in our reading next week, his sheep cannot be plucked from his hand.

I was sitting in a tow truck, listening as another person who had just learned that I'm a minister talked about his own one-time call. He expressed his disappointment that he no longer has a church. After thanking him for his assistance, I whispered, "It's never too late to try again. Not now doesn't mean not ever."