In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text for this morning is the very last sentence of our Gospel Lesson, especially the very last two words. Jesus speaks to Peter. The sentence goes this way:

   And after this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21:19, RSV)

“Follow me.” Many a mile has been walked since Jesus first spoke those words to Peter. Let me read for you St. Matthew’s lovely report on the call of Peter and Andrew, back at the start of things. It goes this way:

   18 And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. 19 And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. 20 And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-20, KJV)

They were all younger then. Jesus was starting his ministry. He was thirty years old (Luke 3:24). Now, in this morning’s gospel story, they are all older. Maybe not a whole lot older in terms of years. Judging by the Gospel writers, the ministry of Jesus lasted no more than about three years, and that is not a real long stretch of time. But Jesus and Peter are a whole lot older in terms of experience. Many a mile has been walked in those three years. A lot of water has gone under the bridge. And some of it has not been good.

Most recently there has been the disaster of Judas betraying Jesus, the disciples abandoning their Lord in his hour of need, and Peter denying his Master. The word “fled” applies to those fainthearted disciples. St. Matthew puts the matter this way:

   Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled. (Matthew 26:56, KJV)

If all the disciples fled, then Peter was among them. But Peter seems to have turned around and followed after Jesus and the guards, and I admire Peter for this. I admire Peter for drawing close to what he must have known was a dangerous situation, when all of the bitter opposition to Jesus was gathering to crush our Lord. So we can admire Peter for following Jesus and the guards
all the way into the courtyard of the high priest’s house. But there, Peter failed, in a remarkable way. Peter had promised that he would never deny Jesus. Peter had boasted that he would never say, “I know not the man!” But that is exactly what Peter did. Under pressure, in a world of fear and danger, Peter denied knowing Jesus. He wept bitter tears for that. He regretted deeply that he had denied his Lord.

That had been just a few days before this morning’s Gospel story, during the arrest and interrogation of Jesus. Now Peter is talking with Jesus again, and Jesus ends the conversation with those sweet words, “Follow me.” Those were the words which started everything. Those were the words with which Jesus called Peter in the beginning, to leave behind his fishing nets and become a fisher of humanity. And those are the words with which our resurrected Jesus again calls Peter to ministry. Those repeated two words, “Follow me,” launch Peter out into the world and into the church for ministry. It is a ministry that will culminate in the martyrdom of Peter, and it is a ministry that will bear the marks of saintliness. It is with good reason that we call this fisherman “St. Peter.” Quite a ministry was restarted with those words of Jesus, “Follow me.”

For me, those two sweet words spoken to Peter, “follow me,” were among the most important words ever said to the man. They were the start of Peter’s discipleship, and they were the words that renewed Peter’s discipleship after Peter had denied our Lord.

The Christian church talks a lot about the “grace” of God. We mean the unmerited favor of God toward us. We mean the good will of God that goes beyond our deserving. We mean the kindness of God toward us, even though we are disappointing to our Maker in many ways.

What I want to do now is to forge a strong link in our minds between “the grace of God” and the words of Jesus “Follow me.” Let it be like a strong iron chain. When we think about grace, let us also think of our Lord’s most gracious call to a holy adventure in life, “Follow me!”

For after all, what had that fisherman Peter done to deserve being a disciple of Jesus? There is nothing in the story of Peter that would suggest that he was a saintly man before Jesus came along and that that was why Jesus called him. No! The way the story is told Peter is simply a fisherman. He is simply a human being, making his way in the world as best he could, like other human beings. But God’s great grace in the life of Peter is that Jesus came along and called Peter to follow him. In following Jesus, everything changed for Peter, and he became a saintly man. And when Peter fell and so starkly denied his Lord three times, God’s great grace in his life is that Jesus was willing to come again to Peter, talk things out with Peter, get him back on track, and to say once again to the man those most gracious words, “Follow me. Do not be left behind. Follow me.”
What I am trying to get at is that when we hear the word “grace,” we should not think of it as a free-floating benevolence of God toward us. Rather we should think of it as the unmerited call of Jesus to come and walk with him. It is the invitation into friendship with Jesus. It is the invitation into a holy fellowship with Jesus and with all the many other people Jesus is also calling to follow. It is the most important invitation in our life into a great adventure — an adventure that should occupy the remainder of our days on this earth and one day will land us in heaven.

The story of Peter’s reconciliation with Jesus, in which Jesus renews his call to Peter to follow him… this great story is the demonstration for us that with the Lord there is forgiveness of sins and the authorization from Jesus to renew our walk with him. This story lets us know that with Jesus, there is a chance to get back up into the saddle if we have fallen off. It is grace. It is a blessing that goes beyond our deserving, and it is the best blessing we can have in these threescore and ten years. The invitation to follow Jesus is worth more than gold or silver or the cattle on a thousand hills. Gold and silver will come and go, but friendship with Jesus and walking in his ways yield our best life here on earth and eternity afterwards. That Jesus should say to Peter or to any of us, “Follow me,” means that we are being invited into our maximum life. We are being invited to live the life our Maker intended for us. It means that we can leave sin and chaos behind and get on with life — good, true, and abundant life.

From a preacher’s point of view, we certainly have an embarrassment of riches before us in today’s Bible Lessons. I love this story of Peter’s reconciliation to Jesus, but I also love the story in our First Lesson about St. Paul’s conversion—the way the man was knocked to the ground by light and his encounter with our resurrected Jesus. That changed Paul forever and launched him into his life’s work as an apostle and missionary of Jesus Christ.

In this sermon, I am not going to linger with this story of Paul’s conversion, but I do want to point out something that our story about Paul and our story about Peter have in common. In both cases we are not dealing simply with stories of individual conversion, but rather with stories of individual conversion that lead on to the church. In both cases, there is a strong link between following Jesus and immersing ourselves in the church. Take St. Paul for example. He has had a stunning encounter with our resurrected Jesus. But what that resurrected Jesus does is to point him to someone else, an ordinary Christian believer named Ananias. Listen to the firm command of Jesus to Paul, once Jesus has knocked Paul to the ground. The command goes this way:

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do. (Acts 9:5, RSV)
Jesus does not say to Paul, “Rise and enter the city and I will tell you what you are to do.” Jesus does not say to Paul, “It is you and me. Jesus and Paul. We two will conquer the world.” Rather, Jesus sends Paul into the city to meet with another believer, Ananias. Jesus sends Paul to meet with a man who by all ordinary standards is a less talented man than Paul himself. But Jesus sends Paul to Ananias, and Ananias baptizes Paul. Paul is not to go onward without Ananias. He is not to go onward without baptism. Paul is not to treat his fellow believers with fear and distrust. Altogether Jesus calls Paul to pour out his life, for as long as his heart is beating, to be a servant of the church. Jesus says to Paul as he says to each of us, “follow me,” but the concrete meaning of following Jesus is that we are to pay attention to the church. We are to go to church to learn what it is that we should do, to join in praise of our God, and to join the rest of the disciples in trying to win souls to Christ. Paul’s conversion is full of meaning and importance for the church.

Likewise with Peter. There is no true reconciliation with Jesus apart from Peter feeding the lambs. For Peter, there is no getting back up in the saddle and renewing his following Jesus without Peter feeding the sheep. For Peter and for us there is no true reconciliation with Jesus that does not include love. As Jesus says to Peter, “If you love me feed my lambs, feed my sheep.”

The great question before each us is, “Is Jesus calling me to follow him? I know that Jesus called Peter and the Twelve and St. Paul. But is he also calling me? I am not famous like those others? Is Jesus also calling me to follow him?”

Well, some great questions in life are hard to answer. This is not one of them. I can answer it for you. My life’s work is to answer this question for you: Yes! Jesus is calling you to follow him. He is calling you to join the holy apostles in walking with Jesus. He is calling you to turn to Ananias and other brothers and sisters in the church. He is calling you to feed the lambs, feed the sheep, and win others to him. He is calling you to your best adventure in life. And if you should fall, Jesus is asking you to come talk it out with him, come to Confession and Absolution if you would, and then hear again those gracious words, “Follow me!”

If you are not yet baptized, it would be joy for Caleb and me to baptize you. If you are baptized, but have drifted and strayed from Jesus, then still, his love for you is patient and kind and he invites you with all his heart to “Follow me.” Follow Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.