

Spotting a Counterfeit

John 21:1-19

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Since I moved into my condo in January, my partner Elizabeth and I have been decorating the place. Transitioning from graduate school, we didn't have much furniture and a lot of what we did have wasn't worth saving. As we are both in our first "grown-up" jobs after over two decades of school, we also aren't flush with cash.

To find furniture that fits our style on a budget, we've taken to doing most of our shopping on Craigslist. Craigslist is an online buy, sell, and trade bulletin board system. You can easily scroll through hundreds of ads, usually consisting of a couple cellphone pics, a brief description, and a price. Once you identify an item you're interested in, the site will connect you with the seller, usually by e-mail or phone. After a few awkward exchanges, you decide if whatever they're selling is worth the drive to a total stranger's house.

From my experience of buying and selling on Craigslist, I've learned that it's not worth the hassle of negotiating the price before you go and check out the item. The pictures in the ads can be deceiving, and you're never really sure what you're looking at until you can see it in person.

After browsing the furniture ads one afternoon, we identified a beautiful black antique sideboard to fit between the two windows in the living room. I drove the 30 minutes to Burlington after youth group; then the seller warmly greeted and welcomed me into her home. The sideboard was nice looking, but it wasn't the find I was hoping it to be. It was freshly painted with chalkboard paint, but even that could not fully cover up the Ikea screws, the magnetized doors, or the "Made in China" sticker below. With the hand-sanded distress marks around the doorknobs, perhaps you could say it was finished in antique-style. But, this was no antique. I'm pretty sure I spotted a counterfeit.

Speaking of counterfeits, there is broad agreement amongst biblical scholars that there is something fishy about the story we just heard, in John 21. Like many other passages in scripture and even the Gospel of John, most scholars agree this 21st chapter is the work of a later editor. Some of their arguments predicated upon syntax and style are hard for the non-expert to follow. Others are more obvious. For example, the final verses of John 20 offer a complete ending to the book. It reads: "Now 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 that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Whoever wrote the final chapter of John felt that the reader needed another sign from Jesus. Rather than concluding the narrative with the Easter Jesus showing his scarred hands and side to Thomas behind locked doors in Jerusalem, this alternative ending portrays his final encounter with the disciples on the shores of the Galilee. It also offers a redemptive depiction of Peter. The disciple who denies Jesus three times before the crucifixion finally has the opportunity to affirm his commitment to Jesus three times, making for a neat parallel.

If we approach this text exclusively from a source-critical perspective, we might see it as a faux-antique buffet table with chalkboard paint and a few distress marks. Since it comes from the hand of a redactor, it's counterfeit revelation. It's in the style of John, but we would not give it the same authority as the first twenty chapters.

In addition to its dubious origins, it also is fair to question whether or not this story presents an authentic understanding of the human condition. If you look at the world as it is and Christians as they are, the story feels out of whack. From what we know about how Christians act in the world, doesn't the image of Peter denying Jesus before the crucifixion feel more realistic than his affirmation? We know that the problems of the world didn't dissipate following the resurrection. Was Peter—the disciple so often used as a stand in for the common reader—capable of looking Jesus in the face and truly saying, "I love you"? If we are honest with ourselves, neither could we. If our love for others reflects our love for Jesus, we routinely fall short. The story of our lives is better summed up in the grace of God staring us in the face and we needing to see Christ's hands. That hits closer to home than the paradigmatic disciple finally getting it right. From this point of view, John 21 feels like a counterfeit story presenting a counterfeit idea of who we are.

Yet most of us have no problem with scripture that has gone through some creative editing—indeed, much of scripture already has. We also know that redemption and resurrection in Christ is a part of our lives as individuals and a community. Take a moment to consider our annual meeting last week. How many of you who were here fifteen years ago could have dreamt that there would be so much energy and commitment to the ministry of First Church in 2016? In order to trust that God's truth is emanating from this text we need to see it in the light of resurrection.

Adjusting our interpretive lens and interpreting John 21 in this light, the story no longer qualifies as a counterfeit at all. The story of Peter's affirmation is a genuine reflection of our best selves and our destiny in light of the resurrection.

In the Gospel of John, our authentic selves recognize the presence of Christ. Our authentic selves serve. The clear delineation between faith and works is not present. The two are inextricably linked to one another. In John 13, Jesus gets on his hands and knees to serve,

because he knew God “had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God.” Faith is paired with action. In today’s passage, Peter gives us our example. He recognizes the risen Christ, and he dives off the boat and swims to greet Jesus. Faith is paired with action. In Jesus’s questioning of Peter, once Peter affirms his love for Jesus, Jesus tells him to go out and serve, to feed his sheep. For Peter’s redemption to be complete, faith is paired with action.

That night in a stranger’s house in Burlington, I decided that counterfeit sideboard was exactly what I needed. I handed the seller all the cash I had in my wallet, four twenties and four singles. Sure, I was hoping to spend less, but I didn’t want to ride back to West Hartford without that piece—I just knew it would fit perfectly in our living room. Counterfeit antique or not, the sideboard fits just perfectly between our two windows.

John 21 may not be a story wholly authentic to the Johannine corpus, but it testifies to our most genuine affirmations. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. The presence of Christ renews us and liberates us from the demons of our past. It does not promise smooth sailing, because the resurrection of the world doesn’t happen all at once. The text promises tough days ahead for Peter, and there will be tough days ahead for us. Through it all the Living Spirit of Jesus equips us to live authentic lives of discipleship.

One of the ways we experience the risen Christ is at the table, and we will do so this morning. Just as the Risen Jesus prepared a meal for the disciples on Galilee, so he now hosts this meal for us. In a few moments, don’t hesitate to come forward and experience its transformative power to let you be your true self.

Amen.

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