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Now and again it takes a while to catch on to something new. Think of a time you tried to learn a new activity. Maybe you found it difficult at first, but after several tries you caught on. I remember in third grade when the music teacher taught our class how to play the recorder—that small wooden instrument played by covering finger holes while blowing into it. I didn't get it. I sat at my desk, frozen in frustration. I recall being so upset in music class that I would go home angry. I didn't understand the concept of music and how to connect the fingering to the notes on the page.

By fifth grade I had a better grasp of music as I took guitar lessons, but it wasn't until junior high when I began playing a cornet in band that I finally got it. The music theory and notes on the page finally made sense as I connected them to the values on my instrument.

By my third experience with an instrument, music finally made sense. There's an old expression from the 1800s that reflects this process. Maybe you've used the expression yourself: "third time's a charm." It's rooted in the ancient belief that the number three was magical, so trying something the third time would

grant success.<sup>1</sup> We may not today attach this magical notion to the number three, but we may discover that it takes multiple times to learn something. As your child steps up to bat at softball and swings and misses the first two pitches, a coach may offer the encouraging words, "Third time's a charm. Keep your eye on the ball." Or a parent may encourage a child to try riding a bike without training wheels. After falling down twice, Dad or Mom may say, "Third time's a charm. Try again."

It may take some time to grasp a new task or experience—even our faith. How many mistakes do we make over and over again to get what it means to follow Jesus? How many times does it take for us to finally understand what God is up to? How many experiences does it take for our spiritual practices to connect us to the Spirit?

Even Peter took three times to learn what it meant to follow Jesus, and by the third time, he finally understood what God was doing in the world.

First, recall the story of the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus after Jesus was arrested. Each time someone asked Peter, "Aren't you a follower of Jesus," he denied knowing him.

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Second, after Jesus' resurrection, while sitting around a fire, three times Jesus asked Peter whether he loved him. Each time Peter replied, "You know I love you," Jesus invited Peter to "feed my sheep" by caring for those in need. As Jeannie noted after hearing these stories a few weeks ago at CCC, Jesus' three-fold invitation to love him offered healing for the three times Peter denied him.

And now third, in the Book of Acts, we once again have a three-fold invitation to Peter as he had a vision of a sheet of animals lowered before him. All the animals were considered unfit to eat, but Peter heard a voice say three times, "Go to it Peter, kill and eat these animals." Each time that Peter objected to eating unkosher food, the voice said, "If God says it's ok, then it's ok."

About that same time, Cornelius had a vision while in prayer that he was to meet with Peter. Even though Cornelius was an outsider, not part of Peter's religious tradition, on the third vision, Peter finally grasped what God was up to. The unclean animals in his vision represented the outsider people, considered the "unclean" people. Peter proclaimed, "I finally get it! God has no favorites, for God does not show partiality

to one group over another. It makes no difference who you are or where you're from. If you want to follow God's ways, the door is open! This is what God has been saying to us all along through Jesus!"

This was a radical shift in the understanding of what God was doing in the world. Rather than a religion just for people like themselves, Peter realized that God was welcoming others as well. When the other disciples heard that Peter was eating with those considered outsiders, they called a board meeting and accused him of improper behavior, of eating with those who don't follow the rules like they do.

And it appears that for Peter, the third time really was a charm, for he finally realized what God was up to, giving him the courage to stand up to those protestors and boldly proclaim,

<sup>15</sup> "When I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, just as the Spirit fell on us in the beginning.

<sup>16</sup> I remembered the Lord's words: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>17</sup> If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? Could I stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:15-17, CEB).

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When the other disciples heard what Peter said, they were ἡσυχάζω (hay·soo·khad·zo), a Greek word meaning “to hold one’s peace, silent, to be quiet.” Instead of arguing, they listened. They sensed God’s Spirit. They paused, for they suddenly realized that God was breaking the pattern, drawing outside the lines, doing something new.

It takes faith to follow along with God when the Spirit draws a broader circle and includes those we’re not used to being near. It’s an unknown territory for most of us, and it may feel uncomfortable. Theologian Frederick Buechner recognized the challenge when he said in a sermon:

Faith is the word that describes the direction our feet start moving when we find that we are loved. Faith is stepping out into the unknown with nothing to guide us but a hand just beyond our grasp.<sup>2</sup>

When we realize we are loved, we find it easier to take a step forward and offer that love to others, which is what Peter finally realized. Peter had three

chances to affirm his love for Jesus, and he blew it each time he denied knowing him. Jesus offered Peter another three chances by asking about his love, and Peter was eager to affirm his love. As Peter trusted in God’s love through Jesus, he was encouraged to care for others. This third time around, Peter finally got it, and trusting in God’s love for himself, he was able to offer that same love to others, even those considered outsiders.

Who are those people you don’t like? Who doesn’t follow the same rules as you do? Maybe it’s followers of a political party that just don’t seem to get it. Or maybe it’s those who have a different sexual orientation than you do. Or maybe it’s those who have a different racial background. Or maybe it’s those who have a different religion than you do.

To love Jesus means to feed his sheep and to welcome those who may not be like you. You may not always succeed, but God still loves even you. So keep trying, for the third time’s a charm.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://grammarist.com/idiom/third-times-the-charm>

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, from a sermon, “Follow Me,” in *The Magnificent Defeat* (HarperOne, 1985).