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John 21:18-25

Fifty-ninth Message

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PILGRIM STORIES

This morning we come to our last study in the gospel of John. I never planned to spend five years in John; it just turned out that way. I feel like I have run a marathon and finished after all the other runners.

As we conclude our study, I wonder if we have understood more clearly who Jesus claimed to be. Have we grown deeper in our relationship with God? Have we seen ourselves in the gospel story, and has that altered the way we live? I sincerely hope so.

The apostle Peter is front and center in these final verses. In fact, Peter is one of the dominant figures in John's gospel. He often appears in the story with John, the beloved disciple, the author of the book. In chapter 1, Jesus calls Peter to follow him. He changes his name from Simon to Peter, meaning "the rock." In chapter 6, Jesus asks the disciples if they want to leave him like many others were doing. Peter told Jesus that there was nowhere else to go, that Jesus had the words of eternal life, and that he had come to believe that Jesus was the Holy One of God. When Jesus wants to wash Peter's feet in chapter 13, Peter refuses. He wants nothing to do with that. But when Jesus tells Peter he can have no part with him unless he washes his feet, Peter wants a full-body treatment.

At their last dinner together, Jesus tells the disciples that one of them would betray him. Peter motions to John, who is leaning on Jesus' breast, to ask Jesus who it is will betray Jesus. A bit later, Jesus tells the disciples that he is leaving, and Peter wants to go with him. He boldly announces he will lay down his life for him, but Jesus predicts that he will deny him. As the soldiers approach Jesus to arrest him, Peter draws a sword and cuts off Malchus's ear. Peter and John follow Jesus to the house of the high priest in chapter 18, where Jesus is interrogated by the Jewish authorities. The prediction of betrayal comes to fulfillment as Peter looks at Jesus through a charcoal fire.

Mary reports that the stone has been rolled away from Jesus' tomb in chapter 20, and Peter and John run to investigate. Peter is the first to bolt into the empty tomb. When the disciples go to Galilee they spend all night fishing, and the next morning Jesus is on the shore waiting for them. John recognizes Jesus, and when he tells the others, Peter impulsively jumps in the water and wades ashore. Jesus invites the disciples to breakfast. He speaks to Peter across

a charcoal fire and restores him from the shame and guilt of his three-fold denial with a three-fold commissioning to shepherd and feed his flock.

But the story is not yet over for Peter. He and John again take center stage as the book comes to a conclusion.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!" (John 21:18-19 TNIV)

The next verse seems to indicate that Peter and Jesus are walking down the shore having a conversation, while John is following behind. Jesus gives a prophetic word regarding Peter's future. He is not speaking about old age, but how Peter will die. This is how John understands it.

In the ancient world, the phrase "stretch out your hands" would have been understood as referring to crucifixion. Stretching took place when a prisoner's arms were tied to the cross he was forced to carry to the place of execution.

Jesus asks Peter to follow him. He isn't inviting him to a walk on the beach but restating his call in 1:43 to discipleship. Peter asked Jesus in the upper room, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you will follow later" (13:36). For Peter, following Jesus means going the way of the cross; it means suffering and death. This is how Jesus glorified the Father and also how Peter will glorify the Father.

Peter was martyred, probably while Nero was emperor. Later accounts state that Peter asked to be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to be crucified as his Lord was. What is remarkable is that Peter lived and served three decades with this prediction hanging over his head. He probably was already dead when John wrote his gospel.

As usual, Peter has a question for Jesus.

Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, "Lord, and what about this man?" Jesus said to him, "If

I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?” (21:20-23)

Peter looks over his shoulder and sees John following behind. Once more they are together again. John is the disciple who leaned on Jesus’ breast and asked him who was going to betray him. The connection here to the last supper establishes John as intimate with Jesus and credible as the author. It also establishes the intimacy between Peter and John. This is why Peter can ask, “What about him?”

Jesus’ reply is extremely brief. Once again he rebukes Peter. Some things haven’t changed yet. He tells him that it is none of his business. There can be no speculation about the discipleship of others. “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). John may be asked to remain alive until Jesus’ return. That shouldn’t concern Peter. Peter and John have different roads, different ways of serving God. The important thing for Peter is to follow Jesus, and again Jesus states that emphatically.

But John, or perhaps someone who came along later, is concerned about Jesus’ statement creating confusion in the early church. If people thought that Jesus truly would return before John died, then the gospel might be hindered. If John died that would raise questions regarding the credibility of the gospel. So John gives a word of clarification, making it clear that Jesus didn’t say he would return before John died, only that if he chose for John to remain until he returned, then that should have no bearing on Peter. Peter is instructed to follow Jesus on his journey and not worry about what happens to others.

Now a final word from John.

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written. (21:24-25)

Two statements here, one concerning John, the other concerning Jesus. The disciple here who is testifying is John, not another disciple. This harkens back to verse 23. The “these things” refers to the entire fourth Gospel. John’s testimony is true, and he states that “we” know this. The “we” could refer to the elders at Ephesus or others who were closely connected to John. But John uses “we” to refer to himself elsewhere in this gospel, most prominently in 1:14, where he writes, “we have seen his glory.”

In the final verse, John switches to the first person, since he has identified himself and speaks again of Jesus. What he says about Jesus parallels the thought in his purpose statement at the end of chapter 20: there are many other signs that Jesus performed. Now he says there were many other things that Jesus did. In fact there are so many that the whole world would not be able hold the books that could be written about Jesus. This might be an exaggeration, but it also could be referring to the prologue, where John states that Jesus is the incarnate Word who created all things. If all of Jesus’ deeds as creator were written down, then indeed the world would not be big enough to hold all the books. Thus John closes with a statement pointing to the greatness of Jesus.

As we conclude, I want to talk about our life of faith in light of John’s gospel. The point of the gospel story, as with any story in the Bible, is not just to master the meaning and then move on. It is to reveal the truth about God, and for this God-breathed, life-changing truth to penetrate deeply into our hearts. The story must unmask the truth about us so that we become involved personally in it, so that our story and the Jesus story become the one story. In other words, when we read John’s gospel, we are the Jews who are being confronted with our need for Jesus. We are the Samaritan woman receiving living water and being drawn into a relationship with Jesus. We are the apostle Peter denying Jesus at the critical hour and in need of restoration. We are the disciples learning to follow Jesus by faith. What Jesus says about being the bread of life, the water of life, the light of the world, the way, the truth, and the life are said to each of us.

John writes a book so that people who read it “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:31). His desire is for people to receive Jesus because, as he said in chapter 1, “as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

At last Sunday’s baptism we baptized eight people of different ages. Each one shared his or her story of how they came to faith. For each the path was a bit different but each made the same confession, that Jesus is their Lord and he died on the cross for them.

In this gospel, we might identify ourselves with one of the characters we see in the story and how God found us, how he brought us into a relationship with himself, how we grew to understand Jesus as the resurrection and life.

Perhaps you can identify with Nicodemus, in chapter 3, coming to Jesus at night. You grew up in a church. You were responsible and respected and faithful. You knew all

the Sunday School answers to the Bible questions. You had a long list of credits attached to your name through ways you had served. But you knew that you still were missing something. You knew a lot, but you didn't have it right. You didn't want to make a big deal about it, so you went to someone's house at night, someone from a different church, and you asked about Jesus. This person told you that all the good things you had done would not change your heart. You had to be born again, born from above. You didn't do it right away, but eventually you made a choice to believe in Jesus personally as your Lord and Savior.

Perhaps you identify with the woman at the well, in chapter 4. You had a series of unhealthy relationships with not-so-nice boyfriends. You had a shoddy reputation and were an outcast in your community. You were isolated and alone. You tried to avoid other people so you went to the grocery store at 10 o'clock at night. One night you were in a bar, trying to dull the pain of your past, and a man sat down next to you and asked for a taste of your beer. Then he said that if you asked he could give you something to drink that would really quench your thirst, so much so that you would never thirst again. You thought he might be high, so you tried to divert the subject. But he kept honing in, bearing down on the deepest issues in your life. He told you about Jesus and you instantly knew that that is what you had wanted all your life. Right on the spot you accepted Jesus, then you stood up on a chair and told everyone in the bar. Your friends thought you were crazy, but then they saw the change that came over you. Every Sunday you brought someone from your old community to church and one by one they all asked Jesus into their hearts.

Perhaps you identify with the man born blind in chapter 9. From the very beginning you had a tough go of things. You were always sick, you didn't have any friends, you had to be held back in school. People ridiculed you and said you were cursed because of something your parents did. And then somewhere along the line someone befriended you and loved you. They told you about Jesus and how he too was rejected by everyone and died alone. All of a sudden the light went on and you found life.

Or to take the story in a different direction, perhaps you had a yearning for truth and you tried everything possible except God. You got involved in the new age movement, you spend time with a guru in Oregon, or you took philosophy at the liberal university and thought you understood the way things worked. But life just wasn't working; nothing brought you joy and peace. Then you picked up the Bible and began to really read it for the first time. All of a sudden an explosion of light pierced your brain. You saw the truth clearly, the absolute truth, and you believed. In one sense

we are all born blind, unable to see the truth of God. But Jesus is the light of the world and in his life is light.

Perhaps you are like Martha. You believed that after you died there would be a resurrection and that you would have life everlasting. But you had a hard time believing that resurrection life happens here and now. Perhaps you were like John: God gave you the joy of an intimate relationship with Jesus. Perhaps you were like Thomas: you wanted the hard evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead. But finally you had to take a leap of faith and you found a soft landing in the arms of God. Perhaps you were like Peter. You were brash and bold and outspoken in your faith. But then you fell and you fell hard. But Jesus was there for you. He picked you up and gave you an assignment. Maybe you were like the Jews. At first you hated Jesus because he wasn't who you wanted him to be; he didn't do what you wanted him to do. And so you tried to get rid of him. But he just kept coming to life and eventually you had to surrender to him.

We come to Jesus from all different backgrounds, countries, ages, and manners of life. But all of us have one thing in common: We come to Jesus out of our weakness, weariness, and wickedness. We each come to a point, like Thomas, where we confess Jesus as "my Lord and my God." We find life in our brokenness. Jesus is the only place where we can find life. Every act of belief is a miracle, just as miraculous as the conversion of the woman at the well. We become a child of God, born again as an act of creation by the Word who spoke the world into existence. In one sense we have come home, but in another sense we continue on to our final destination, our heavenly home.

What we see in our text is that we continue a pilgrim journey after we have come to faith. This journey will be different for each of us. It might lead us to places we never would have chosen, and oftentimes not where we would want to go. Maybe we have health issues early in our lives or our child is stricken and needs constant care. Maybe we have difficult relationships in our family. Maybe we face tragedy: the loss of a spouse, the loss of a child. Maybe our business goes under. None of us would choose these things, and yet they become part of our pilgrimage. They are places where we are called to lay down our life or love sacrificially like Jesus. But they are also places where we encounter the transcendent love of God, where we boldly proclaim the gospel, where God uses us for his glory and not our own. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. To each of us he says, "Follow me."

The temptation is to compare our journey to someone else's. What about her? What about him? Jesus tells us not to go there. It's none of our business. Instead of comparing ourselves to others we are each called to be God-focused and cross-centered, keeping our eyes on Jesus and following

him where he leads. Growing in maturity means we can be led to where we don't want to go, we are content instead of complaining, we are more concerned with glorifying God than seeking our own selfish desires.

What happens to Peter? In the first chapters of Acts we see Peter and John, Peter and John. But what a different Peter. We see a Spirit-empowered man boldly preaching the gospel at Pentecost and leading 3,000 people to Christ. Even in the face of prison or death there is no denial of his Lord. And when you open his first letter, there he is, living in resurrection hope and rejoicing with joy inexpressible despite the difficult things he had to endure. He encourages his readers that it finds favor with God to suffer for no reason, and exhorts others to do what Jesus had exhorted him to do: shepherd the flock of God among you. Unstable, unreliable, outspoken, foot-in-mouth Peter becomes The Rock.

All of us are pilgrims on a gospel-defined spiritual journey, immersing ourselves in the Jesus story. And this story is our story. We are the least, the lost, and the left-out that Jesus finds. We come in our weakness, weariness, and wickedness but Jesus forgives and heals us. He takes us on a journey to places we would rather not go, but he will never leave us or forsake us. He will have his way with us, and in the midst of our journey he will continue to transform us. We all have a different cross to bear, but we all are headed to the same place: to our heavenly home, the new Jerusalem, to be God's people, his treasured inheritance, for all eternity. May we be encouraged today through John's gospel and Peter's life simply to follow Jesus.

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:20-21)

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