

## Sermon- DNA of Discipleship: Embracing the Cross

Sermon: John 21: 18-25

Sunday, March 28, 2021

This is the last sermon I will be preaching in John. It has been a long and challenging journey. A journey that has changed me in a deep and powerful way. God has done so many things in my life that I decided that if I do not write them all down, I would forget it in time. And acts of God must never be forgotten because that diminishes the visibility of God's glory in one's life.

Last Sunday we looked at an important aspect of being a disciple of Jesus. Learning to love. It is easy to forget in a sentimental culture like ours that when the Bible talks about love it is never talking about a "feeling" but a verb. Love is a doing that involves a doer and the one who the act is being done for. And so when a disciple of Jesus expresses love to Jesus there has to be a clear understanding of the doer, that means one's own self and limitations, a clear understanding of who Jesus is and finally, what actions done for Jesus qualify as "love" in His eyes. And what qualifies as love for Jesus is obeying His Call in our lives.

There was another aspect of discipleship that Jesus needed to make clear to Peter. You see when Jesus Calls his disciples to follow him, the path every disciple has to follow includes the cross in some form. In Matt 16:24 Jesus had warned his disciples upfront. He said, "***if anyone wants to follow me, he must deny himself, pick up his cross and follow me***". In many parts of Western Christianity, we are declared "saved" if we simply believe four spiritual laws and say the sinners pray. Then suddenly you now have a "get out of hell free card". And people take that free card and many times do hellish things with it, because they think they can get away with it! And then you end up with church going people who shout "Jesus is my savior" as they wave their guns about. And that repels many non-believers and then we wonder why the church in the US is shrinking. According to Pew Research from 2009 to 2019, Protestants have shrunk from 51% to

43% of the population. That is an 8% drop in 10 years. For Catholics in the same period have gone from 24% to 20%, a 4% drop. I am sure that when the numbers come in for the last two years it is going to be even more horrendous. I have taken this time to share this big picture of what is going on because what we claim to be Christian faith in this country and what Jesus is expecting of his disciples seem to be as different as the East is from the West. In today's passage as Jesus is restoring Peter, he reminds Peter of the way he is going to die. That is not something you or I would have done when we are trying to recruit someone to our cause, right? But it is exactly what Jesus is doing here and we have to understand what exactly Jesus is trying to accomplish with Peter and why, very carefully.

So let me start with the actual words of Jesus to Peter. In verse 18, after he gives Peter the call to feed his sheep, Jesus immediately follows up with these very difficult words, ***“Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”*** <sup>19</sup> ***Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”***

This phrase, “when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to do” is a prophecy that Peter would die by crucifixion similar to the way Jesus died. But most scholars will agree that John was written in 90 AD and Peter's crucifixion would have already taken place by the time these words were written. So we can be sure that this prophecy was known to many and added here to explain to the community of believers why Peter died the way he did. Also many people expected Jesus to return in their lifetimes and so to see the believers die before Christ's return would have been shocking for them and they needed some reassurance. Hence the beloved disciple took pains to include these words of Jesus to Peter in this chapter.

From where we stand 2000 years later, we are ultimately interested in what this means for us, Jesus' disciples in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But if we fully understand what it meant to Peter, that would help us apply the lessons to ourselves as well.

So let me start with the meaning and implications of the cross for Peter. So why was it necessary for Peter to be crucified as well?

Let's start by looking at the promises Jesus gave Peter. In Matt 16:18 Jesus said ***"upon you I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it"*** and in the next verse he tells him, ***"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be<sup>[d]</sup> bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be<sup>[d]</sup> loosed in heaven."*** Then in John 21 Jesus gives Peter his calling with these words, ***"Feed my sheep"***. So if you looked only at the Matt 16 and John 21 you would get the impression that Jesus really wants to use Peter for some critical church building. So on the face of it, it would not make sense for Peter to have his years cut short. But this is the mysterious higher ways of God playing out. God would build His church on Peter, but Peter would not live very long. But even so, you may be wondering, why did Jesus have to tell Peter about it right at the beginning. Would that not discourage him?

I think, when Peter came to fully understand the message it would have a powerful positive effect on him and that is what we are going to look at today.

You see, if Peter knew that he would end up losing his life, once he had the power and boldness of the Holy Spirit on him after Pentecost ironically it is one of the most empowering things because if he was not going to be afraid of losing his life knowing that that was part of God's plan for him, the first thing is that nothing would stop him from boldly preaching for God right? He would be free to do what God wanted Him to do without focusing on self-preservation like every other human being on the planet. The first thing I believe Jesus was giving Peter by telling him what His end would look like was **incredible boldness**.

The second reason I believe Jesus told Peter what his end would look like was so that he would not be focused on the things of this world but the world to come. If you are so worried about your needs in this life it divides your attention, right? The world has a way of weighing you down and by giving Peter a head's up about his end, Jesus was saying, don't worry about the world and the worst it can do to you, just follow me. We love to think of worst case scenarios, but if Peter knew the worst and he know it was part of God's plan then why worry about anything else right? By telling Peter how he would die, I believe he was paradoxically **remove the worries** of this world from his mind.

The third reason Jesus told Peter about his end is that all human beings have a "flesh" problem. That means that we are always surrounded by temptations that come not from Satan but according to James 1:14-15 they come from the desires of our own "flesh". If Peter would one day come to grips with dying on the cross then he would at that point not be controlled by his own fleshly desires but have **mastery over his flesh** just like his Savior Jesus had.

We know that knowing how he would die did not dampen Peter but he became on fire for Jesus.

Let's broaden the lens to include all followers of Jesus include you and me. Let me tell you that the message of these verses is not that God is calling all His followers to a physical martyrdom like Peter. Many are, by the way, being called into martyrdom. The statistics are that 11 people are being killed for following Jesus every day. Most likely we will not be among those 11. But the fact is that every follower of Jesus, if they are really following Jesus will have to do nothing less than pick up their cross and follow Him. Let me quote this entire section of Jesus' words in Matt 16:24-27 for you.

***<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever wants to save their***

*life<sup>f</sup> will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. <sup>26</sup> What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>27</sup> For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.*

This is a message that does not get heard enough and not explained enough when we share the Gospel. What Jesus is saying is that a very important part of the witness of his disciples is this idea of denying themselves and taking up their cross and following Jesus. But just as this message would have been very empowering for Peter when he finally got it, it can be very empowering and freeing for Jesus' followers in this day and age as well. Let me give you three reasons why. It is the same three reasons that would work for Peter and it is all embedded in the Matt 16 passage.

The first thing is that, as a disciple of Christ our cross is not the physical cross but the cross of "self-denial". And self-denial is very empowering. You know why? Because this "world" is designed to cater to our "flesh". If you are not driven by your "flesh" then this world cannot give you anything that you truly hunger after. And if the world cannot give you anything you really hunger after then this world has no power over you. And if this world has no power over you, then **you** have all the power over this world. And if you have all the power then you can boldly proclaim the Gospel that God has called each of you to proclaim. You see if Peter became a bold proclaimer of God's message **after** Jesus told him how his end would be, then we should become bold proclaimers of the Gospel after Jesus' has told us to deny our selves and take up our cross and follow Him as well.

The second reason why this message of taking up your cross should be very empowering is because of something else our Matt 16 verse is saying. It says "**whoever wants to save his life will lose it but whoever is willing to lose one's life will save it**". Let me explain this. What it means is that a non-follower of Jesus who wants to live their life on

their terms is going to find that in the end, they will lose their eternal life. On the other hand, the follower of Christ who is willing to hand over control of their life to Christ unconditionally, and losing their life, will find that they will gain a life that is eternal. So if this world cannot take away anything from you of eternal value and in fact taking up your cross is **giving you** a life of eternal value, then you do not live in fear about what you can lose right? If you have no fear of what you can lose you can be truly fearless right? And a fearless person is not weighted down by the cares of this world. A fearless follower can experience the lightness that is promised to the one who is yoked to Christ. In this world people are worried about their wealth, their status, their security, their privacy, their health, well, just about everything really. But if you are ready to carrying your cross, at that point you realize that the world cannot take anything of eternal value from you. If the world cannot really take from you, you can follow Jesus without being weighted down by worries.

I have to mention one more thing that these verses address. You see when Jesus told Peter that he would have to be martyred, he immediately turns to the beloved disciple and said “what about him, Lord?”. To that Jesus replies, “if I want to keep him alive till I come back what is that to you”. “You follow me”. In our flesh our natural desire is to always be comparing our lives, our tasks, our pay, even our crosses to those of others. But hear this. Jesus’ plan and call on your life is as beautiful as his plan and call on anybody else’s life. Because it is Jesus’ plan and Jesus does not do anything that is less than perfect. So if he is calling you in a way that is different from someone else, we need not be concerned about it because Jesus’ plan for you is stunningly beautiful and perfect. So hear, these words, once again, “you follow Jesus”.

Three things to remember from our encounter with Jesus today. He is calling you to pick up your cross, deny yourself, and follow Jesus. But this is not a downer of a message. It was not a downer of a message for Peter and it should not be for us as well. So follow

Jesus without the fear of what you may lose. Follow Him with the boldness that comes from the power you have over the world. Follow Him knowing that Jesus' has planned a unique journey for you whose beauty you will only fully marvel at in eternity.

That brings us to the end of our journey through the Gospel of John. The purpose of the book of John was that the reader would understand who Jesus is and by believing, they would have eternal life. The purpose of the epilogue is that once you become a believer in Jesus you would know what it would mean to be a follower of Jesus. Through the trammel fishing episode we saw that the first element of the DNA of a disciple is "obedience". Through the restoration of Peter, we saw what it means to "love" Jesus and today's section concluded with the call to deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow him.

May each of us not only carry a richer understanding of who Jesus is but lean fully into the obedience, love and the cross involved in being a disciple of Jesus Christ, because that is what you do when you are on fire for our Lord. Let us pray.