



ROSE
HILL
CHURCH

John 21:15-25
So That You May Believe: John
“Following Jesus”

Rev. Brian North
May 14th, 2023

Well, this morning we end a journey we've been on since February of 2022. Other than a few weeks off this last fall to launch our new vision for the church, and a couple other Sundays last spring...we have been in the Gospel of John since February 20th of last year. This is the longest sermon series I've ever done. To balance that out, we'll have a one Sunday “series” next week, as the youth lead us in worship. Then we will begin a 5-week series on the nature of the Church, before getting into another series for July and August. So, let's get into today's message.

How many of you have ever gotten distracted from what you were supposed to be doing? Anyone? If you have one of these (hold up phone) then you most certainly have gotten distracted at some point. We had an experience of distraction this last week in our house. Actually, we experience it every day multiple times...but there's one that stood out that I've been given permission to share.

Gwen and I were in the kitchen working on dinner and putting away dishes from the dishwasher. JD came in to show her something on Brooke's phone while on a FaceTime call with Hailey: He had turned his face into a unicorn with a filter on FaceTime. Gwen looked at it, “turned into a unicorn” and decided it would be cute to act like a unicorn for a moment to entertain JD. At this point, she was now fully distracted from dinner prep.

Here's what then happened: She twirled around, lost her balance, slipped, fell backwards, landed at least partly on the open door of the dishwasher, hitting both the upper rack and the lower rack on her way down because they were both out at least part way, and finally landed on her stomach to the side of the dishwasher. I actually did not see any of it, even though this all happened right next to me. Why? *Because I wasn't distracted.* 😊 All I know is that my wife was standing in the kitchen next to me one moment, a loud crash happened, and then she was lying on the ground on her belly.

Of course, I was deeply concerned and immediately sprung into action. Who wouldn't right? And fortunately, the dishwasher and dishes were all fine, except for one glass that got broken.

OK...actually, I pretty much went right to Gwen to check on her, though when I heard the crash into the dishwasher I did initially look there until I realized Gwen was on the floor next to it. I immediately stepped over to her to see how she was. All kinds of things went through my head that could have happened, like a heart attack or a stroke. She was actually quite touched at how concerned I was for her – and fortunately, she didn't have any injuries – not even a scrape or a bruise. She even started laughing at the whole event. And today, we see someone who was distracted in his faith, and most importantly, we see how Jesus responds. I think it's instructive for us. Let's turn to John 21. We'll be in verses 15-25 this morning, though we'll start with **verses 15-17**. This is God's Word to us this morning...

So, things zero in on Peter and Jesus there on the beach. **Jesus addresses Peter by his proper and full name.** Maybe you moms have done this with your kids when they've done something they shouldn't have. If I heard, "Brian Bradford North!" then I knew I was in trouble. That's not quite what's going on here. Calling him, "Simon, son of John" is more about the genuineness of the conversation. There's an important conversation that Jesus needs to have with Peter.

Three times, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. The first two, John records the word *agapao*. The root word is *agape*. It's one of several words in the Greek language that mean "love." Each has a little different connotation, though some were also used a bit interchangeably some times. **This agape love is often called the highest form of love; it's a love of total commitment, such as God's love for us – and that is actually its original usage in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.** It originated as a Biblical word, but grew to wider use. In Jesus' third asking of the question, the word is *phileo*. It is more of a brotherly love...maybe "friendship" would be a good way to think of it. In fact, that's why Philadelphia is called the city of brotherly love – the first two syllables come from this Greek word, *phileo*.

After each question, however, Peter responds with the phileo love. **Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him completely and totally – as Jesus loves him – and Peter just can't bring himself to say that he loves Jesus to that degree.** He knows he falls short. In fact, the last time we saw Peter at the edge of a campfire like this, he denied knowing Jesus – he got distracted from following him. So, how could he say here that he “agapaed” Jesus? The best he could say is that he'd love him like a friend.

And as I said, the last time Jesus asks the question, he changes to phileo, the word Peter keeps using. We might wonder why Jesus changed? I think the answer lies in Peter's emotion to being asked the question. He's hurt that Jesus asked him the third time “do you phileo me?” It's not that the fact that Jesus asked three times that hurts; it's that **Jesus is even questioning if Peter can even love him with a phileo love.** I think this also gives us insight into how Jesus asked this third question. “*Do you love me?*” In other words, “Are you sure you phileo me?” Peter is hurt by the questioning. But really, given his earlier distraction and denial of even *knowing* Jesus maybe two or three weeks earlier: the unbiased observer would say, it's not an unfair question.

Now, one other thing we need to keep in mind, and it ties back to Peter's denials, is “What is the purpose of Jesus asking these questions?” Is Jesus asking for his own benefit, to confirm that Peter really loves him? **Or, is Jesus asking for Peter's benefit, to get him to consider his love for Jesus?** I think that's the answer, because Jesus asks him three times, correlating exactly to the number of times Peter denied knowing Jesus. Jesus is asking once for each time that Peter denied him. This is partly why Peter answers the final time, “You know all things, you know that I love you.” It's like Peter is acknowledging that the three questions correlate to his three denials, which were done under the cloak of darkness as Jesus was on trial, but Jesus still knows the denials happened; heck, he told Peter before they happened that he would do it.

Of course, also sprinkled in here are Jesus' commands to Peter to “feed his lambs...take care of my sheep...[and] feed my sheep.” A lot has been made about the feeding and the caring, the lambs and the sheep: especially about the different pairs of words and what the implication is. And from everything

I looked at this week: way too much is made of this. Even the agape and philo word pairing has probably had too much made of it for the most part. One commentator summed it up like this, **“The likelihood that no major distinctions are intended [lambs/sheep; feed/care; love/love] is rendered the more credible by the lack of a clear consensus among those who want to make a distinction. It is probably therefore wiser to see this as a Johannine stylistic feature rather than a basis of a major exegetical [analytical] truth.”** In other words, the interchangeable vocab words are really just the result of a thesaurus bringing some variety to the conversation.

But the upshot of it all is that Jesus is reinstating Peter to a place of leadership in the group of the disciples. Just because Peter got distracted around the earlier firepit and denied knowing Jesus, that doesn't mean Jesus can't still work through him. And so **Jesus is letting Peter know that he's counting on him.** Peter needs to nurture people in their relationship with Jesus. He needs to disciple them, feed them, care for them, so that people would grow closer to Jesus. This is what Jesus is charging him to do.

All right, let's **continue on with the rest of the passage (21:18-25)** and finish out this morning's message and our journey through the gospel according to John. After a brief prophetic word from Jesus about Peter's death – and to the best of the abilities of historians and scholars, it appears that Peter was crucified, much like Jesus, but upside down because he said he wasn't worthy of dying in the exact same manner as Jesus. So, after this word from Jesus, the rest of the passage until John's concluding words, is all about following Jesus. And we see here that **Jesus commands Peter – twice – to follow him. It's not a request, it's not a suggestion. It's in the imperative form - akolouthei.**

After even just a few steps of following Jesus, Peter once again gets distracted. This time, it's by this other disciple, almost certainly John, the writer of the gospel. Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus, turns around, and sees him following along behind. Peter asks, “What about him?” The implication is that Peter is kind of bothered that John is following along as well, as if the invitation to follow Jesus is only to Peter and not to anyone else.

Our journey of faith takes us in a certain direction, and others come along in a similar direction. Still others are led by Jesus down a different path. I've often wondered why Peter didn't ask about the rest of the disciples and why they weren't also following along. That, to me, is the larger question.

So: Jesus invites and even commands us all to follow him, but how that looks for each of us varies according to the gifts and passions that we have. **But the path of following Jesus is always marked by being Christ-like, if we live our faith well.** It's marked by the fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Holiness, repentance, forgiveness – both asking and receiving are other marks of a follower of Jesus, no matter what they do, or who their friends are, or where they live, or what their ministries are.

But in following him, there is this temptation to take our eyes off of Jesus and where he is leading us, and look at others. Like setting aside the dishes to dance like a unicorn, it's easy to get distracted in our faith. It's easy to do what Peter does here, and compare the call upon our lives to the call upon others. Maybe doing that makes us prideful, or maybe it makes us feel inadequate. Pastors struggle with both of those a lot, when we get distracted and compare ministries and churches.

It is so important as a Jesus-follower, that we not find our identity in comparing our faith to others, but instead to find our identity in our relationship with Jesus. To just follow him and where he's leading us. This doesn't mean we put blinders on and pretend other Christians don't exist. In fact, Jesus' call on Peter is to help people know Jesus as Lord and Savior and feed them, to care for them so their journey of faith in Jesus would be fruitful. So, we are in relationship with other Christians, and we can learn from one another, and encourage one another, growing in faith, serving together, and so forth. But the comparison game is not spiritually healthy; We keep our eyes on Jesus and follow him.

So, as we wrap up this series after journeying through the entirety of the gospel of John – From the opening prologue about the word becoming flesh and make his dwelling among us, to the miracles, the "I am" statements, the

incredibly in-depth look at Jesus' last week of life that John gives us, the empty tomb and his resurrection appearances...as we wrap this all up I have two prayers that come out of this.

First, I pray that we would know Jesus as Lord and savior... as the one who loves us with this agape love that took him all the way to the cross, into the tomb, and then back out of it, fulfilling the Old Testament requirement of sacrifice as payment for sin, and giving us the hope of eternal life. Jesus is the once for all sacrifice, and his resurrection gives an assured hope for the life to come. If you don't know Jesus' agape love, if you don't know him as your Lord and Savior, the one who has done this for you, and commands you to follow him, then I hope you will. It's why John says he wrote his gospel account – so that we would believe.

And then **Second, I pray that we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.** Let's keep growing in faith, growing in Christ-likeness, and following where he leads, so that Jesus is seen in us each and every day wherever we are. Let's ignore the distractions – whether it's comparisons to other Christians, other churches, or the distractions of life that so easily entice us to think that following Jesus is a part-time thing, or the distraction of look backwards at what's behind us and maybe we wish we could recapture, instead of keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus and where he's leading. When we do get distracted, when we stumble along the way, when sin gets the best of us – even denying our discipleship to Jesus – when what's behind us gets our attention: we can repent and come back to Jesus. Our sin, and our distractions, do not define us, as Jesus demonstrates in his conversation with Peter in this passage. He welcomes you, as he welcomed Peter. And Jesus wants to work through us as we follow him, so that the agape love of God would be made known to the world. Let's pray...Amen.