

8.6.23 Sermon

Stay in Your Lane | John 21:20-25

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

peter, people, Jesus, invites, comparing, comparison, lane, god, life, call, john, love, moment, fishing, crucified, disciples, path, betrayed, knew, asks

SPEAKERS

Rev. Dr. Tracy L. Saletta

Today is truly a miraculous day. We are nearing the end of John, with just one more sermon from Pastor James. Actually, just last week, James and I decided there would be one more because we can't let it go. It feels almost impossible to believe we've been preaching through John for two and a half years – or was it five and a half? Regardless, I've loved every bit of this journey.

Now, reflecting on where we are in John, I felt there needed to be some sort of ceremony to mark the end. Perhaps a flag ceremony? We're delving into John 20-21 today. To give some context, we find the disciples in chapter 21 locked away, unsure of their next moves after witnessing their Savior's crucifixion. It's during this time of uncertainty that Peter decides to go fishing, and the rest follow. They fish all night without success, but upon seeing a figure on the shore – Jesus – their fortunes change. He instructs them as he did in their first meeting, leading them to a plentiful catch.

After sharing a meal, Jesus directs a poignant question to Peter. I often think about the depth and meaning behind these conversations. Jesus and Peter's exchange is no exception, especially considering Peter's previous denial of Jesus. To me, this dialogue showcases human flaws and our endless potential for redemption.

Can you imagine the sheer weight of betrayal Jesus felt? Think of a time in your life when you felt most vulnerable or abandoned. Yet, throughout all this, Jesus doesn't chastise or reprimand them. Instead, he offers forgiveness. This teaches us about the power of grace and the importance of embracing it even when faced with betrayal.

Jesus, in his infinite wisdom, takes Peter's denial and uses it as an opportunity to teach about love, humility, and purpose. He poses the question, "Do you love Me more than these?" We're left speculating about what "these" refers to. Could it be his occupation as a fisherman or his ties with the other disciples? Peter, for once, responds without bravado, simply affirming his love for Jesus.

Jesus then reinstates Peter, charging him with the care of His flock, symbolizing a broader message. I believe God asks each of us, in various moments of our lives, if we love Him more than our earthly possessions or identities. This isn't a one-time query but a continuous call to evaluate our priorities.

I often find solace in scriptures, like Psalm 91, which remind us of God's unwavering love. Just as Jesus invited the disciples back into fellowship, he invites us. It's not only about theology; it's about applying these teachings in our daily lives. Every one of us has a purpose, whether that's serving in a grocery store, holding a political office, or working as a nurse. God has a unique plan for each of us, urging us to nurture and guide those around us.

Our faith isn't solely about securing a place in heaven. It's about heeding the call of duty, recognizing the sacrifices required. Jesus's teachings aren't merely historical accounts; they are direct invitations for introspection and action in our lives.

First, it's not just about salvation. We're not merely seeking an insurance policy for the afterlife. Accepting God isn't a mere ticket to heaven. It's an invitation to a deeper, meaningful relationship. It's about answering God's call, every single day.

Yes, initially, I saw accepting Jesus as an insurance policy. I thought, "If God is real, and there is an afterlife, I don't want to risk it. If He isn't real and I accept Him anyway, it won't make any difference." But God, in His wisdom and humor, seemed to respond, "I've got you now." However, our relationship with God isn't just a one-off event. It's an ongoing dialogue, a continuous commitment. We're called not just to accept God, but to live in a way that reflects His love and grace. Every day, He seems to ask us, "Do you love me more than your daily distractions, your comforts, your ambitions?"

Tracy, this isn't a question you answer just once. It's a question we must confront daily, moment by moment. God's call is relentless, persistent. He continuously invites us into a deeper relationship, challenging us to prioritize Him above all.

And then Peter becomes exasperated. He says, "You know that I love you." This is where we delve into the verses I've prepared for today. The entire scene feels somewhat like a setup.

"Peter, listen," Jesus says in the passion translation, "When you were younger, you made your own choices and went where you pleased. But one day when you're old, others will bind you and take you where you do not wish to go, where you will spread out your arms." John adds a parenthetical note here: Jesus mentioned this to Peter as a prophecy of the manner in which he would die for God's glory. After this, Jesus told Peter, "Follow me."

It's important to note that this was documented three decades later. By the time John penned this gospel, Peter had already been crucified, and tradition claims it was upside down. John was fully aware of what Jesus meant. Whether John understood when Jesus initially spoke these words to Peter remains unknown. Yet, by the time of Peter's crucifixion, John had clarity. From my perspective, and this is my human side speaking, the conversation seems to have a predetermined feel to it. Jesus repeatedly questions Peter's love for Him, to which Peter responds, "Lord, you know that I do." And then, almost gently, Jesus informs Peter of the trials he would face and the price he'd pay, concluding with an invitation to "follow me."

I must admit, faced with such a revelation, I'd have second thoughts. I'd need a moment to process the magnitude of such a declaration. Initially, when I came to know Jesus, it felt like an insurance policy. My early experiences in church made it seem like with Jesus by your side, life would be smooth sailing. The narrative was clear: Accept Jesus, and everything will fall into place. You'll be ecstatic, perhaps even "tiptoeing through the tulips" with a ukulele in hand. If challenges arise, just pray and everything will resolve itself.

But is that the reality? Not quite. I once believed miracles like the parting of the Red Sea would be commonplace in my life. However, experience has taught me otherwise. I'm a realist. I wish someone had told me, "Tracy, following Jesus doesn't guarantee an easy life."

He means that He will never abandon you; He will accompany you in every moment of life. No matter the circumstances or how grim situations become, His presence will breathe new life into yours. Even in the most distressing and difficult moments, He will find and restore you. In those dark times when it feels as though there's no way out, there's His unwavering love. He always seeks us out, and His love consistently pulls us through.

However, this wasn't the message I was always given. Take the biblical scene where Jesus speaks to Peter. Jesus asked, "Peter, do you love me?" To which Peter responds, "Yes, I love you." Jesus then instructs him, "Tend to my sheep." And Jesus warns Peter that the very sheep he cares for will be the cause of his crucifixion. Would anyone still agree to such a task? Yet, Peter does. As Sandra often mentions in her sermons, I'm the one assigning scriptures to individuals. Most of the time, I just list names, but occasionally, I assign specific texts intentionally, like one to Sandra and one to myself.

One of my favorite verses captures a poignant moment. As Jesus invites Peter into a deeper commitment, notifying him of his impending crucifixion, Jesus says, "Follow me." But Peter reverts to his old self, spotting John and asking, "What about John?" as if saying, "If I must endure this, so should he. What's his fate?" Was John eavesdropping on their conversation? There seems to be a rivalry of sorts between John and Peter. John often claims he's Jesus' favorite, and Peter often feels left out. Was John lurking nearby, wanting to be part of the moment? They both seem so human in this narrative.

Isn't Peter's behavior reflective of our own? When in misery, we often look around to see who shares our plight. If we're suffering, we sometimes wish others to be in the same boat. We fall into the trap of comparison.

Comparison is challenging. Jesus' words to Peter are powerful, "If I decide to let John live until I return, what concern is that of yours? You must keep on following me." Everyone's journey is unique. My path is different from yours, and yours differs from your neighbors, partners, or children. Everyone has a unique journey to undertake.

The danger lies in the comparison trap. Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Comparison is the thief of joy." Through my research, I found that people frequently measure their worth against others in terms of attractiveness, wealth, intelligence, and success. Some studies suggest that up to 10% of our thoughts revolve around such comparisons. The social comparison theory proposes that we determine our social and personal worth based on how we fare against others. With the rise of social media, the issue has exacerbated. Data suggests that about 90% of women compare themselves to other users on these platforms, and for men, this figure stands at 65%. Alarmingly, nearly 40% of these individuals develop a negative self-perception due to these comparisons.

There's even a diagnosis in the DSM known as obsessive comparison disorder, characterized by symptoms like anxiety and intrusive thoughts. Affected individuals perpetually weigh their life against others, leading to discontentment with their own. It's alarmingly easy to fall into this cycle. In a recent survey, over 75% of participants admitted to measuring their worth by comparing themselves to others, leading many into an emotional slump.

You know, social media is very interesting to me. I have this love-hate relationship with it. It's an excellent way to communicate and stay in touch with people. However, it often feels like a cauldron where I question: "Why do other people's lives look better than mine?" I don't spend much time comparing in that regard. I just don't. And here's part of the reason why.

I connect with a lot of people and often have deep, intense conversations with them. It's always so ironic to me that I'll be having these in-depth discussions, and then I'll see their social media

posts, which tell a completely different story. I'll look at those posts and think, "That's not what you just shared with me an hour ago in my office." We present ourselves online in a way that I don't think is healthy. And our perception of social media itself, I believe, is skewed. While it's said that comparisons can occasionally be beneficial and might motivate improvement, that's fleeting.

Comparing often leads to feelings of dissatisfaction, guilt, remorse, or even destructive behaviors. Haven't we all felt that? Seeing someone else's life and wishing we were there? An interesting statistic I came across mentioned that reducing social media use by even 30 minutes per day can lower levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and improve sleep quality. We're all naturally curious about how we're doing because, as humans, we are relational creatures. Comparison is inevitable, but it's about how we handle those feelings when they arise. As I said earlier, I don't spend much time comparing. At my age, I've come to accept myself as I am. However, when it comes to pastoring, that's a different story.

Especially after 2015, when our pastor passed away, I'd often ask myself, "WWBD - What would Bob do?" Stepping into his role, I constantly compared myself to him, to Pastor Bob. We were two different people, yet I measured myself against his achievements and even against other churches. Whenever I'd meet another pastor, my immediate thoughts would revolve around how successful they were. There's a part of me, even now, that gets drawn into this. When I see an event at another church, I can't help but analyze the crowd and even recognize familiar faces.

A friend of mine, Rob Holman, who supported me after Pastor Bob's passing, would constantly remind me, "Tracy, stay in your lane." Every one of us has our own path, our own congregation to tend to. This is mine. Your lane is different from mine, just as mine is different from every other church out there. The journey for all of us should be to remind ourselves to stay in our lane. It's reminiscent of Jesus' message to Peter, "Peter, do what I've called you to do and don't worry about John. Let John be John. You be you."

Second Corinthians has a message that resonates deeply with this sentiment. It says we shouldn't dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by one another, they lack good sense. It's never wise to compare. It's not helpful or beneficial. There will always be someone better or worse off than us.

We will always find that it's not about that. It's about dwelling in the secret place and allowing God to speak into each one of our lives. It's about staying in our lane. Pulling it all back to where I started, the quintessential question that I believe God asks all of us is, "Do you love Me more than these?" If so, He invites you to feed His tender mind and to stay in your lane. You have a call. You have a people. There's a place and space in this world where you belong.

There's a call meant for somebody, for a group, a call to enter what I term your "swing". We all have our unique "swing" and space. So, what is yours? Discovering it comes through dwelling in that secret place of the Most High and listening to what God says.

Now, consider the opposite of comparing. It's embracing. Instead of comparing, we should look at other people's gifts and celebrate. It means looking at somebody's life and genuinely feeling happiness for them. The opposite of comparing is not just celebrating, but building a community, working together almost like a pack where everybody supports one another. It's seeing someone else's giftedness and saying, "I want to support you where you're at. I want to walk with you there." Because I have my lane, and you have yours. I want to celebrate the lane you're walking in just as I celebrate my own.

Imagine the world through this lens. As we discussed earlier, our culture, especially Western culture, is grounded in competition. It promotes the idea of stepping on others to advance, a focus on winning. However, that is not the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is about celebrating with one another, embracing each other's gifts. In this kingdom, each of us must answer the question, "Do you love Me more than these?" How you love Jesus is personal, and not my concern. There's a saying I'm fond of: There are two places you can stay for free - in your own lane and out of my business. My friend Tony often hears me say, "Not my business, not my call." He knows the kind of day I've had when I come home echoing those words. Here's another perspective: Everyone has their own lane. When you stick to yours, there's less traffic and no speed limit. Imagine if we all focused on our lane, intently listening to how God invites us into it.

As we approach communion this morning, grasp this invitation: Can you hear the whisper of Jesus asking, "Do you love Me more than these?" As you come up and take the communion elements, reflect on that question. As we partake in the breaking of bread and acknowledge the sacrifice of Jesus, each one of us must confront that question. After Jesus says, "Feed mine, tend to mine," He follows with "Follow me." This question and invitation are posed to everyone, regardless of age.