

 **Main Street**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**John 21:15-25**  
**“Tough And Tender Jesus”**

April 26, 2015  
(4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter)

Pastor Phil Thrailkill  
Main Street UMC  
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646  
Church Office: 864-229-7551  
Church Website: [www.msumc1.org](http://www.msumc1.org)

**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

## JOHN 21:15-25 "TOUGH AND TENDER JESUS"

Appearances: 1 Cor. 15:3-5, Mk. 16:7, Lk. 24:34

### A) vv.15-17 PETER AS RESTORED SHEPHERD: 3 VERBAL EXCHANGES (One for each denial).

Starting Over (Old name = Simon), Good Shepherd Passes Off Flock To Under-Shepherd

- 15 1 When they had finished breakfast, (Link to 21:1-14: Same Appearance Scene With Risen Lord, Part II)  
a Jesus said to Simon Peter, Other Attachments vs. Primary Loyalty  
"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Priority, Multiple Possibilities, Solemn Address (1:42, 20:16)  
b He said to him, "Yes, Lord, *you know* that I love you." Threefold Denial: 13:37-38 (Prediction), 18:17, 25, 27  
c Jesus said to him, "Graze my lambs." Pastoral Image, Acts 20:28-31, Matthew 16:16-19, John 13:34-35, 10:1-18  
16 2a Again a second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter Sifted In Questions  
b He said to him, "Yes, Lord, *you know* that I love you." Affirmations: 1) Jesus Knowledge, 2) His Love  
c He said to him, "Shepherd my flock." *poimaine my probata!* Both Young And Old, Ezek. 34, Pastoral Commission  
Peter Needs Fresh Commissioning, Beloved Disciples Does Not  
17 3a He said to him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Leaders Responsible For The Community  
b Peter was grieved that he said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" Multiple Use Of 3's  
c And he said to him, "Lord, *you know* everything; *you know* that I love you." 1:47-48, 2:25, 4:17-19, 6:64-65, 11:4,13:1, 11  
Jesus said to him, "Graze my flock." On Pastoral Ministry, See 10:1-21, Ezek. 34, Eph. 4:11, Acts 20:28, I Pt. 5:2-4

//The Fathers According To Rabbi Nathan 17, Genre: Succession Narrative, Moses To Joshua

### B) vv.18-19 DEATH/DESTINY OF PETER: HOW HE GLORIFIES GOD: 3 PARTS.

Peter Does Not Follow Jesus Now But Later

- 18 1 Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, 1:51, Death Of Peter Now Prophesied (1)  
you girded yourself and walked where you would; Proverbial Wisdom: Youth vs. Old Age  
but when you are old, Risen Jesus' Prophecy + Fulfillment  
you will "stretch out your hands," Crucifixion Metaphor (Is. 65:2, Ex. 17:12, Theme Of Jn. 13:36-38)  
and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." First Clement 5:1-6:1 (AD 64)  
19 2 (This he did to show by what death he was to glorify God.) Explanation By Prophecy (2) (12:33, 18:32)  
Neronian Persecution, After 64 A.D. Readers Knew It Was True  
3 After this he said, "**Follow me.**" In Death, 1:35-51, 13:36-38, 12:26; Mk. 1:17 = Call To Follow: Discipleship (3)  
Never Through With Discipleship, Peter Called To Assent To The Prophecy Of Death

### C) vv.20-21 PETER AND THE BELOVED DISCIPLE: 3 CHARACTERIZATIONS.

Issues From Central Casting

- 20 Peter turned and saw following them 1:38, Doing What He As Supposed To Do = Follow, 13:23-24  
Peter Absent, Beloved Disciple Present, 19:25-27  
1 the disciple whom Jesus loved, Loved  
2 who had lain close to his breast at the supper Close (13:23-25)  
3 and said to him, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" Said  
21 When Peter saw him he said to Jesus, "What about this man?" Rivalry? His Future? Cross As Well?  
Question Answered By Question

### B') vv.22-23 DEATH/DESTINY OF JOHN: HOW HE GLORIFIES GOD: 3 PARTS.

We Are Not To Manage One Another's Discipleship; That's Jesus' Jo b!

- 22 1 Jesus said to him, Genre: Prophecy/Misunderstanding  
"If it is my will that he remain (abide) till I come, what is that to you?" 14:1-3, 1 Jn. 2:28, Death Of John? (1)  
Mk. 9:1, None Of Your Business!  
2 **Follow me!** Allegiance, 1) Be Faithful, 2) Your Life Patterned After Mine, Call To Follow: Discipleship (3)  
Emphatic, "You, follow me!"  
23 3 (The saying spread abroad among the brethren Church Gossip Is Often Wrong  
that "the disciple" was not to die; Misunderstanding Corrected (2)  
yet Jesus did not say that he was not to die, Peter Needs Fresh Commissioning, Beloved Disciples Does Not  
but "If it is my will that he remain (abide) until I come, what is that to you?"  
One Does As Martyr, Another As Long-Lived Witness

### A') vv.24-25 JOHN AS WITNESS AND AUTHOR: 3 USES OF "WRITTEN." 2<sup>nd</sup> Conclusion

Anonymous Particular Individual, Teacher Of Johannine Community, Source

- 24 1 This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, 1:32, Eyewitness Validated By Community  
and who has WRITTEN these things; 19:19, 22; Peter Died As True Pastor, John As True Witness To Tradition  
and we know that his witness is true. 19:35, 1 Jn. 3:2, 14; 5:16, 19, Witness Of Community: "We" (1:14, 16)  
Peter & John Are Unified In Differing Ministries, Rom. 12:3-8, Eph. 4:11-12  
25 2 But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be WRITTEN.  
3 I suppose that the world itself could not contain all the books that would be WRITTEN. Deliberate Hyperbole

A Brief Treatment Of John 21:15-25

With this thought unit John’s Gospel comes to an end. The saga of *the Word become flesh* is sufficiently told in John’s biography, but a full recounting would overflow both space and time (v.25). As we’ve come to expect, our author is careful in his arrangement of materials and edits them closely. The surface structure is a 5:1 concentric pattern (A. vv.15-17, B. vv.18-19, C. vv.20-21, B’ vv.22-23, A’ vv.24-25) with a transition unit at the center that brings Peter and John together. The use of *these* (vv.15a, 24a) in A//A’ is a simple inclusion, as are the three uses of *written* (vv.24-25) paralleling the three opening dialogs (vv.15-17). The use of 3’s is a structuring pattern throughout. There are three dialogs between Jesus and Peter, each with three parallel parts (Jesus’ question, *Do you love me...* [vv.15a, 16a, 17a], Peter’s reply, *You know I love you* [vv.15b, 16b, 17b], Jesus command to Peter to tend and shepherd the church [vv.15c, 16c, 17c]) and three uses of *follow/ing* (vv.19b, 20a, 22b). There are three characterizations of the beloved disciple in the center unit (v.20). The internal frames B//B’ concerning the ministries and death of Peter (vv.18-19) and John (vv.22-23) each have three parts, though in differing order: 1) Prophecy (v.18//v.22), 2) Explanatory statement in terms of death (vv.19a//v.23), 3) Command for Peter to follow (v.19b//v.22b). The use of questions is frequent (vv.15a, 16a, 17a, 21, 22, 23), as is the word *Lord* (vv.15b, 16b, 17b, 20b).

How did Peter go from fulfilling the prophecy he would deny Jesus three times (13:37-38; 18:17, 25, 27) to being entrusted with the community Jesus created? The Peter who was full of bravado is revealed as a coward. He’s not who he thought, but still we see him swim towards Jesus when the risen Lord is revealed (21:7). He’s hungry for a restored relationship, but it does not come quickly, only after a common meal. The bridge from 21:1-14 to this thought unit is the phrase, “When they had finished breakfast...” (v.15a). Jesus then asks Peter a question (on a walk? v.20a), using his more formal name from the start of the story (1:42), “*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these* (i.e. more than the other disciples love me)?” Peter’s answer emphasizes Jesus’ knowledge, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Note that Peter avoids the comparison *more than these* in his answer; he’s no longer a solo hero among lesser men; he is the needy man. Then comes the recommissioning which implies full forgiveness, “Graze my lambs.” The full pattern is repeated two more times with stylistic variation, one for each denial, and in the third Peter’s heart is pierced with grief. That Jesus is in full control of Peter’s present and future is evidenced in the prophecy of v.18 where, after a solemn introduction (*Amen, amen, I say to you*), Jesus invokes a proverb about the independence of young men and the dependence of the old who *stretch out their hands* to be helped along, sometimes where they do not wish! The parenthetical comment of v.19 clarifies intent after the fact, “This he did to show by what death (crucifixion) he has to glorify God.” The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (10:11); it is fitting that Peter follow Jesus and do the same. His earlier assertions of loyalty will be fulfilled, just not as he thought. The command, “Follow me” (v.19a) is a reminder that those who serve as leaders must first and always be loyal followers.

The central subsection C. (vv.20-21) brings the two apostles together. Peter must be restored to following, not the beloved disciple who walks behind them. After the author offers three glances back at high points (v.20b), Peter asks, “What about this man? What’s his future?” Jesus sharp reply, “If it is my will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?” means “It’s none of your business.” That Jesus’ words were sometimes misconstrued in church tradition is clear in v.23. For John to die, if it was believed he would remain till Jesus’ return, would provoke an unnecessary crisis of faith, thus the clarification of v.23. The final subsection (A. vv.24-25) grounds the life of the community in an eyewitness, “and we know that his witness is true.” How much film was left on the cutting floor is unknown (v.25).

## TOUGH AND TENDER JESUS

*“After this, Jesus said, ‘Follow me.’”*

The path to life.

J O H N 2 1 : 1 9 b

**I**t is historically probable that the bones of both the Apostles Peter and Paul are where early Christian tradition place them: Peter under the altar at St. Peter’s<sup>1</sup> and St. Paul at the *Basilica of St. Paul Outside The Walls*.<sup>2</sup> Several years ago the BBC ran a program on the disciples, and here is their summary on Peter:

“Tradition since the end of the first century always maintained that Peter was martyred in Rome. Written accounts of his being crucified upside down so as not to be compared with his master are detailed but relatively late. The strongest evidence lay unchecked for centuries, right under the noses of the Vatican. The magnificent basilica that now stands in the centre of Vatican City was built to replace an original structure built by Constantine, the first Christian emperor, early in the fourth century. Constantine's basilica was a remarkable engineering feat: his men moved a million tons of earth from the hill in order to create a platform for the structure and yet there was a flat plot just yards away. Constantine went to such lengths because he believed this was the very spot Peter was buried, on the side of the Vatican Hill.

Then in 1939 routine alterations under the floor of St Peter's unearthed an incredible find. Archaeologists discovered a whole street

---

<sup>1</sup> “Is it really the Tomb of Saint Peter under Saint Peter’s Basilica?” [www.culturaltravelguide.com/real-tomb-saint-peter-under-saint-peters-basilica](http://www.culturaltravelguide.com/real-tomb-saint-peter-under-saint-peters-basilica); “Saint Peter’s Tomb,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Peter's\\_tomb](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Peter's_tomb).

<sup>2</sup> Maria Cristina Valsecchi, “St. Paul's Tomb Unearthed in Rome,” *National Geographic*, Dec. 11, 2006, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/12/061211-saint-paul>.

---

of Roman mausoleums, highly decorated family tombs of both pagans and Christians dating to the early centuries AD. They asked for papal permission to dig towards the high altar and there they found a simple, shallow grave and some bones. It took years for the bones to be analysed and anticipation grew, but the results were disappointing. The bones were a random collection from three people and several animals!

Years earlier, one of the Vatican officials overseeing the dig removed some bones from a niche above the grave for safe keeping after the team had gone home. Amazingly no one gave them a second thought till one of the experts asked whether anything was ever found in the niche. These bones were then analyzed. The tests showed they were the remains of a man in his 60s or 70s and of stocky build. Yet perhaps even more revealing was the fragment of graffiti-covered plaster discovered next to the bones. The words were incomplete but could read *petros emi*, which means 'Peter is within'.<sup>3</sup> It's also likely we know the date of Peter's death: October 13, 64AD.<sup>4</sup>

Could it be? I think so. But what would it mean? That's disputed, because in the sixteenth century Protestant reformation our new wing of the church largely gave up the trade in and veneration of relics, but since there are two verified locks of John Wesley's hair at the Methodist museum at Lake Junaluska<sup>5</sup> – no doubt to his great embarrassment– it shows the Methodists have not yet given up on relics! In a universal human sense that transcends culture and faiths, it's one way of staying *in touch*– and I mean that literally– with our founders. People soon become long ago and far away, but to have something of them or something they used or touched is a bridge of sorts. The craze for sports memorabilia has much the same impulse. A quick internet search revealed that Mickey Mantle's first bat as a Yankee may soon bring \$200,000.00 at auction, not because of the wood but him who swung it!<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Edited, [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/disciples\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/disciples_1.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> On the day of Peter's death (October 13, 64AD), see Magherita Guarducci, "The Date of Peter's Martyrdom," [www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/PETEMART](http://www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/PETEMART).

<sup>5</sup> [methodistmuseum.com/category/artifacts](http://methodistmuseum.com/category/artifacts).

<sup>6</sup> Mason Levinson, March 12, 2015, [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-23/mickey-mantle-s-first-yankees-bat-may-draw-200-000-at-auction](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-23/mickey-mantle-s-first-yankees-bat-may-draw-200-000-at-auction).

---

That interest continues in the material artifacts of our Christian hall-of-famers is evident from this year's Easter TV specials on the bones of John the Baptist<sup>7</sup> and the possible wood of the true cross brought back to Europe by Constantine's mother Helena after a fact-finding trip to sites in the Holy Land.<sup>8</sup> New analytic techniques as well as computer modeling of the trail of relics allows fresh assessments. Most are fakes, but some are not. Many unusual items are preserved from the ancient world. To me the real import of such relics- when and if verified by responsible historians and scholars- is not any kind of *magical* or *power* association but that they are historical, meaning the remains of real people who left written and physical evidences behind. Paul's letters plus Paul's bones, likewise Peter, his letters and bones. As for the beloved disciple, if he is the same person as John the disciple- which remains disputed- the end of his life is associated with Ephesus, but no bones so far.

We can never be reminded too often that classic Christianity is an historical faith founded on events. Not myth or legend- though both have a place in later Christian imagination- but events through which we claim God acted for the healing and eventual remaking of the entire world as previewed in Jesus. And in his case- and this makes all the difference- there are no bones to validate or visit precisely because he's the only human being whose corpse was used up and transformed in a bodily resurrection from the dead.<sup>9</sup> There are now many saved souls in heaven awaiting the resurrection of the dead as the doorway into the new creation- among them several people I love- but only Jesus can be said to have fully inherited the kingdom of God and already be a resident of the new creation because of his unique resurrection body and what it declares about him and him alone. He is a preview of coming attractions; in him we see the world's future. Only he, as God the Son come among us as Jesus of Nazareth, is stamped *fully approved* as the true source of divine revelation at ground level. He is unique, one of a kind, his entire life, pre-and-post

---

<sup>7</sup> Ker Than, "John the Baptists Bones Found," *National Geographic*, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/06/120618-john-the-baptist-bones-jesus-christ-bible-bulgaria-science-higham>.

<sup>8</sup> Yasmine Hafiz, "Piece Of Jesus' Cross Found? Archaeologists Discover 'Holy Thing' In Balatlar Church In Turkey," [www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/01/jesus-cross-found-archaeology\\_n\\_3691938](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/01/jesus-cross-found-archaeology_n_3691938).

<sup>9</sup> On the difference between the resuscitation of a corpse and the resurrection of the dead, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008), especially chapters 3-4.

---

Easter, a statement about God, through God, and by God. The tomb was empty, the body gone and the appearances commenced because the new body took up and remade the old one; Jesus then came back to show it off, with the nail and spear wounds as the credentials of continuity! God does not throw away creation, beaten and battered and soaked in death as it is; it's still his, and as a sign of its bright future, God remakes the corpse of Jesus as a parable of what's ahead for the entire creation at the end. There are no material remains of Jesus, just his people and our history across two millennia. Peter left bones; Paul left bones; John the Baptist left bones; I will leave bones; you will leave bones; but Jesus left no bones. What he left behind was people under his living influence, and that's us.

### **TURNING TO THE TEXT**

#### **1) vv.15-17 A Broken Man Restored.**

The scene is set in a homey way in verse 15, "When they had finished breakfast...." One almost forgets it's the risen Lord who engages Peter. This is an encounter at the interface of this world and the next. A man who lives this side of death- Peter- converses with one who had already died and come back fully re-embodied with the life of God- the risen Jesus. The one who earlier washed feet now serves breakfast and provides not only a meal but a net full of valuable fish- 153 of them. Is this who God is? If so, then many of our images of God as boss and tyrant have to change. Jesus models for them what he desires from them. He feeds them; Peter and the rest then feed the flock of God. He serves them; they are then to serve others.

God the Son cooked breakfast, and if it wasn't true, no one would ever have dreamed it up; it's just too bizarre. In him they glimpsed their own future and learned by eyesight that grace does not destroy but fulfills nature. What lies beyond heaven as an interim arrangement is the kingdom of God- the entire creation made new and scrubbed clean. It is not about being forever disembodied as an eternal soul but re-embodied as a resurrected human being. As the Apostles' Creed ends, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." After that meeting on the beach they saw every human being- however distorted in body or soul- as glowing with hidden potential, and to each they could say, "You have a future behind anything you've dreamed." Peter was loved and healed by the One he three times denied, and if for him, then for all of us as well. With Jesus, our history does not have to determine our future. It was not until *after he fed them* that Peter was taken aside. First friendship, then soul-level surgery. Never stay away from the table or from this

---

**John 21:15-25 ..... 8**

altar of prayer because of your sins. Trust that Christ is able to give you the desire to be rid of them. Let his grace be a solvent to loosen you from the hold of destructive habits. Trust him, not your own performance.

We do not find out till a bit later that Jesus and Peter took a walk together. Verse 20, “Peter turned and saw *following them* the disciple whom Jesus loved...” “Peter, let’s you and I take a walk.” It was not in front of the other six but in private that Jesus deals with Peter. Jesus is modeling what Peter will afterwards do with others. Not to humiliate in public but to restore in private.

It’s not until people trust you that you have opportunity to deal with the hurts and wounds we’ve come to call *inner healing* or *the healing of the memories*.<sup>10</sup> The past could not be undone; there’s no denying his denials, so it’s not about erasing history. Peter’s disloyalty could, however, be faced, forgiven, reframed, and used to open Peter to his true vocation. He always remembered the denials, but the torment and shame were gone. So if you have memories of sin or trauma or loss or cowardice that torment you, you’re a candidate for the healing of memories. With the help of the risen Lord and a friend who prays with you, you can find freedom and new life. Peter did, and what the Lord does for shepherds, he will do for the flock. Jesus has access to the whole of our histories; he can pull a file at any time. It’s always a humbling experience and sometimes quite dramatic. The Lord knows well the fault lines of our character and the soft spots in our defenses. Your inmost thoughts, dreams, fears and desires are an open book, and if you ask for Christ’s light, he will sort it all out with the thoroughness of amazing grace. Just look how he dealt with Peter, not in public but in private, not before the meal but after, not flat-footed with an angry stare but as they walked. It was soul surgery on the tenderest part of the man- the man Peter once thought the was, the brave and confident man Peter used to be. He’s never be the same after this encounter. Not yet perfect, but whole.

---

<sup>10</sup> See John Wimber, *Power Healing* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1987), Chapter 5, “Overcoming The Effects Of Past Hurts,” 77-96; Mark Pearson, *Christian Healing: A Practical Guide* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1995), Chapter 6, “The Healing of Memories,” 100-118; Harold Taylor, *Sent to Heal* (Roseville, MN: Speedwell Press, 2007), Chapter 8, “Inner Healing- Healing of Memories,” 176-208; Terry Wardle, *Healing Care, Healing Prayer* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Press, 2001), Chapter 6, “The Structure of Inner Healing,” 127-144; Alexander Venter, *Doing Healing* (Cape Town, SA: Vineyard International, 2009), Chapter 15, “Ministering Healing to the Emotions,” 241-256.

---



People are the way they are for a reason, and more than once I've been corrected by God for premature judgments after I found what an awful load people were carrying. If people are strange or withdrawn or annoying or evasive or depressed or prickly or fearful or deceptive or confused or seductive or argumentative or unbelieving or trapped in destructive habits, there's a reason and reasons, and until the tough and tender love of Christ reaches the infected spots and bring the freedom of forgiveness and deliverance, they remain stuck. There's no self-help for what most deeply afflicts us. We naively think that at some point in the Christian walk we will be rid of all our stuff, all our baggage, all psychological knots of the heart, but this is not true. To others we may appear whole by comparison, but Jesus knows better. Sometimes I cry out, "Lord, why is it taking me so long to get better? If you're so great a Savior, why aren't I more saved?" The answer comes back, "Because I'm more patient than you; it's my way of keeping you coming back to me."

Peter was always promising more than he could deliver, "Lord, I will lay down my life for you."<sup>11</sup> Peter wanted to be a hero; I think Peter was a firstborn son. But Peter was not yet able, and- as predicted- denied Jesus three times. Failure is the seed bed of true ministry and wise compassion. It's brokenness that fits us for following, and Peter is Exhibit A.

I'd rather Jesus ask me any question than what he asked Peter, "Simon, son of John, *do you love me* more than these?" whatever *these* happens to be that day. But under interrogation Peter got it right, even his emphasis on the Lord's knowledge of his heart, "Lord, *you know* that I love you." Only then the commission, only then the restored trust, "Feed my sheep." Jesus throws no one away; he's into recycling.

Bob Hoover was once a famous test pilot and favorite at air shows with his modified F-51 fighter. Once, while returning to LA from an show in San Diego, both engines died. With the prayers of two passengers, he managed an emergency landing without injury to anyone. As suspected, his tank had been filled with jet fuel, not gasoline. He asked to see the mechanic, but when they met there was a surprise. Hoover put his arms around the frightened man, "I'm sure you'll never do this again, so sure in fact I want you to service my F-51 tomorrow."<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> John 13:37.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond McHenry, *The Best Of "In Other Words"* (Houston, TX: Raymond McHenry, 1996), 107.

---

It was too good a lesson to lose the man who learned it, and that's what Jesus did for Peter. Broken and under no illusions about his strengths, Peter was now ready to be as gentle with others as Jesus had been with him, "Tend my sheep. Lead them to green pastures. Protect them from lion and bear. Follow me and lay down your life for them." It was to a broken but restored liar and coward that Jesus entrusted his church. My kind of guy! Jesus invites us to come and have our worst flaws exposed, and to do it time and again. It's the only way to grow. What we hide rots; what we take to Christ, he deals with so that layer by layer we grow into true freedom.

Though the three dialogs in verses 15-17 are parallel in structure, there are variations worth noting. The tasks are two: feeding and tending. *Feeding* has to do with preaching and teaching the Scriptures and the faith, *tending* with watching out for and encouraging the people entrusted to your care. Pastors must do both and adapt their lessons to the needs of their hearers. The flock is of different ages and stages: the mature and the not-so-mature, sheep and lambs- to stay with the image. The church cares for people across the whole span of life. That in itself is a major challenge: from genetic counseling to geriatrics, from womb to tomb and cradle to grave. What other organization attempts such a great and messy task? It's why we will never look slick and efficient. We're as messy as a big family.

But here the analogy breaks down. We are not shepherd-and-sheep, nothing so patronizing and dependent as that but pastor-and-people, and that is infinitely more complex because we are peers. Teaching, leading, serving, and watching over souls is more difficult than managing a furry flock on a hillside. Sometimes sheep bite the hand that feeds them; they sometimes nibble themselves away into the path of a wolf; sometimes they lay on their backs and howl because they don't get their way. And if you don't like the smell of sheep, don't be a shepherd!

The goal with people is that they largely learn to feed themselves and care for one another, that they mature in faith and learn the skills to shepherd others. At some point sheep ought to *morph* into shepherds, able to give at least as much as they receive. Keeping people dependent and childish is not what Christ had in mind. But this much is clear: Jesus entrusted care of his movement to a restored failure, Simon Peter. And shepherding remains a key- if partial- metaphor for this work.<sup>13</sup> What

---

<sup>13</sup> See Jim Van Yperen, *The Shepherd Leader* (St. Charles, ILL: Church Smart Resources, 2003); William H. Willimon, *Pastor* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2002); Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1983), especially chapter

---

**John 21:15-25 ..... 11**

shepherds do for sheep, pastors and lay leaders do for churches: things like provision, protection, watchfulness, courage in the face of danger, being trustworthy enough to be followed, leading with a staff and knowing where to go next. Not because they are so wise but because they have a sacred trust from Christ, and if there are people under you, there had better be someone over you!

This is an intensely emotional moment. Peter faces his failures and pledges his love. The best analogy is an adulterous spouse retaking wedding vows. Failure behind, hope ahead, love his only plea. It was the third time Jesus asked that tapped into Peter's grief, "Peter was *grieved* that he said to him a third time, 'Do you love me?'" Jesus would not quit till each of Peter's denials had been healed by a confession of love, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

Jesus wanted Peter free. He was already forgiven. Peter failed, but Jesus used it to make him a better leader as they looked at it together. This gives me hope. Jesus wants his people well-fed and well-watched over by faithful leaders. Healthy churches with lots of new sheep! He wants Peter to raise up other shepherds,<sup>14</sup> and he uses faulty people to do the job. Like me, like you. In this game we all get to play.

**2) vv.18-19 Peter's Future.**

Reliable tradition is that Peter was crucified in Rome at the order of Emperor Nero in the mid-sixties of the first century, and that he was crucified upside down.<sup>15</sup> It is to this future that Jesus refers in a proverb that makes a contrast between a *young man* who sets his own course and an *old man* who must be led about:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will 'stretch out your hands,' and another will gird you and take you where you do not wish to go."

---

5, "Shepherding as Pivotal Analogy," 49-63; and for a classic that bears recovery, St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care* (New York, NY: Newman Press, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> 1 Peter 5:1-11.

<sup>15</sup> "... and at the end he (Peter) came to Rome and was crucified head downwards, for so he had demanded to suffer" (Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 3.1.2).

---

**John 21:15-25 ..... 12**

The good news is he will grow old; the tough news is he will be strung up and thus follow Jesus to the end. This word of prophecy no doubt lent a certain focus to Peter's work; he lived every day in light of his last. The promise he earlier failed to keep would later come to pass, "Lord, I am willing to lay down my life for you."

I find it interesting to note where Peter was in life, and I place him right in the middle. Notice that Jesus lays out *the before*, "when you were young," and *the after*, "and when you are old," which places Peter in the middle, no longer young, not yet old. A prior vocation of fishing and a three year stint with Jesus prepared him for a new vocation: missionary pastor. I'm no longer a young minister full of naivete and promise. I am not yet retired. At sixty-one I'm rounding turn three and wondering what's ahead. The stakes are high, and all I hear is a question, "Will you follow me?"

Three military recruiters addressed a room full of high school seniors. Each had fifteen minutes to make a pitch, but the Army and Navy recruiters went over their times. The Marine was left with only two minutes. He walked to the podium and stood utterly silent for a full sixty seconds. He then said: "I doubt whether there are two or three of you in this room who could cut it in the Marine Corps. But I want to see those two or three in the dining hall when we're dismissed." He turned smartly and sat down. When he got there, the dining hall was packed. The Marine knew that commitment comes from appealing to the heroic dimension in every heart.<sup>16</sup>

There on the same stretch of beach as three years before, the risen Jesus reminded Peter of the call that first stirred him, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."<sup>17</sup> It touched a deep chord within Peter's still heroic but chastened heart. Following Christ is the biggest adventure ever offered. I heard that call forty-three years ago on July 5, 1972 and I've been trying to keep up ever since. I never tire of having him say, "Hey you, yea you— Thrailkill— follow me."

For some it's an assignment or a career; for me it's an adventure. I couldn't go on unless I believed Jesus was going before me, looking over his shoulder and calling back, "Follow me." As one sent to you, I need your prayers and continued friendship, but you are not my flock, never have been, never will be. You are one of *his flocks* I have the privilege of tending for a season. "Feed *my* lambs," he said, "Tend *my*

---

<sup>16</sup> "To Illustrate Plus: Commitment," *Leadership*, Spring 1998, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Mark 1:16-20.

---

sheep.... Feed *my* sheep.” Three times Jesus uses the possessive pronoun: *my, my, my*. You belong to him. Peter was forever a steward, never an owner. Sometimes the Lord says to his pastors, “Take your grubby hands off my flock.” Leadership is a good thing, but a church built around the personality or ego or performance of a solo pastor is a fragile thing indeed. You belong to Jesus Christ, and your primary attachment is to him. We belong to him and only through him to one another.

**3, 2') vv.20-25 The Death Of Comparison And Competition.**

By my reading Peter and John represent two styles of discipleship and leadership. Peter’s is an outer strength that must be guided by repeated commands- twice in only a few verses, “Follow me.... Follow me.” John’s is an inward attachment of love. Peter was a rock of a man who had to be chiseled. John was pliable as clay and could be molded. John follows Jesus like a loyal mascot; his following is not so much commanded as intuitive. Peter, on the other hand, was high maintenance.

When Peter looks back as he and Jesus walked, there’s John, not invited but there anyway, verse 20: “Peter turned and saw *following them* the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Was it just curiosity, or was it a tinge of envy or competition that made Peter ask, “What about *this man*?” That’s an oddly impersonal way to refer to an old buddy who’s been your daily companion for three years on the road. Peter wanted to know, “If I follow you as a martyr, what about this man? What’s his future?”

Jesus looked at Peter, “None of your business, Mr. Curious!” That’s my translation. Jesus was a bit more indirect, but the sharp edge of rebuke is still there, “If it my will that he remain until I come, *what is that to you*?” The Peter who was restored was still subject to correction and rebuke. The final test of authority is probably teachability.

But the issue is two apostles: Peter and John. They do not stand or fall before the court of one another’s opinion; they stand or fall *before the Lord*. It’s not Peter’s job to manage John’s future. To practice the spiritual discipline of non-competition and non-comparison is hard; it’s the way the world trains us. Pastors have different spiritual gifts, different styles, differing histories, different personalities, different strengths and weaknesses. What a freedom to know that I will not be judged by you in an ultimate sense, by comparison with others, or even by myself. I stand or fall before Christ, as do my predecessors and successors all the way back to Saint Peter himself. Accountable to the church, but judged only by the Lord. As Jesus said to

---

Peter’s question, “What is that to you? It’s none of your business. You are to follow me, not worry about what I have for John!”

I’m not called to manage any one else’s ministry. I have troubled enough with my own! What the Lord does with or through others is- as Jesus reminded Peter- none of my business. Note that Peter had a comparison problem even after forgiveness, inner healing, and restoration. I find that wonderfully comforting.

Isn’t it interesting that the third from the last verse of John’s gospel, verse 23, has to do with church gossip and misunderstanding? First the fact of the grapevine, “The saying *spread abroad* among the brethren (and the sisteren!) that *the disciple* was not to die...” Surely Jesus would return before the last of the original twelve died? He would not leave us without a living voice! Wrong. No one asked John. No one went to the leader who could give the answer. And when he died, it threw many into a crisis of faith based on a misunderstanding of a saying of Jesus. So here are the rules for such matters:

- Rule 1: Check out the sources.
- Rule 2: Go to the person who can give the answer.
- Rule 3: Refuse to participate in speculation and rumor.
- Rule 4: Go back to rule 1.

One of the jobs of pastors and lay leaders is to listen in on the rumor circuit and offer corrections. That’s what the author did in the second half of verse 23; he offered correction and clarity, “...yet Jesus *did not say* that he was not to die, but ‘if it my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?’” So if you’ve heard any rumors, or if you have any questions about anything in the church, come to me and we will find the truth together. A church where gossip is rare and rumors are few is a healthy church, and if it was a problem even then, it will be a problem now, and one we will have to constantly monitor. Gossip is demon food, and the clearest path is the shortest one. Go to the people who are responsible.

Tradition is John lived to be an old man, outliving Peter thirty years. The way he glorified God was not by martyrdom as Peter but by his long term witness and shaping the gospel that bears his name. He was a living link with the memory of Jesus well into the last decade of the first century, verse 24: “This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things...” which then draws a comment from the church, “and *we know* that his witness is true.” What a

---

great thing to be said at the end of your life, “We know that his witness is true.”

**1') vv.24-25 The End.**

It was customary for ancient writers to end major works on a double note of exaggeration and humility. They inflated the importance of their subject and their inadequate presentation. A contemporary of John, Rabbi Johanan ben Zakki, wrote:

“If all heaven were a parchment, and all the trees produced pen, and all the waters were ink, they would not suffice to inscribe the wisdom I have received from my teachers; and yet from the wisdom of the wise I have enjoyed only so much as the water a fly which plunges into the ocean can remove.”<sup>18</sup>

John knew the expected pattern and wrote:

“But there are many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain all the books that would be written.”

Jesus Christ, God’s gift, is more than any one author can reveal, which is one reason we have four gospels. The world is not large enough to contain the truth of Jesus Christ. And that, my friends, is the peculiar glory of the Christian church. We are about something bigger than all of us. That was Peter and Jesus. That was John and Jesus. That’s me and Jesus. That’s you and Jesus. He gave his life for us. He then came back alive to restart the movement, and what he does for us, we learn to do for others. We follow him and pass it on. It’s that simple and that deep.

---

<sup>18</sup> Gail O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995), 863.

---