

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Follow the Leader

(John 21:18-23)

Introduction: Taught by a kids' game...

In addition to being good, clean fun, kids' games can often teach valuable lessons.

For instance, in "Simon Says" success comes from following precisely what "Simon" tells the followers to do. You lose the game and have to sit out when you don't do as Simon says. I can remember times as a child when I didn't wait for the "Simon" *cue* to "stand up and flap your arms like a goose." I ended up embarrassed AND out of the game. "Simon says" is a great tool for teaching kids of all ages to follow directions.

In another game, "Follow the Leader", you, the follower, do your best to imitate the actions of the leader. Whatever the leader does, you, the follower, are to do. Each follower in the game is to follow **only** the leader, not other followers. You get into trouble in "Follow the Leader" when you take your eyes off the leader. In this game, to fail to follow the recognized leader is to lose.

One way to view the Christian way is to see it as a grand game of "Follow the Leader." Jesus is our Leader. We are to follow Him. And we Christians get into trouble when we follow anyone other than Him.

Today, in a brief vignette taken from the very end of John's Gospel, Jesus reminds us to follow the Leader.

Last Sunday, our first of two post-Easter reflections, we watched as Jesus joined seven of His disciples on the beach at the Sea of Galilee.

After a horrible night of fishing – they caught nothing – Jesus reminded them that He's all about fishing by having one hundred and fifty three large fish jump into the disciples' nets.

We also watched as Jesus engaged Simon Peter in a redemptive conversation aimed at restoring him after his failure on the night Jesus was betrayed, when Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus.

With that restoration accomplished, we arrive at the final scene in the Gospel of John. This scene gives us a ringside seat to the continuation of this conversation between Jesus and Peter.

Jesus has let Peter know that he is cleansed, forgiven, and restored via the interview by the sea. And there is now no question about how Jesus wants Peter to spend his life - in fishing for the souls of people who matter to God and in tending Jesus' sheep.

In other words, the remainder of Peter's life will be spent following Jesus - doing essentially the same things he had been doing for the previous three years.

But, the resurrected Jesus takes the opportunity of this time on the beach to pull back the curtain to Peter's future. He has made clear the manner of Peter's life from this point forward (serving; fishing). Now, He makes clear the manner of Peter's death.

Peter, and the Life of Peter (21:18-19)

Peter's Early Life

[18a] "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished..."

Growing up in Galilee, Simon (let's just call him Peter) enjoyed the increasing independence that naturally comes with maturity. By the time he had grown to adulthood, Peter was captain of his ship, master of his own destiny, ruler of his own fate.

Peter's life as a fisherman

The Gospels describe Peter as a robust man – and all the movie clips show him this way, too!

Sometimes bombastic, Peter was high energy, enthusiastic and physically strong. He was also an able businessman and was able to handle the tough work of being a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee.

Peter's years of walking with Jesus

Peter's tough constitution stood him in good stead when he began following Jesus. Together, he and Jesus and the other disciples walked the roads of Palestine together in all kinds of weather, sometimes went without regular meals and endured a variety of hardships.

Peter's apostolic ministry, as recorded in Acts

Following Jesus' ascension into Heaven, Peter became the leading apostle through the first years of the church.

While his home base was Jerusalem, Peter traveled to places as far flung as Antioch, other more eastern sites, and westward as far as Rome.

He was a bold spokesman for Jesus. He endured imprisonment. He led with conviction and strength.

That's Peter! He was one tough guy.

Now, when we are thinking about what lies ahead, most of us are drawn to think that the future will be like the past, only more so. At the height of his strength, Peter might have assumed that he would continue strong forever.

Here, Jesus clues Peter in to the reality that the future will not be like the past.

Peter's Later Life

Typically, weakness comes with age

[18b] "...but when you grow old..."

Well, of course, with aging comes certain limitations. We all know that.

Most people who have lived past thirty play the "I remember when I used to be able to" game. The aging process brings with it certain weakenings. You've either observed it or experienced it.

Joints ache. There is a loss of mental agility. The faculties of hearing and sight diminish. Eventually, many aging people need to be cared for.

Of course all of this is true. But this is not what Jesus is driving at. Listen to all that the Lord says.

Peter's old age experience

[18b] "...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." [19a] Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God.¹

This is a clear prediction of a martyr's death.

¹ As recorded in the book of Acts, Peter did suffer persecution. In chapter four of Acts, Peter and John were both threatened by the Jewish Supreme Court (the Sanhedrin) to speak no more about Jesus – a directive they promptly ignored. And in chapter five, Peter, along with the other apostles was flogged and commanded to speak no more in the Name of Jesus. Then we read, "**So they went on their way from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His Name.**" (Acts 5:41-42).

Various accounts from church history assure us that Peter not only lived for Jesus. He died for Jesus. In fact, the more reliable witnesses tell us that he died in Rome by way of crucifixion.²

Under Emperor Nero's purges (thus, no later than AD 68, the final year of Nero's reign), Peter was identified as a leader of the followers of Jesus. For that, he was sentenced to die as Jesus had died - on a cross.

History records, though, that Peter protested. He didn't believe he was worthy to die in exactly the same manner as his Lord. So, he asked that he put to death head downward.³ Simon Peter, chief of the apostles, died on a Roman cross, upside down.

Now, why did Jesus feel compelled to let Peter know that he would one day be martyred?

If you could know what the future held, would you want to?

If you could know that ten years from now, twenty years from now, you'd be living on easy street, sure. Who wouldn't want to know that? But what if your future was similar to Peter's? Would you want to know? Maybe...

Maybe if you'd recently failed to stand up for Jesus, you'd want to know the future if your future involved fighting the good fight and keeping the faith.

I think it was for encouragement's sake that Jesus told Peter he would die by way of crucifixion. *"Peter, your faith will grow to the point where you will stand for Me. You will come to a place where your faith will not fail."*

Peter had been forgiven earlier (vv. 15-17). Now he has a vision for faithfulness and restored ministry.

After describing the manner of Peter's end, Jesus pulls His friend back into the present with a command. It is to be the one constant directive for Peter from this point forward, as it has been the constant since a day at this same beach over three years earlier.

The One Constant (v. 19b)

[19b] And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!"

And where will "following the Leader" take Peter? As of John 21, of course, we don't know specifics. But generally, it will involve fishing for the souls of people for Jesus. And it will involve serving the Lord's people, being a Great Commission Christian, making disciples.

Among the very first words Jesus spoke to Peter were, *"Follow Me!"* (Matthew 4:19)

Now, not long before His ascension to Heaven He repeats these exact words. There is no way Jesus could have made it more clear that *"follow the Leader"* is the name of the game for Peter and for all of us who have come after Peter.

Well, as John tells the story, Jesus and the disciples were walking along the beach as this dialogue between Jesus and Peter was taking place. The others were trailing along behind. At a certain point, Peter turned to look behind him and saw the apostle John.

Peter, and the Life of John (21:20-23)

John, the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved (v. 20)

[20] Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them;⁴ the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?"

² *The Acts of Peter and Eusebius* (Church History 3:1) citing Origen, report that Peter insisted on being crucified head-downward. This is confirmed by Tertullian.

³ All of the physical pains suffered by Jesus, Peter willingly suffered. We don't know that he was scourged, although a pre-crucifixion beating was fairly common, if only as a mercy beating to hasten death.

⁴ Not incidentally, John says that he was "following." While this is an accurate statement of the order on the beach, given the topic Jesus is addressing, it is also likely a statement of John's own commitment to follow Jesus.

On a number of occasions, John referred to himself as “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*” in this Gospel. This doesn’t mean that Jesus loved John more than he loved the others. It means that John self-defined in terms of his relationship to Jesus.

What was most important to John by the time he wrote this book?
“Jesus loves me, this I know!”

Now, John wrote this Gospel quite late in life, after decades of knowing Jesus and living for Jesus and suffering for Jesus. Near the end of his life, he became known as the Apostle of love, something we might guess from the three short letters that bear his name near the end of the New Testament (all three letters are concerned with love in the church).

But, as we read through the Gospels, we find many similarities between the Apostle John and the outspoken Simon Peter.

He and his brother, James, were nicknamed “Boanerges” (sons of thunder). You don’t get that nickname by being shy and retiring!

One time, he was so bold that he (along with his brother James and their mother) approached Jesus with a request to sit next to the throne in the Kingdom Jesus was going to set up. As a young man, John was not in the least opposed to self promotion.

As well, he was a Sea of Galilee fisherman, so he likely had the same physical strengths Peter had.

That’s John. Another tough guy. Well, when Peter looked behind him and saw John following, a question came to his mind. Peter, being Peter, gave voice to his question.

Peter’s Off-Base Question (v. 21)

*[21] So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, “Lord, and what about this man?”*⁵

It’s a simple question and the meaning is pretty clear. Knowing that he will die a martyr’s death, Peter wants to know if the Apostle John would, too.

“Will John be persecuted and put to death? Will he also be crucified?”

Why did he ask this question? We really don’t know...

Misery does love company, and Peter might have been hoping for some shared misery, not wanting to be the only one to die for Jesus. Just as likely, though, is the possibility that Peter was concerned for his younger friend’s welfare.

All that is clear is that Peter was curious about how Jesus was going to deal with John.

It seems to me to be a reasonable question. I could see myself asking the exact same question if I had been in Peter’s shoes. And if I had, I would have been as wrong in asking the question as Peter was.

Jesus would disagree with the old saying that “*The only bad question is the question not asked.*” Peter’s was a bad question.

The One Constant Remains Constant (vv. 22-23)

[22] Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” [23] 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?”

By focusing on John, Peter had violated the disciple’s one and only rule for the only game in town. The game? Follow the Leader. The rule? Focus on Jesus.

Peter wanted to know how God was going to deal with John. He wanted to know the result of faithfulness for John. He wanted to know how John’s life was going to turn out.

⁵ Some have suggested that the question shows there was a rivalry and possible split in the apostolic band. I fail to see that here.

And Jesus saw that to the extent Peter was paying attention to John, he was NOT paying attention to how he (Peter!) should follow. He flatly refused to satisfy Peter's curiosity.

So He told Peter, "*Noneya!*" as in, "*None of your business.*"

Sometimes, the function of our interest in other people's business is a refusal to mind to our own business. I know this firsthand...

When I first was exposed to the Gospel as a teenager, I was quite resistant to the message. I remember saying to the woman who was telling me about Jesus, "*But Mrs. Dodds, you're saying that Jesus is the only way to Heaven. What about all the people who have never heard about Jesus?*"

Not a bad question. I'm still pretty proud of myself for coming up with that one when I was fifteen.

But Joan Dodds saw that I was evading the larger, more personal issue by my question and shot back, "*David, I'm not talking to someone who has never heard about Jesus. I'm talking to you. What are YOU going to do with Jesus?*"

It was that comment that drove me to a consideration of my own need for a Savior and that compelled me to take a more serious look at Jesus - which prompted me to place my faith in Him.

I think Jesus' question, "*What is that to you?*" was intended to have the same effect on Peter.

"Peter, stop worrying about John. The assignment to follow Me is so big that it will take all of your energy and attention to carry it out without worrying about anybody else. John and I will take care of John. You and I, Peter, will take care of Peter."

I believe that if Jesus was physically present with us today, He would say something similar to each one of us here.

Conclusion:

We serve a living, risen Savior who is actively at work in each of our lives, working out God's plan for each of us, longing to use each of us in totally unique ways.

And this God is wonderfully creative! He arranges each snowflake's structure differently than every other snowflake and He has also broken the mold with you.

Do you remember Earl Campbell? Campbell was a star running back for the Texas Longhorns and then for the Houston Oilers NFL team. Earl was a remarkable athlete, and his coach in Houston was the legendary Bum Philips.

Once, a reporter asked Philips if Earl Campbell was one of those athletes who was in a class by himself. The coach replied, "*Earl may not be in a class by himself, but whatever class he's in, it doesn't take long to call roll.*"

Bum was on to something. Each person is in a class by himself or herself. Each one is unique, from DNA to temperament to looks.

And God's dealing with each person is also unique and creative. There are no cookie cutter people and there is no cookie cutter approach that God takes with people. His way with each of us is based on His complete knowledge of our unique temperament, gifts and abilities and opportunities.

Adam committed the original sin in the Garden of Eden. The temptation before each of us is to be guilty of unoriginal sin. "Unoriginal sin" is the sin of believing that God will deal with me as He deals with you, or with you as He does with me.

But Jesus' comment to Peter should put that idea to rest. He'll deal with John in one way and with Peter in another. He'll deal with Dave Smith in one way and with you in another.

If we will embrace this idea, we will recognize that:

- *Jesus will allow trials to come into your life that He will spare others and will spare you some trials that He will allow others to experience.*
One Christian enjoys good health while another contracts cancer or Multiple Sclerosis. One Christian employee gets stuck with an unreasonable supervisor and another is blessed with an understanding boss. God is walking with you through a unique path. Nobody else walks your path. There is no reason to gloat or to be resentful over someone else's life. You, follow Jesus.
- *Jesus has gifted you in ways He hasn't gifted others and has gifted others in ways He has not gifted you.*
Look around you today and you will see some people who are remarkably gifted as teachers, musicians and vocalists. Others are gifted in leadership or administration or hospitality. No one is gifted in everything. Everyone is gifted in something. There is no reason for any of us to be envious or to look down on anyone else. We are all uniquely gifted by Jesus. You, follow Jesus.
- *Jesus will give you opportunities that He will not give others and will give opportunities to others that He will not provide you.*
The ministries of John and Peter were profoundly different. The ministries you might be engaged in will be different from anybody else. You aren't meant to be slotted into a ministry hole. There is room in the church for people to be involved in a variety of ministries: missions, music, prayer, Care Groups, Youth, mowing, children's helper. And outside the walls of the church, the sky's the limit! Serving homeless people and being hospitable to neighbors and getting involved in community service projects and working with Habitat for Humanity. What do you want to do? What are you gifted to do? You, follow Jesus.

I believe that this even applies to churches -

- *Jesus will shape and grow our church in ways He chooses not to shape and grow other churches and will shape and grow other churches in ways that He has not chosen to shape and grow ours!*
Like people, each individual church is uniquely gifted. Northwest is not Communion Chapel is not BRCC is not Crossroads Baptist is not Community Bible Church Northwest is not ... - well you get the idea. And

God has placed us here to carry out a unique Great Commission ministry as surely as He has placed individual Christians to do the same.

Again, in the kids' game, "Follow the Leader" children lose when they follow other followers. Christians who follow other Christians lose out, too. Focusing on God's dealings with our brothers and sisters is focusing on the wrong thing! We are to focus on and follow Jesus!

So, based on Jesus' words to Simon Peter, His call today to each one of us is to be:

- **content** with the sphere in which He has placed us;
- **attentive** to how He might increasingly use us in each situation;
- **grateful** for the ways in which He uses others!