

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon Series: Equipped BY Jesus to Live FOR Jesus

(Studies in John's Gospel)

Discipleship Verbs: Fish. Trust. Follow. Study #7

(John 21)

Introduction: The end of the story, followed by...

Jesus was crucified. Then He was raised from the dead - and when the disciples saw Him, they rejoiced. Just like last Sunday, we remembered Jesus' cross, then we rejoiced as we celebrated the glorious resurrection message of Easter.

End of story, right? Nope. Not according to the Gospels.

As fine a place to end the story as the event of the resurrection would have been, none of the Gospels end with the noun of resurrection. They end with a call to action. They end with a verb.

Luke a call to take the gospel everywhere. Matthew takes us to a mountain in Galilee and ends with Jesus' Great Commission.¹

And then we come to John, who, as is typical, gives us an atypical ending. Today, we turn to John 21 and hear three verbs Jesus gave to those who had already believed.

The purpose of Jesus' interactions with them on this day was not to *convince* them to believe. They already believed. The point was to *commission* them to act on the truth they had already believed.

¹ There is debate about the ending of Mark. If the shorter version is Mark's true ending (Mark 16:8), the last scene is of the women's silence and fear. If the longer ending is correct, Mark ends with a reference to the walk to Emmaus, appearances by Jesus, and the promise of power (Mark 16:9-20), like Matthew, Luke, and John.

We start off with a fishing story because a big part of following Jesus involves fishing.

FISH (vv. 1-7)

"I'm Going Fishin'" (vv. 1-3)

Seven of eleven disciples (vv. 1-2)

[1] After these things Jesus revealed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias,² and He revealed Himself in this way. [2] Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee³, and two others of His disciples were together.

The region of Galilee would have been rich with memories for all the disciples. Galilee had been home to them all, except for Judas Iscariot.⁴ Galilee was where they had all met Jesus.

Now, the gloom of Good Friday was long gone. They were out of the pressure cooker that was Jerusalem, on home turf in Galilee. They were right there by the sea, which gave Simon Peter a great idea.

The disciples got "skunked" (v. 3)

[3a] Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing."

Today, at least in some circles, the words, "*I'm goin' fishing*" speak volumes. "*I'm goin' fishing*" can be the ultimate kick back and take-it-easy phrase. "*I'm goin' fishing*" = "*Get away from it all.*"

But that was not what Peter meant. Peter was a professional fisherman. For him, "***I'm going fishing***" meant, "*I'm going to work.*"

The six others joined Peter and they all went fishing - meaning that they were going to be working.

² When John wrote his Gospel, Tiberias Caesar was the ruler of the Roman Empire. The big inland lake was - temporarily - named after the Emperor.

³ James and John.

⁴ Iscariot = "a man from Kerioth" a city in Judea.

They didn't take rods and reels. This isn't fly fishing with barbed lures. They fished with heavy nets. And since fish bite better at night, they threw their nets all night long.

On that night, though, these pros didn't get so much as a nibble.

[3b]...They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing.

As I've told you before, I can relate. And there's a reason why I haven't been fishing for a very long time.

The fishing trips of my youth were always very clean affairs. I never had to mess with the smelly job of cleaning fish. I never had to carry a heavy stringer of fish from the river to the car.

I excelled at getting skunked on lakes and rivers.

These disciples and I have the shared experience of catching nothing. But I've never had happen to me what happened to them next.

Fishing with Jesus (vv. 4-7)

A risky greeting (vv. 4-6)

[4] But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.⁵ [5] So Jesus said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish to eat, do you?"

Jesus did things here that I would never do.

First, He called the fishermen "**children**." When you next go to Corpus Christi and see seven men coming in from a night of fishing, I do NOT recommend that you address them as "*Children*."

It'll get their attention, but not in the way you hope.

Second, Jesus pointed out their lack of success in fishing. Again, if you see seven guys walking away from their boat at Calaveras Lake or Canyon Lake with no fish, it is not a great idea to yell out, "*Hey, I see you didn't catch any fish!*"

To their credit, these guys didn't mouth off. They just said, "**NO.**" That prompted Jesus to offer a suggestion, which is the third thing I would not recommend.

There is nothing more frustrating to fishermen, mechanics, athletes, or plumbers than listening to an arm-chair quarterback spout advice from the sidelines.

He told them, **[6a] "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find the fish."**

Here is this guy telling THEM, professional fishermen who have been out fishing all night long, how to fish.

Still, and again to their credit, they took the Stranger's advice. After all, it wasn't like they were going to catch less fish than they already had.

[6b]...So they cast it, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great quantity of fish.

Yes, of course, they had fished from the left AND the right hand side of the boat all night long. It wasn't a change in tactics that changed the outcome. It was Jesus.

And as soon as John saw the fish racing for the nets, something clicked.⁶

"Hey, isn't that Jesus?!" (v. 7)

[7a] Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord."

⁵ Remember the problems identifying Jesus in chapter 20, also in Luke 24, Matthew 28.

⁶ Jesus had performed a similar miracle earlier, recorded in Luke 5.

And if John was the first to perceive that this catch was Jesus' work, Peter was the first to do something about it.

[7b]...So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea.⁷

And why did he throw himself into the sea? Because he wanted to see Jesus, and the quickest way to get to the shore was to swim.

Jesus performed a miracle here. And it was the exact same miracle He performed when He first called Peter and Andrew and James and John to follow Him.⁸

There He made sure that His followers knew that *fishing* - for people! - was close to His heart. Here, Jesus is making sure His disciples remembered that *fishing* was still close to His heart.

In their gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all quote Jesus saying when He called the first disciples: *"So far, you've been fishing for fish. Follow Me, and you'll catch people who will join you in following Me."*

John is the only Gospel writer who doesn't include a comment like that. But we hear it in this, Jesus' last miracle. A big part of following Jesus involves fishing.

Of course, fish aren't lost at sea, and fishermen aren't doing fish any favors by fishing.

But people without Jesus are lost. And followers of Jesus go lovingly fishing for people who are far from God.

Last Sunday, we listened to what John said about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances.⁹

⁷ That phrase, ***"...and threw himself into the sea"*** has prompted some to wonder if Peter was trying to harm himself, overwhelmed by guilt over past failures. I sure don't think that was what was going on.

⁸ See Luke 5:4-11.

⁹ He appeared at the tomb to Mary, to the disciples minus Thomas, then to the disciples plus Thomas.

Mary saw Jesus in the Garden and believed. Most of the disciples saw Jesus in the room in Jerusalem and believed. Thomas saw Jesus eight days later and believed.

Those appearances fostered FAITH. This get-together with Jesus at the beach fostered FISHING!

And by "fishing" I mean to say, tell others the good news about Jesus. Evangelism. Gracious, grace-filled, loving evangelism.

There are people you and I know who don't know the good news message that if they believe in Jesus - the One who died and rose again for them - they will receive the gift of eternal life.¹⁰

They need to know the Savior you know. And you may gain a listening ear by serving them, by becoming their friend, by meeting a need, by listening.

Your daily life is your Sea of Tiberias. Let down your net.

Fish at work, in your neighborhood, at school, at the gym. Fish as you lovingly share the good news that Jesus saves.

Now, if your fishing attempts of late have looked like a Dave Smith fishing expedition - not many engaged conversations, not many opportunities - well, maybe it's time to try the other side of the boat.

- For one thing, pray that God would open a door for you to naturally and normally tell your friend your own faith story.
- Boldly walk through that open door. Speak.
- Ask your friend how you could pray for him, for her.
- Tell your friend your story. Ask to hear theirs. Then tell them Jesus' story.

But go. Fish. Lovingly, sensitively, creatively, graciously, bring your friends to Jesus.

¹⁰ See John 3:16; 1 John 5:13; Luke 16:1-13; Acts 1:8; Galatians 6:10; Colossians 4:6; 2 Timothy 4:5.

The story continues.

TRUST (vv. 8-13)

Jesus Provided a Great Catch (vv. 8-11)

[8] But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about two hundred cubits away, dragging the net full of fish. [9] So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already made and fish placed on it, and bread. [10] Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." [11] So Simon Peter went up and hauled the net to land, full of large fish, 153; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.

That last comment, the counting of the fish, lends an undeniable air of credibility to the story. There weren't a lot of fish or even "about a hundred and fifty fish." No. They were precise to the last fish - one hundred and fifty three.¹¹

Here's the thing. They caught nothing all night. At Jesus' word they cast on the other side of the boat and instantly caught an overflowing net full of fish.

As they prepared to eat, John tells us in deliciously memorable words how Jesus served them breakfast.

Jesus Provided Fish and Bread (vv. 12-13)

[12] Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to inquire of Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. [13] Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise.

¹¹ Scholars have made lots of guesses about the significance of "153." (1). The ancients believed that there were 153 kinds of fish, indicating that the appeal of the Gospel was universal. (There isn't much evidence that ancient peoples believed this.) (2). If you add the numeric value of the Greek letters in the name "Simon" (76) to the numeric value of the Greek letters in the word "fish" (77), you get one hundred and fifty three. (3). The Trinity is represented by multiplying 3 and 50 and then adding 3. Me? I think the point is that they caught a bunch of fish.

Do those words sound familiar?

If they do, it is because they are very similar to the way John described Jesus breaking the bread and distributing the fish at the feeding of the five thousand. (John 6)

We've already tied in the fish-catching with Jesus' first calls to His disciples to *fish* for people. Here, with the enormity of the catch, Jesus is building their faith, He is vision-casting, for a great catch of fish.

I think that Jesus wanted the disciples to connect what He was doing *here*, with the fish, with what He had done *there*, with crowds.

At the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus multiplied fish and loaves and fed a great crowd of people.

On that day He was responsible for seeing that everyone got all the food they needed. He provided.

The disciples were in charge of distribution, not production.

On that day, the disciples understood that they had to depend on Jesus if they were going to see fruit from their labors. They could only distribute what He provided. He alone was responsible for results from their efforts to serve Him.

At the beach, the disciples re-learned this invaluable lesson.

They caught, by Jesus' provision, what they wouldn't have been able to catch without Him. Going forward, they will have to depend on Him if they want to see any fruit / fish from their labors.

And today, you and I affirm the exact same thing.

Jesus has told us, ***[John 15:5] "apart from Me, you can do nothing."*** Unless we abide in Him, "stick close to Him," we won't bear fruit.

We won't become more and more like Jesus, and we won't produce the fruit / fish of bringing our friends to Jesus. We must trust Him for all results.

One more item to comment on from the morning at the beach.

Jesus already had a charcoal fire going with fish on the grill, ready for the seven disciples to eat when they got to shore.

We have no idea where Jesus' fish came from, but I think it is a wonderful picture of grace and kindness that He had food for them to eat after they had labored at His bidding.

He provided their daily food. We can trust Jesus to provide us what we need. We can be content with what we have because what we have is exactly what Jesus deems we need.

Jesus is trustworthy. Trust Him.

Then, shortly after the breakfast dishes were cleared away, we come to a final exchange on the beach, this one an extended conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter.

The Lord has given all disciples two marching orders so far. Fish. Trust.

Now, speaking to all of us, He turned His full attention to the Apostle Peter (Jesus calls him "Simon" here) and gave the third. Follow.

FOLLOW (vv. 15-23)

Follow. Despite Having Failed. (vv. 15-17)

Jesus and Peter: Round One (v. 15)

[15a] Now when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon¹², son of John, do you love Me more than these?"¹³

¹² It is worth noting that Jesus said, "**Simon, son of John,**" and not "**Peter**" (which means "rock") for Simon hadn't exactly been "Rocky" lately.

¹³ Note Mark 14:29, where Peter claimed that even if all the others fell away from Christ, he wouldn't.

In other words, "*Simon, do you love Me more than the other disciples love Me?*" It was a good question because Simon had made this claim on the night before Jesus died.

The word for *love* that the Lord used here is the uniquely Christian Greek word *agape* - "*Simon, do you love Me UNCONDITIONALLY more than the others do?*"

Simon might have been surprised by the question, but he answered quickly.

[15b] "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You."

It's a good response. But Simon didn't *exactly* answer Jesus' question.

For one thing, he didn't tell Jesus that he loved Him more than the others did. For another, in answering, Simon didn't use the word *agape*, but another Greek word for love, *phileo*, which speaks of a brotherly affection.

But Jesus accepted the answer, and then told Simon, ***[15c] "Tend My lambs."***

Peter probably thought to himself, "*Well, that was random.*" And we can almost see him heading back to whatever it was he was doing before when Jesus asked him a nearly identical question.

Jesus and Peter: Round Two (v. 16)

[16a] He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?"

The only change in this second question was that Jesus didn't ask Simon to compare his love with the love of others for Jesus. It is binary. "*Do you or don't you love (agape) Me?*"

Simon gave exactly the same answer.

[16b] "Yes, Lord; You know that I love (phileo, again) You."

To which Jesus replies, ***[16c] "Shepherd My sheep."***

I'm guessing that Simon was surprised that Jesus had asked him the same question twice. He was undone when Jesus asked the same question a third time.

Jesus and Peter: Round Three (v. 17)

[17a] He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love¹⁴ Me?"

Ouch!

[17b]...Peter was hurt because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You."¹⁵

With that, Jesus repeated what has become by now a formula.

[17c] "Tend My sheep.

Especially in light of his recent three-fold denials, Simon had to know that Jesus was calling him to repentance.

After the third question, he would have heard the rooster crowing in the background. Grieved at what he did on the Lord's last night, he saw his denials for the ugly things they were. He came to grips with his sin.

And in the moment of this exchange with Jesus, Peter repented, received a fresh foot-washing from Jesus, and was made clean, again.

Don't miss the conclusion of each of Jesus' questionings. All three times, He told Peter to take care of people, serve, fulfill his ministry.

The Lord took a man who had failed, urged him to come to grips with his failure, and then recommissioned him to serve people in His Name.

This exchange between Jesus and Peter speaks powerfully to me. Like Peter, I'm quite familiar with failure.

Parsonel Failures...

For instance, I've got lots of experience with failure when it comes to preaching.

Once, I was describing what happened in Old Testament times on the Day of Atonement. The High Priest's job on that day was to enter the Holy of Holies and offer sacrifice for the sins of the people.

He wore a robe, on the bottom of which were sown bells. From the sound of the bells inside, the people could tell if God had struck the priest dead or had accepted the offering.

What I said was, *"The people standing outside could hear the sound of the High Priest tinkling in the Holy of Holies."*

Truth be told, though, that's a pretty easy story to tell. Other failures aren't quite so easy to talk about.

I could tell you of on-going battles with
...selfishness and greed (which the Bible says amounts to idolatry. Colossians 3:5)

...grumbling and complaining. (in the Old Testament, God dealt severely with His people's complaints; Numbers 14)

...a tendency to worry rather than to trust.

...to act without praying.

...to speak when I should be silent, to be silent when I should speak.

I could go on.

I'm not proud of those failures, past or present. But they are all a part of my story. It's a story God wants to redeem for His glory, just like He wanted to weave Peter's three denials into a story of grace and service.

¹⁴ Here, Jesus asked Peter the question with the Greek *phileo*, not *agape*.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis once wrote, *"On the whole, God's love for us is a much safer subject to think about than our love for Him."* Peter would have certainly agreed.

He wants to do the same with the stories of struggle in your life.

What does Jesus say to us, today, who fail? *“Own up to your sin. Turn from it. Get over it. Serve again. Follow Me.”*

I’ve got a great verse for people who fail.

[Prov. 24:16] For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again, But the wicked stumble in time of disaster.”

Following Christ means that we repeatedly get up after we inevitably fall.

Falling is not remarkable. But when we fall / sin, we turn to the Lord, admit our sin, receive His forgiveness, and serve again, completing the full cycle of the yo-yo. Down and up.

We are to follow, despite our failures. Then, as Jesus goes on to tell Peter, we are to follow, no matter the cost.

Follow. No Matter What. (vv. 18-19)

[18] “Truly, truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to put on your belt and walk wherever you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will put your belt on you, and bring you where you do not want to go.”
[19] Now this He said, indicating by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had said this, He said to him, “Follow Me!”

Throughout his life, Peter had enjoyed a lot of freedom to do what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it. He no doubt believed that freedom would continue.

Jesus told Peter that in the future he won’t enjoy the freedoms of the past.

He will soon suffer the limitations of beatings and imprisonment. Peter will die a martyr’s death. History tells us that he died like Jesus did, by crucifixion.¹⁶ He was faithful to the end.¹⁷

¹⁶ Some traditions tell us that Peter was crucified upside down.

Jesus’ charge to Peter was to follow. Period. No matter what.

And that is His charge to us, too. Is life tough these days? Are you facing trials and troubles? Relational challenges? Problems in your marriage? At work? In your health?

Jesus is not unsympathetic. He cares and hurts with you in your pain. But your pain doesn’t give you a “pass” from following.

FOLLOWING when in pain unleashes the Holy Spirit to shape your character.

FOLLOWING Jesus when it is hard to follow Jesus adds extra brilliance to your witness.

FOLLOWING hard after Jesus when suffering or when opposed brings great reward from God.

Peter understands. He is to follow Jesus, despite failures and regardless of suffering.

To the final question Peter asks, Jesus adds one more detail to the call to follow.

Follow. Look to Jesus. Not to Others. (vv. 20-23)

“Lord, what about him?” (vv. 20-21)

[20] Peter turned around and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them - the one who also had leaned back on His chest at the supper and said, “Lord, who is the one who is betraying You?”

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

I think that there was more than simple curiosity behind Peter’s question.

¹⁷ Eventually, Peter did fight the good fight. By letting Peter know that he would one day NOT deny, but would be martyred for his faith, Peter was no doubt encouraged. He now had a vision for future faithfulness. There is hope, not for perfection, but for real change in this life for the believer who walks with Jesus.

Adversity is always hard to bear. It is especially hard if you are the only one bearing it. So, it turns out that misery really does love company.

So, Peter wanted to know, *“Is John also going to die a martyr’s death? Is he going to suffer, too, like I am?”*

Well, we know that John did suffer greatly for Jesus. He endured exile on the island of Patmos for his faith.

But Jesus didn’t tell Peter that. In fact, Jesus didn’t respond as Peter had expected him to at all.

“Peter, You. Follow. Me” (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!”¹⁸

Peter’s question revealed that he was far too interested in how Jesus was going to deal with John, and far too little interested in simply following.

After about five seconds of reflection, I’ve noted the same tendency in myself. Super concerned with someone else’s following. Watching carefully to be sure that guy follows. Unhappy with the degree to which my friend follows.

Jesus’ comment to Peter is an important word to me. The way my brother or sister follows Jesus has no bearing on my following Him.

I am to do what I believe Jesus has called me to do. You are to do what you believe Jesus has called you to do.

We are each to fish for people for Jesus’ sake, trust Jesus to bring about results from our service, and follow Him - despite our failures, no matter what, even if we follow alone.

¹⁸ John adds, *[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?”*