April 26, 2015

“The Way Forward”

John 21:1-19

**FCF**: The way forward – where do we go from here?

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) The Christian life means to follow Christ.

(magnet) And so we must look to Him with every step.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION**:

The Corps of Discovery, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, is said by many to be the most momentous expedition in American history and one of the greatest adventure stories of all time. Their task, in the words of President Thomas Jefferson (READ quote):

***"…the object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, and such principal streams of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado or any other river, may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce…"***

The preparation was extensive. Lewis studied astronomy, botany, navigation, medicine and biology, and other disciplines. He collected two tons of goods – guns, ammunition, medical supplies and scientific instruments. He had to, given their understanding of what it would take.

You have to wonder what was on his mind, standing on the edge of a cliff in a way, about to take that first step. Did they know what this would take? Could they see the way forward?

We’ve been looking at the life of Peter the last few weeks. He and the other disciples faced the same question, with far greater stakes. Could they see the way forward? Can we?

**SCRIPTURE READING**: John 21:1-19

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

We have a way of making things more complicated than they need to be. Yesterday was the Maroon and Orange Game, the spring game for Virginia Tech’s football team. Many teams have something like this. There are two schools of thought on this. There’s the game clock view that just wants to get it over with and escape without any injuries. Then there’s the spotlight view that wants the fans, the players, and the coaches to have a chance to see what the team is made of. Which would seem to be the way to go. Yes, there’s risk but you have to play.

We have a way of making things more complicated than they need to be – even in the Christian life. What is the Christian life? We have endless books and seminars thrown at us. And there’s a place for all that. But really the Christian life simply means to follow Christ.

Let’s set the scene. The disciples are in Galilee, home for most of them and where they’d spent most of their time with Jesus. They are fishing, a familiar task. And they are torn. This has been a tumultuous stretch of days. Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday. And Jesus appears yet again. John describes it in an interesting way (READ John 21:1, 14). Three times Jesus is said to have “revealed” Himself to them. Meaning He is making known the unknown, causing something unseen to be seen. But what? We see it in His call to Peter (READ John 21:19b). What is being revealed? Who they were to follow and what it meant to follow Him.

Put another way, the Christian life means to follow Christ. The Christian life means to follow Christ. And to follow Christ, we must look to Him with every step. This becomes clear in three ways. First, in our failure. Second, for our growth. And third, with our service.

1. **IN OUR FAILURE**

Remember how Peter had boasted he would stand firm but had withered under the questions in the courtyard. What does following Christ look like after we fail? Two vital things.

1. *Never Surprising to Him*

First, our failure is never surprising to Jesus. It never takes Him off guard.

1. Predicted

Jesus knew Peter’s denial was coming. So when it came He was saddened but not shocked.

1. Pursued

Jesus predicted this of Peter. And then He pursued him. What, after all, do we see here? Jesus draws near. Who instigated this event – drawing their memories back to another miraculous catch? Who invites them to breakfast and even ennobles them by including their catch?

1. *Never Final with Him*

Our failure is never surprising to Jesus. And it is never final with Him either.

1. A renewed assignment

Peter is not shelved. He receives a renewed assignment. Three times Jesus tells him, “*Feed and tend my lambs and sheep. I’m not giving up on you. I’m going to work in and through you*.”

1. His future path

Jesus gives Peter a renewed assignment. And a glimpse into his future path (READ John 21:18-19a). This is an allusion to Peter’s death, a crucifixion that would come some 30 years later. “*Peter, you will continue to serve me. You will be identified with me and suffer for my sake*.”

The Christian life means to follow Christ. And so we must look to Him in our failure.

*Application:*

Why is this vital to know? Because of our inevitable failure. And our typical response to that failure. We all tend towards one of two directions – either to despair and give up trying altogether or to put more pressure on ourselves. Either one will leave us heartbroken in the end.

What did Peter learn from Jesus that day? “*Peter, as you follow me, you need to look to me. Even in your failure. It is not as you think. It is not as you’ve learned. Not with me*.”

*Illustration:*

When Thomas Edison and his staff were developing the light bulb, it took hundreds of hours to manufacture just a single bulb. One day, after finishing a bulb, Edison handed it to a young errand boy and asked him to take it upstairs to the testing room. As the boy turned and started up the stairs, he stumbled and fell, and the bulb shattered on the steps. But instead of rebuking the boy, Edison reassured him, turned to his staff, and told them to make another bulb.

When it was completed several days later, Edison walked over to the same boy, handed him the bulb, and said, “*Please take this up to the testing room*.” Imagine how this boy must have felt. Edison was restoring him to service. And there was something of Jesus there.

1. **FOR OUR GROWTH**

Which brings us to the second point. What does following Jesus look like in terms of our growth? How do we mature in the faith? Not in the ways we might initially sign on for.

1. *With Pain*

For it comes with pain. I recall C. S. Lewis’ line in A Grief Observed (READ quote):

*What do people mean when they say, 'I am not afraid of God because I know He is good'? Have they never even been to a dentist?*

1. What Peter wants

What does Peter want? He’s eager for restoration. He jumps in the water. He’s quick to haul the fish. But he’s grieved at Jesus’ questions. He doesn’t want to face the elephant in the room.

1. What Jesus gives

We see what Peter wants. But what does Jesus give? Despite the protest, He says, “*Let’s go there*.” All this happens over a charcoal fire. The last time we saw that? In the courtyard of the high priest. That and then the threefold questioning are clearly intentional, meant to recreate the scene of the threefold denial. Peter wants to pass this over. Jesus is determined to bring pain.

1. *With Purpose*

But not pain without purpose. There is a surgery taking place here by the lake.

1. His role as a leader

For starters, by doing this in front of the other disciples, Jesus is restoring Peter as a leader.

1. His need of deep healing

But beyond that, Jesus deeply heals him. He’s washing out the wound, setting the broken bones. Asking not because He doubts Peter’s love but to bring it out. Asking not so He can hear it but so Peter can say it. Giving Peter the chance to wipe out the old memory and create a new one.

The Christian life means to follow Christ. And so we must look to Him for our growth.

*Illustration:*

Jesus described this earlier in John’s Gospel (READ John 15:1-2). The vinedresser does two things. First, he removes unfruitful branches. Second, he prunes the rest. Meaning he takes a knife and pares them down to a stub. The cut goes deep and feels like death. But has purpose.

*Application:*

Why is this vital to know? Because Jesus is determined to make us fruitful. Which means He has to bring out the pruning knife. And our response to that pruning is usually to say, “*He hates me. I can’t take it. This is pointless*.” Some of us may even walk away for a time.

But what did Peter learn from Jesus that day? “*Peter, as you follow me, you need to look to me, to trust me, even as I work for your growth. It’s not as you feel. Not with me*.”

1. **WITH OUR SERVICE**

Which brings us to the third point. What does following Christ look like in terms of our service? What does it demand? An understanding of at least these two things.

1. *Always Dependent*

The first being that our service to Jesus demands our dependence on Jesus.

1. Fishing as a metaphor

The count of 153 fish is clearly a mark of eyewitness detail. But it is also a metaphor, a symbol. Jesus had called the disciples to be fishers of men, an image they could readily identify with.

1. The necessity of His help

He is speaking to a point of their strength and experience. But what’s interesting is that each time Jesus is with them, they never catch anything without His help. Which is meant as a lesson.

1. *Beyond Expectations*

The great catch pointed to their dependency. And then to look beyond their expectations.

1. Number of converts

Meaning that as they looked to and leaned upon Him, they would see countless conversions.

1. Extent of the impact

The sheer number of converts would go beyond their expectations. As would the extent of the impact. In place of disease, emptiness, broken relationships, injustice, and racism there would be healing, fullness, reconciliation, justice, and peace. No limit in numbers or in the impact.

The Christian life means to follow Christ. And so we must look to Him with our service.

*Illustration:*

Let’s look back to John 15 (READ John 15:3-5). What must the branch do? Simply abide in the vine, to depend on it, to find its life in the vine. And what is the inevitable result? Fruit. Vitality, flourishing, and reproduction. And without the vine, there is nothing at all.

*Application:*

Why is this vital to know? Because of our innate desire to be productive, to have something to show. And our tendency to rely on ourselves, on our cleverness, planning, skills, and abilities. These gifts of God end up becoming distorted as substitutes for God. And where does that leave us? Barren and dry. We think we know best and can handle things on our own in our relationships, our parenting, our marriages, our ministries, our labors, our careers, our studies. But we don’t and we can’t. And it’s all dead, lifeless, empty, and futile without Christ.

What did Peter learn that day? “*Peter, as you follow me, you need to look to me – even in your service. It’s not like you’re used to, not like what you see around you. Not with me*.”

**CONCLUSION:**

This is not always easy. Part of us wants to resist this and chafe against it. But at the same time, those who have followed Jesus any length of time will speak to a deep rightness, a sense of fittedness and fulfillment to this – as though we were made for it. Which we were.

Think with me of *Cinderella*. There’s a new film version of it in the theater I would highly recommend. You know the story. A young girl is cruelly treated by her stepmother. The prince throws a ball. The girl loses her glass slipper. The search is on to find her. She’s discovered. The slipper fits. The girl and the prince get married and live happily ever after.

There’s a fittedness there, of course, with the glass slipper. But it’s not just there. It’s in the story itself. The tale and the film have resonated, struck a deep chord. Why? Part of it is the moral center to the tale, the need to “have courage and be kind,” and the beauty of forgiveness. But another part is the longing for a happy ending in a cold and cynical world. Ultimately, we weren’t made for a tragic tale or an unresolved plot. There’s a longing within. The story fits us.

Just as with following Christ. Now, I don’t mean the Christ you’ve misheard about. I mean the One we discover in the Scriptures. You were made to follow Him, to walk behind Him, to walk in line with Him, to walk near and beside Him. For we are never more human than when we give up our self-righteousness, self-dependence, and self-determining ways and pledge ourselves to follow Jesus with every step. And we are never less human than when we don’t. In our failure, for our growth, and with our service – we were made for this, to follow Him.

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