

"Stay on Task"

Over the past few weeks we have been reading from the final chapter of John and his account of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples. Peter is the disciple who is gets the most attention here and today we pick up where we left off last week with Jesus asking Peter if he really loved him. So to make this scene from our Gospel lesson a little more real and understandable, I will be playing the part of Jesus and I've recruited a couple of volunteers to play the parts of Peter and John. Our story begins:

Jesus: "Peter, do you love me?"

Peter: (visibly upset) "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Jesus: "Ok then, serve me and my church. It won't be easy. Now you have the freedom to come and go as you wish. But eventually there will be a time that you will stretch out your hands (motion like on a cross) and be carried where you do not want to go. Peter, I'm going to level with you here. You will be martyred for me. You will die a painful death by crucifixion but your death will glorify God. That's not for a while though. Until then, I need you to feed my sheep."

Peter: "Lord, I don't know what to say."

Jesus: "Let's talk about it as we walk. Follow me" (Peter and Jesus walk away. John follows).

Peter: (looks back and notices John). "Wait Jesus, before you say anything, what about this man? We've been pretty close over the years. What's going to happen to him? How is he going to die?"

Jesus: "Peter, I'm not going to answer that. We're talking about you here, not John. If I want him to live until I come again, what's that to you? Be faithful to my Word; stay on task. You follow me." (applause and thanks).

Just like Peter, we are often curious to know the hidden will of God, both about ourselves and about others, aren't we? Peter happened to hear Jesus reveal something about his own future. But that did not change the tasks laid out before him. "You follow me," Jesus says.

All of us can probably relate to this exchange between Jesus and Peter because we want God to reveal certain things to us don't we? But unlike Peter, who in essence was told by Jesus that regardless of what was known or not, the task is still the same, we, on the other hand, usually want to know the hidden will of God for our planning purposes. "God, give me a sign whether I should move to another state." "Lord, tell me if my marriage is going to survive." "Heavenly Father, tell me if my sick Mom is going to make it?" Of course, there is nothing wrong with asking God these question as long as it's out of trust. But there is something wrong when we get ticked when things like this are not revealed to us. A lack of an answer that satisfies us might even cause some to question if God is really there. But we have to remember that even though God is hidden, he is still genuinely present and his presence is grasped by faith.

Martin Luther seemed to understand this. In the book, *The Spirituality of the Cross*, author Gene Veith says of Luther that "over and over in his writings, he tells those who are doubting whether they have been saved; those who question whether God loves them; those who think they have committed a sin that God will not forgive, to read God's promises in the Bible and to hold Him to His Word--to remember the objective fact that they have been baptized--to receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion--to cling to the cross of Jesus Christ."¹

I think this is what Jesus was reminding Peter of when he basically said, "what is John's fate to you? You follow me!" Certain things of God are hidden but "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor.5:7). That's something that Peter had to accept and it's something that you and I have to accept. But we accept it knowing that the most important thing we need to know is not hidden; it is revealed to us in the Scriptures. And it is Jesus Christ and the salvation he brings. We are to stay on task and keep the focus on Him and what it is he's calling us to do.

¹ Gene Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross* (St. Louis: CPH,1999), 65.

But even that gets mixed up at times doesn't it? What is Christ calling us to do? I think sometimes, we get caught up in this notion that our mission as Christians is to change the behavior of society. I don't think many would argue that our society seems pretty messed up right now. The moral fabric that is our foundation seems to be eroding away. And as those who confess our faith in Christ, we can easily insert our beliefs into almost anything from politics to social issues and convince ourselves that what Christ is calling us to do is change things in his name. But guess what? The Church's purpose has never been primarily about changing society's behavior.

I read a great blog post the other day from an active duty LCMS Chaplain who wrote about this. He wrote that "Christians from the very beginning have been called **not** to change behavior but to proclaim Christ and Him crucified. We have been called and sent to deliver the promise of forgiveness and everlasting life to a world that has, is, and will always be infected with sin. Gross, vile, repugnant sin!"

"Ours is not a moral crusade," he continues. "Our faith is not contingent upon how righteous we make the society in which we live. Christ is still risen from the dead. Death has still been defeated."²

Wise words for sure. The promise of forgiveness and everlasting life through the way of the cross is the most important message. I'm not trying to be funny here but if it's just a better life we are advertising as the most important benefit of following Jesus, we are selling people short. On the surface, you can still have a pretty good life without Jesus. But you can't and won't have a good eternal life without him. God's plan revealed in his Word is clear. "Jesus is the way; he is the truth; and he is the life" (John 14:6). So we follow him and do what we can to share this eternal message -- not out of judgement or condemnation but out of love--and then let the Spirit take it from there. And this brings us back to Saint Peter.

He eventually got this. Throughout the book of Acts and in his own epistles, we hear him put the cross of Christ at the center boldly proclaiming the one who God revealed to be to the Redeemer from sin and death. And I believe Peter did this until his last day.

Remember that Jesus told Peter he would die for the faith? Well, after many years of proclaiming Christ, that's exactly what happened. According to records of early church history, Peter was crucified under the Roman emperor Nero. Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea called the "The Father of Church History cites the testimony of Clement, the

² Where Does Your Hope Come From? By Graham Glover; thejaggedword.com; 4/27/2016

Bishop of Rome in the late first century, who says that before Peter was crucified he was forced to watch the crucifixion of his own wife. As he watched her being led to her death, Clement records that Peter called to her by name, saying, "Remember the Lord." And while it is more tradition than recorded fact, it is said that when it was Peter's turn to die, he pleaded to be crucified upside down because he wasn't worthy to die as his Lord and Savior had died.³

But how he died is not as important as who **he was** when he died. Peter, the impulsive, impetuous, and sometimes scatter-brained sinner was an empowered follower of Jesus. He stayed on task even when life for him was really uncomfortable as the Scriptures certainly attest. Life for you and me can be really uncomfortable as well, can't it? But there is hope and comfort in this world for us just as there was for Peter. Our sins and failures; our tragedies and our misfortunes through our repentant faith are hidden by the blood of Christ. And this frees us. We don't have to wonder about God's secret plans or his hidden agenda for our lives or the lives of our loved ones. This empowering truth allows us to heed Christ's command to follow Him with complete confidence knowing he will never leave us. Isn't this a message worth following? Isn't this life saving message worth sharing?

You know we began with the words of Jesus and Peter and I want to close with Peter's words **about** Jesus. At the conclusion of his second letter he writes these words of God. "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity" (2 Peter 3:18). What a powerful reminder to stay on task my friends. In the name of our crucified and risen Savior. **Amen.**

³ John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville: Nelson, 2002), 60.