



SERMON TITLE: "Peter's Bad Example"

DATE: September 13, 2020

SCRIPTURE: John 13:33-38

PASTOR: Jim Thompson

"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

What do you do when you don't understand Jesus? You know broadly what he is asking of you, to be faithful and obedient. But what about the specifics? What if you think he's saying X, Y, and Z, and so you start to act on it. But the whole time he's really saying "be still," and you can't hear him. Jesus' disciples felt this on occasion 2,000 years ago when we walked and talked among them. Sometimes they acted on misunderstanding sinfully, but sometimes it was just an issue of fully following what he meant. Either way, no one likes to live there. We want to know. So, as his disciples today, what should we do if we find ourselves misunderstanding Jesus?

In John 13:33-38, this is where Peter finds himself, and he's a little frustrated that Jesus isn't explaining it so he can eventually understand. So, what does Peter do? Well, he doesn't set the best example for us, and we can learn from him how to not-respond to Jesus when we don't understand him.

Here, the first thing that Peter does is that he interrupts Jesus. Jesus was just launching into his longest discourse on the night he was arrested before going to the cross, and he barely gets started before Peter interrupts. And in his interruption, Peter changes the subject and rewinds to something Jesus said earlier because Peter wasn't satisfied with the answer he had. And even though Jesus calmly replies, Peter bursts out in response, "Oh yeah! I'll die for you." And yes, there is some unique irony here, but Jesus knows that Peter is not done wrongly acting on his misunderstanding. Jesus says, "Actually, Peter, you won't die for me; you'll deny me three times before the rooster crows." Jesus sees how far off Peter is in his assessment and understanding of things.

And just like that, Peter's words dry up. This is how John ends the dialogue and the chapter. But John does this on purpose. He wants us to reflect. What if Peter was thinking, "Wait a second, I just saw what happened with Judas. I'm definitely better than that. I'll show Jesus." Or what if Peter just realized that he was getting a little too loud and drawing too much attention to himself, which was also drawing too much attention to his misunderstanding. We're not totally sure. But John wants us to consider, if we were in Peter's shoes, what would we do? As this is not too hard to imagine because we feel these kinds of things in our own lives. So, what do you do when you don't understand Jesus?

First off, here's what not to do...

If you're confused about what God is doing, you should never presume on his plan, act in extremity, or deny his love and presence.

All three of these come from Peter's responses to Jesus. But this is not just Peter. Many of us, when bad things happen, are tempted to immediately think, "Well, that's just proof that either God's not real or he doesn't love me." We downshift to denial far too easily. Others of us think that just because we have a passion that feels spiritually justified like Peter, we're entitled to know more than we do about what God is up to. Obviously, passion for the Lord isn't wrong, but sometimes, even without us knowing it, it can breed presumption, and that doesn't lead to understanding. But there's good news...

It is not primarily our grip on God, but his grip on us that will sustain us when we don't understand what he's doing in our lives.

And where is this in the Jesus-Peter interaction? Well, this is the understanding that Jesus himself had about his own life and Peter's! And there is so much freedom in this truth. We have to know that he is the Sovereign. We have to see him as the One who sees what we can't, both now and in the future. No matter what we don't understand or what frustrates us, he is still strong enough to keep us in his love. He is still good. He is still God. And if we are his, he will hold us fast. It's his grip on us that is going to keep us and sustain us and be faithful to us no matter what. And for just a brief moment here, Peter doesn't believe it. Peter walked on water, but he also sank. And we have to learn from his mistakes. We have to hold fast to the truth that he *will* hold fast to us.

Furthermore, what was Jesus talking about when Peter interrupted? He was talking about loving each other. And in light of Peter's frustration, we can read these commands to love in a nuanced way. Think about it...

Loving one another sacrificially (like Jesus) guards us from wrongly acting on our misunderstanding because it uses our energy to rightly prioritize others above ourselves.

Love gives and sacrifices for others. But it also guards us. Do you know how much less time you have for sin and presuming on God if you're trying to find new, happy ways to love others? So much less. But Peter couldn't hear the invitation to this kind of love. He was too busy with his own agenda. That's why he had to go and interrupt God. He wasn't listening to what Jesus was saying. He wasn't abiding in Jesus' words like Jesus says in John 15. And this leads to what else we should do when we're wrestling with misunderstanding...

Spending time immersed in God's word has the power to calm, repurpose, and/or change our misunderstandings.

What do we do if we're misreading or misunderstanding God? We go and read and soak in what he's already said, and pray that it would change us. As William Brisbane says of Scripture, "O, Precious volume! How many bruised hearts hast thou healed! How many dungeons hast thou illumined! How many prison doors hast thou opened! And how many captives hast thou restored to freedom and to God!" We know that we need to be in God's word to hear from him and know how to follow him. And, of course, we want to be lifted out of the life-pressure that comes with misunderstanding. But often, we don't want to do the hard work of making space to hear from God in his word. How can we abide in it, immerse ourselves in it, and be changed by it if we're not creating time to be with him in Holy Scripture. It has the power to transform our misunderstandings. And climactically,

Trusting God means depending on his word and his promises, even when we don't have all the answers we want.

Peter couldn't live with "Where I'm going you can't follow." That wasn't enough for him. He had to have more. And so we have to ask, "Am I ok to live with unanswered questions in my life?" This is the kind of faith and trust that pleases God. Yes, the language of faith and belief can be defined in terms of allegiance or faithfulness, but it should also be defined as trust even when the answers you want seemed threatened or out of reach. The kind of faith we're called to is a dependent reliance on who God is and what he has promised, regardless of situation. God's promises are not good and loving based on the level at which we understand them. They are good and loving because *he* is good and loving. And believing his promises with a confidence that isn't demanding – this shows God off as worthy and glorious and awesome.

We must remember the old Martin Luther prayer, "God give me clarity, but not at the expense of faith." That's what this is about. Pursuing understanding of what God wants is great! But guess what might be even greater? Joyfully casting yourself on his promises when you still don't have the clarity you want. This is so crucial to life with God. And it also reminds us of the place where God cannot be misunderstood, the cross.

Where is it that Jesus was going that Peter couldn't? To the cross. And it's here that God's love and God's promises and our faith all collide. And it's here that we have all the clarity we need from God. The cross tells us that our sin is worse than we could imagine, but it even-more-loudly tells us that God's love is better than we can fathom. The cross tells us that our misunderstandings, presumptions, and denials don't define us. If we are trusting Jesus for eternal life and salvation, God's self-giving love in the gospel is what defines us. The cross speaks a better word that we often feel. In the face of our sin, doubt, and uncertainty, the cross is God's clear word of grace: "I forgive you, you are mine, I love you."

Fellowship Greenville 3161 S Highway 14, Greenville, SC 29615-5906

And more than this, the resurrection of Jesus is the surety that all of our misunderstandings will one day finally die with death itself. The gospel of Jesus crucified and risen is the place where all of our demands for clarity must bow. This good news is the decisive reason why we are to cling to God with everything we've got even if it doesn't include understanding that immediately satisfies.

Discussion Starters

- Personally, what stood out to you the most in this passage/message?
- Why did Peter interrupt Jesus?
- What is something in your life right now that you wish you had more understanding on?
- How does Peter act like a little child in this passage?
- When is a time where you have presumed on or denied God or his love because you were frustrated?
- How should we think about God's word as it relates to our misunderstandings?
- Who is someone you know who happily trusts God even without all the answers?
- How is the gospel the place where God is most understood?