



A DIFFERENT KIND OF HERO



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John 21:15-25
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During the first half of the 1929 Rose Bowl, Roy Riegels, playing for the California Golden Bears, picked up a Georgia Tech fumble and ran sixty-nine yards—in the wrong direction. A teammate finally caught up with him and turned him around just before he scored for the other team. His misplay created a change in field position that eventually resulted in points for Georgia Tech. Riegels was so distraught that he had to be talked into returning to the game for the second half by his coach, Nibs Price. “Coach, I can’t do it,” Riegels said. “I’ve ruined you, I’ve ruined myself, I’ve ruined the University of California. I couldn’t face the crowd to save my life.” Price told him, “Roy, get up and go back out there—the game is only half over.”

When we fail, there’s still more life to live. We have to get up and go back out there, so to speak. Peter, who failed Jesus, had to get up and go back out there, but he had to do so with an entirely different approach. Our approach to rest of life might also need some refining.

Peter, standing by a charcoal fire, had disowned Jesus three times. In the first half of John 21, Jesus restored Peter by serving him breakfast around a charcoal fire. Does Jesus love Peter? The answer, of course, is yes. Another question emerges in the second half of John 21: does Peter love Jesus?

‘Do you love me?’

John 21:15–19:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶**He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”** ¹⁷**He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you**

love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸**Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”** ¹⁹**(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”**

Jesus essentially asks Peter the same question three times. Peter essentially answers it the same way three times. Jesus then follows Peter’s answer with essentially the same exhortation three times. The question concerns whether Peter loves Jesus. The answer is yes. The exhortation is to care for Jesus’ sheep. Two different Greek words are used for “love.” John is fond of synonyms, so different meanings should not be assigned to the different words. (In this passage, he depicts Jesus as using two different words for shepherding, two different words for the flock, and two different words for “know.”)

Verse 15 literally begins with the word “therefore.” What follows, then, is based on what has gone before, apparently the statement in verse 14 noting that Jesus had appeared to the disciples for a third time. Now asks Peter the same question three times.

Jesus calls his disciple “Simon son of John” instead of “Simon Peter.” The name Peter means “rock.” Peter hasn’t been much of a rock lately. Jesus comes to reshape the rock.

The first time Jesus asks the question, he asks Peter if he loves him “more than these.” The question is whether Peter loves Jesus more than the other disciples love Jesus. Peter, thinking that his love excelled that of the other disciples, had boasted that he would lay down his life for Jesus (Mark 14:29, John 13:37). Now he gets the point. He’s not interested anymore in measuring his devotion against anyone else’s. He simply says, “Lord, you know that I love you.”

Peter is hurt, wondering why Jesus questions his love three times, and finally responds, *Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you*. Peter doesn't just say that he loves Jesus. He says that Jesus knows that he loves him and finally bases his assertion on his belief that Jesus knows everything. Jesus, the one who knows everything, never disagrees with Peter's assertion. In fact, he asks Peter to shepherd his sheep. He wouldn't ask someone to shepherd his sheep who didn't love him. By asking the question repeatedly, by never disagreeing with Peter's answer, and by asking him to shepherd his sheep, Jesus is leading Peter, the one who faltered, to the place where he knows that he loves his Lord.

The questions get Peter to tell Jesus that he loves him three times. When Peter boasted that he would lay down his life for Jesus, Jesus told him, *Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows you will disown me three times* (John 13:38). After Peter denied knowing Jesus for a third time, *at once a rooster crowed* (John 18:27). How many times did Peter disown Jesus? Three. How many times does he tell Jesus that he loves him? Three. In a stroke of touching poetry, Jesus restores Peter. In this heartbreaking and heart-mending scene, Peter is face to face with Jesus, knowing that he has failed Jesus but knowing just as certainly that Jesus has forgiven him and loves him still. And by the end of this scene, Peter knows that he loves Jesus.

Yes, Peter loves Jesus.

Do you love Jesus?

Do you love Jesus? Well, if you love Jesus, why you don't do what he says all the time? How come you fail so often? Why aren't you fully committed to him? How come you don't live up to even your own expectations? Because of our failings, some of us who try to follow Jesus tend to doubt whether we love Jesus. Someone once handed me an essay titled "Do I love God?" which marshaled evidence that called his devotion into question. Doubts about love for Jesus even cause some people to give up following him altogether. They say to themselves, "If I'm so bad at this, why bother?" A friend of mine who concluded that she wasn't living up to Jesus' expectations told me, "I'm out." As far as I know, she never came back.

Consider, on the other hand, the story of Peter. He failed Jesus. In fact, he failed Jesus in multiple ways. First, he failed Jesus by deeming his commitment superior to that of others. Second, he failed Jesus by boasting

that his commitment was superior to that of others. Third, he failed Jesus by promising to prove his superior commitment. Fourth, he failed Jesus by drawing a sword to prove that his commitment was superior to that of others. Fifth, sixth, and seventh, he failed Jesus by failing to live up to his promise when he disowned Jesus three times. If Jesus sees that Peter, the seven-in-one failure, loves him, then it is quite possible to both love Jesus and fail him.

Although we should never make excuses for our failure as disciples, we should expect it, and, more importantly, we should expect Jesus to make use of it. Failure tends to humble us—to disabuse us, for example, both of deeming ourselves superior to others and of making promises to prove ourselves. Jesus doesn't retreat from our failures but instead loves us in and through them—and if he loves us in and through them, he uses them to restore us, reshape us, and refine our love for him.

Sure, you've failed Jesus. Do you love him? Watch for what he does, for how he comes to you in a particular time, place, and way that is just right for you and you only. He won't make breakfast for you over a charcoal fire and ask you three times whether you love him (that was for Peter), but rest assured, he knows you, and he knows what you need—he knows "all things," as Peter observes—so that you may not only be convinced that you love Jesus but also that your love for him may be refined.

Do you love Jesus? If you're even asking the question, if it's important enough for you to ask the question, then the answer is self-evident: yes, you love Jesus. Jesus didn't need to ask Peter three times whether he loved him. Peter needed Jesus to ask him. If the question keeps appearing in your mind, it means you know the answer.

If we love Jesus, what should we do?

'Feed my sheep'

What should Peter, secure in Jesus' love for him and in his love for Jesus, do now? "Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep." The image of a shepherd is applied to the leaders of Israel. Moses and David, the two most prominent leaders in Israel's history, were both shepherds. God bemoaned the shepherds of Israel, who failed the people (Ezekiel 34). Then Jesus arrives and says, *I am the good shepherd* (John 10:11). Now he arrives in Peter's life and turns him into a shepherd—a good shepherd.

A good shepherd loves Jesus and does his work because he loves Jesus. Peter loves Jesus. Now he knows he loves Jesus, and now he knows what he has to do: lovingly lead the people of Jesus. Jesus, even now, is shepherding Peter and showing Peter how to be a shepherd. Jesus is feeding him fellowship, love, and forgiveness. Peter has feasted on the Bread of Life around the charcoal fire that has now become the place of restoration. Peter, motivated by Jesus' love for him, will now respond to Jesus' call. He'll be serving up the same kind of meal Jesus served him on the beach, overflowing with fellowship, love, and forgiveness.

Not only that, he'll also turn others into shepherds. Listen to what he says to elders at churches in Asia: . . . *shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory* (1 Peter 5:2–4). Where do you think he learned that? He learned it from one who served him breakfast on the beach.

How is Peter to shepherd the sheep? He is to do it the same way Jesus did it. Jesus said, *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep* (John 10:11). Like his Master, Peter will die for the sheep. Jesus uses the illustration of putting on clothes to show Peter how he is to shepherd the sheep. He used to dress himself and go where he wanted, but when he grows old, someone else will stretch out his hands and put them in handcuffs or chains; someone else will dress him and take him where he doesn't want to go. The illustration points out "by what kind of death he was to glorify God." The verb translated "wanted" ("you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you *wanted*") is also used to convey what Jesus *wants* of another disciple in verses 22 and 23. Someone else will take Peter where he doesn't want to go but where Jesus does want him to go.

When he was younger, he was willing to die for Jesus, but not like this. He said he would lay down his life for Jesus, and he meant it. In the garden of Gethsemane, when the authorities came to arrest Jesus, Peter drew a sword and struck the high priest. By all appearances, he was ready to continue his rampage, but Jesus stopped him (John 18:10-11). A death like that in the garden would not be a death that would glorify God.

Jesus has an entirely different kind of death in mind—one that is brought about because Peter loves people so

much. Then when they finally come for him, he is to do what the Good Shepherd did when they came for him: put away the sword, turn the other cheek, take up his cross. He is to do what he eventually would tell others to do:

1 Peter 2:19–23:

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

Jesus then simply tells Peter, "Follow me." Just before Peter asserted his willingness to die for Jesus, Jesus told him, *Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward* (John 13:36). Peter couldn't follow then, because he thought following meant taking up the sword. Now he knows that following means putting away the sword, receiving insults without retaliating, suffering without threatening. The kingdom of God will not be ushered in by the power of the sword but by the power of love. Instead of being a soldier who would take lives for the kingdom, Peter will be a shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep. Now, Peter will follow Jesus, just as Jesus had said he would. For Peter, following Jesus means that he will be a shepherd who loves the Lord's people so much that he will suffer and lay down his life for them.

What should you do if you love Jesus?

If Jesus loves you and if you love Jesus, what should you do? First of all, it is quite possible for you to completely misunderstand what you're supposed to do. Peter, though he knew Jesus as well or better than anyone, was convinced that he should take up a sword for Jesus. He couldn't have been more wrong. How are we prone to misunderstand what Jesus wants us to do?

Many of us want to do something we construe as great, something impactful, even something world-changing. We more or less assume that glorifying God in the best

sense involves doing something we construe as great. “Do something great for God,” people say, which sometimes sounds to me like, “Do something great for yourself,” so that, doing something great for God, you can feel great about yourself. Didn’t Peter do something great, something extraordinarily courageous, in the garden? With his act of heroism, couldn’t he have sparked a righteous rebellion? Jesus was popular enough that others could have been persuaded to take up swords as well. Didn’t Peter do something great? Uh, no. Wanting to do something great, he did something stupid. Yes, he loved Jesus, but his love for Jesus needed to be refined.

Rest assured, Jesus has something great for you to do—many great things, in fact. Your love for Jesus just needs to be refined—and not just once but again and again. As the apostle Paul says, *be transformed by the renewal of your mind; be renewed in the spirit of your minds* (Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:23). Refined in what way? Refined so that your definition of greatness increasingly conforms to Jesus’ definition of greatness. For Jesus, greatness means laying down your life for others—sacrificing for others in the ultimate sense, if necessary, but always in a daily sense (Mark 10:43–45).

Sacrificial love: that’s a better target than the slave of the high priest, isn’t it? Then, again, of all the people in the world, who do you love, and how exactly do you love them?

In many cases, whom you’re supposed to love is obvious. I know, for example, that I’m called to sacrificially love my wife and children. On the other hand, I can’t assume that I know how to love them; to love them best, I need to know them better. Loving one person is different from loving another person, because each person is different, and loving one person at a certain age is different from loving that person at a different age, because people change.

I also know that I’m called to love the people in the church I serve as a pastor. How do I do that? I believe that Jesus has called me as a shepherd and that, as a shepherd, I am supposed to teach the Scriptures. “Feed my sheep,” Jesus says to Peter—and to me. This means that I spend a lot of time with my nose in the biblical text, trying to make sense of it, and with my eyes on a computer screen, trying to craft meaningful sermons. There have been times—not so much recently—when I questioned whether there wasn’t a better way for me to love people. Wouldn’t it be better if I were more active? This I have wondered. But I have been encouraged—by my study of the Scriptures, by what I sense from the Lord, and by many of you—to persevere.

For some, following Jesus will lead them into places of prominence. Pat Gelsinger is both a follower of Jesus *and* CEO of VMware. He’s in a position to influence, for sake of righteousness, the way a major company does business in the world and, in his spare time (he has spare time?), to spearhead Transforming the Bay with Christ, which brings together church and business leaders, including some of ours, for the sake of impacting the Bay Area with the gospel.

Then again, following Jesus will require some to leave places of prominence and go, perhaps, where they do not want to go, at least at first. In 1990, J. Robertson McQuilin left a position of prominence as president of Columbia International University in South Carolina to care for his wife, Muriel, who was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. He said he had made a promise many years ago—to have and to hold “in sickness and in health, till death do us part”—but also that his wife had sacrificed for him and that it was time for him to sacrifice for her. “She’s a delight,” McQuilin said. “It’s not that I have to; I get to.”

If you love Jesus, he will refine your love for him, oftentimes in and through your misunderstandings and failures, up to and including the time and circumstance of your death. Death is an enemy, even an enemy of God (1 Corinthians 15:24–26, 54–55). That Jesus can even speak of a death that glorifies God should give us pause. Then again, Jesus, in his death and resurrection, triumphed over death—so that even death becomes his servant, to further the purposes of God. Even in death, “we are more than conquerors,” as Paul says (Romans 8:37). Moreover, Jesus has in mind the kind of death by which you are to glorify God.

As your love for Jesus is being refined, you may have to let go of the man or woman you thought you should be.

If we worry that we’re going to forever misunderstand what Jesus wants us to do, note that Jesus himself takes the initiative with Peter and gets him to do what he wants him to do. Jesus tends to get us to do what he wants us to do, even if we don’t want to do it at first: *another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go*.

I didn’t set out to be a pastor, and once I sensed the Lord transitioning me from the news business to the sheep business, I didn’t set out looking to be a pastor in the Santa Clara Valley, the home of my youth. Yet, here I am. How did I get here? I think Jesus got me here.

As our love for Jesus is being refined, we'll need to stop worrying about how Jesus is refining other people.

'What is that to you?'

John 21:20–23:

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?”²¹ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?”²² Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”²³ So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

Peter then turns and notices John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, following Jesus. (The Greek text does not say he was following “them,” just that he was following. Evidently, he was following Jesus). Jesus and Peter must have gotten up after eating and went for a walk. In view of the way Jesus answers Peter’s question, it seems that Peter is wondering whether John will suffer similarly. Jesus says, *If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?* Jesus says John’s fate is not Peter’s concern. The text says the other disciple was loving and following Jesus—what Jesus had asked Peter to do. Jesus has his plans for what that will mean in John’s life. They may or may not involve similar suffering. If Peter begins comparing his path to that of other disciples, his focus will be off what Jesus has called him to do. Jesus again tells Peter, *You must follow me.*

Stop comparing. Stop being distracted by what someone else is doing—how she’s succeeding or how he’s failing, how things are easier for him or harder for her. Learn from other people, by all means. Incorporate the bits that resonate with who you are and discard the rest. But stop looking to others to figure out how you’re doing. Stop being envious. Stop feeling superior. Regarding the fate of someone else, “what is that to you”? The fate of someone else is Jesus’ concern, not yours. Instead, look to Jesus, who has plans for you that are unlike his plans for anyone else.

Early on, when I was trying to figure myself out as a pastor, wondering if I had what it took, someone told me, “Your problem is you want all the gifts.” He was right. I needed to look to Jesus.

Calling all Peters

Jesus is calling the Peters of every generation, who may have had the wrong idea about things, who may have botched things up a bit, but who still cast themselves toward Jesus to be nourished by his love.

John Hanneman, a pastor at PBC Cupertino, says this:

It is easy for me to dwell on my failures and think I have wasted my life. My default mode is that I am no good and that I don't have anything worthwhile to offer. I am not sure where this comes from. There are many things in my life that would reinforce this message, but most likely it comes from the deceiver who whispers his lies into my ear. When I hear that condemning voice, all I want to do is go fishing or play golf. But then I read this sweet passage. I hear Jesus calling me to sit awhile and share a meal. I hear his acceptance of my inadequate and impure love. And I hear his word to feed his sheep. The idea that God would want to use me and put me to service is beyond my understanding. Why would he want someone like me? But he does.¹

And how does he use us? He refines our love for him so that we love others sacrificially. What does it mean to love others sacrificially? What does it look like in a life? It involves choices, doesn't it?

Here's a choice: You've qualified for the U.S. Olympic team and you're actually favored to win a medal. But your wife is pregnant with your first child and her due date falls during the two-week Olympic competition. Your wife urges you to go. What do you do: go overseas for the Olympics or stay for the birth of your child? That's precisely the choice that American rower Bill Havens faced in 1924. Havens chose to give up his place on the team for the games in Paris in order to be with his wife during the birth. It turns out his son Frank was born four days after the Olympics were over.

Twenty-eight years later, in 1952, Bill Havens received a telegram from Helsinki, the site of the Olympics that year. It read: “Dear Dad, Thanks for waiting around for me to get born in 1924. I'm coming home with the gold medal you should have won. Your loving son, Frank.” Bill Havens' son Frank had won the gold medal in the 10,000-meter canoeing event.

Which is better: competing in the Olympics, with a chance for “greatness,” or receiving that telegram? I’d say Bill Havens made the better choice.

When you were younger, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted. You were going to be a hero, but you ended up like Peter—“Peter, who was going to be the great hero waving his sword around like a blundering idiot in the garden, then lying and swearing because of a question from a servant girl.” Will you let Jesus into the place of failure, guilt, and brokenness? Will you let him love you there? Will you be convinced, though your love for him isn’t perfect, that you love him still? Will you lay down your life for the sheep? Will you follow him? Now that you’re older, will you let someone else dress you and take you where you do not want to go? Will you do it for Jesus? Don’t worry about what everyone else is doing, whether they’re following Jesus, how they’re following Jesus. You, follow him. Look to Jesus, and he will refine your love for him so that you love others sacrificially.

Thus we come to the end of the gospel of John.

Uncontainable

John 20:24–25:

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

25 Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

The gospel of John has featured the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” but only now, at the end, does the author identify himself as that disciple. The pronoun “we” in verse 24 is most likely akin to our editorial “we”—meaning, it’s a reference to John himself. John used the pronoun in a similar way in at the outset of the gospel, in John 1:14 (“we have seen his glory”), and in his epistles (1 John 1:2–7, 3 John 12).

Just as Jesus did many signs other than those reported by John (John 20:30–31), he also did many other things

that could not be included in the gospel. How can John say that if everything Jesus did were recorded, the world wouldn’t be big enough to contain all the information? If Jesus is who John says he is, the incarnate word who is God himself, the creator of the heavens and the earth, then indeed, there would be no way to build enough libraries to contain, or even enough computers to store, the information.

Who Jesus is—not to mention what he has done, what he is doing today, and what he will do—cannot be contained.

NOTES

- 1 John Hanneman, “Restored from Failure” (Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino), Oct. 19, 2008.
- 2 N.T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 66–67.