

John 21:15-25

“Feeding the Sheep By Following Jesus”

November 6, 2022

Pr Josh Anderson

Ordinary Time

Our sermon this morning will be briefer than normal, given the nature of the other elements of our service this morning, as we install the Reverend Jeffrey Prager as an assistant pastor for our congregation.

In our sermon text this morning from John 21:15-25, Jesus not only restores Peter to himself after his betrayal of Jesus on the night of arrest, but Jesus also commissions Peter as a pastor to serve the people of God.

And as we’ll see this morning, what Jesus calls Peter to, above all things, is not to pursue giftedness or intelligence or rhetorical eloquence in his pastoral, but rather, Jesus teaches Peter capacity as a shepherd of God’s people will be determined by the extent to which he follows Jesus.

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word from John 21:15-25.

*15 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."*

*20 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?"*

*24 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.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

*Let's pray...*

This conversation between Jesus and Peter recorded for us here in John 21 is an immensely rich one, and we will certainly not come anywhere close to mining its depths this morning.

I just want to make three simple points regarding Jesus' instruction here regarding the pastoral ministry.

First, in this passage, Jesus teaches Peter that a pastor will demonstrate his love for Jesus in no way more than this — that he feed his sheep.

Simon, son of John, Jesus says, *“Do you love me?”* He asks him this question three times. And each time Peter responds in the affirmative, the last time emphatically so — *“Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!”*

And in response to Peter’s assurance that he indeed loves Jesus, Jesus *tells him in turn: “Feed my lambs.” “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.”*

Jeff, as you begin your ministry among us, and as you return to active service as a pastor after some years away from that ministry, remember this.

The way that you show your love for Jesus is not performing dramatic and glorious acts of spiritual achievement.

No, the way that you love Jesus best is by simply tending and feeding the sheep that belong to him.

These people in this room — these men and women and children, they are precious to Jesus. As Paul will instruct the elders in Ephesus, these people in this room are lambs bought and redeemed with the precious blood of Christ.

And so the way you will love Jesus in your ministry is always going to be intimately connected to the way in which you love and serve the people in this room this morning.

Pastoral ministry is not glamorous. It is not for the ambitious, at least as the world counts ambition.

No, pastoral ministry, at its heart is simply to love and serve and tend and feed the beautiful, precious, holy lambs for whom our Lord Jesus spilled his blood.

But, as our Lord teaches Peter, for one who would be a faithful pastor, to feed the sheep faithfully according to the way of Jesus always involves suffering.

In fact, in some sense, the way in which faithful pastors feed their sheep is by giving their lives in suffering for and with the precious blood-bought lambs they serve.

Listen again to verses 17-19, as Jesus explains to Peter what it will mean for him to feed Christ's 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 Peter was to glorify God.)*

The longer I serve as a pastor, the more I realize that there is a particular form of suffering that is prepared for those who serve the church faithfully in ordained pastoral ministry.

All Christians have the cross laid upon them, but a fundamental part of the special and holy calling of a pastor is a call to a special and holy form of suffering.

Part of the suffering involved in being a pastor is that you are now a man under orders. Your life does not belong to yourself any longer.

You serve at the behest and call of the church. To be a pastor is to surrender your ambition, your independence, and to go and serve wherever the church of Jesus Christ calls you.

And at least for now, Jeff, this congregation is the place where the church has called to you serve. This congregation is now the limit of the horizon of your ambition until and unless the church calls you to some other field.

Part of the suffering of a pastor is the way in which you are called to bear the burdens of others in a particular way.

Pastors are called into the most difficult moments of people's lives, they are called to serve at the frontlines of the suffering of others.

I have a vivid memory of this. I won't give the details of the situation, but when I was in my second year of pastoral ministry in St. Louis, I got a phone call in the middle of the night and ended up going to one of the city hospitals to be with a young couple in crisis who were members at the church I served.

I remember getting out of the car in the hospital parking garage at like two in the morning. I was 29 years old.

The parking garage was totally quiet and almost completely deserted. I remember thinking to myself — this is probably the worst moment of these people's lives - these two people I love and care about — I had done their wedding just a year before — and this situation that they're in is the worst thing they have ever faced — maybe the worst thing they will ever face in their lives.

And I'm supposed to somehow walk into that hospital room into all that pain and grief and suffering and anger as an ordained representative of Jesus. I remember thinking — what am I doing here? I feel completely inadequate for this.

But of course that hospital is exactly where I was supposed to be that night. The sheep that belong to Jesus need their pastors to show up in places like that. And that's what Jesus calls pastors to do.

If you're going to be a faithful pastor, it's impossible to avoid stepping into the darkest and most challenging places in people's lives.

Whether it's grief or sin or conflict or despair or anger or violence or doubt or death — whatever it is — pastors are called to show up in the worst moments of people's lives and shepherd men and women in the name of Jesus.

There is much more that I could say about the particular forms of pastoral suffering, but suffice to say this.

Jeff, if you are to be a faithful pastor in the way of Jesus, then you will learn that the primary way you will feed the sheep that Jesus has given you is by suffering with them and for them.

But the final thing that Jesus teaches Peter about what it means to be a faithful pastor is summed up in verses 19-22.

*19 And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."*

*20 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!"*

To be a pastor is to follow Jesus. It is to stick close to Jesus. It is to abide with Jesus.

And ultimately, the particular reward of the pastoral life is Jesus himself.

This, I think, is the great secret of pastoral ministry.

Jeff, you may already know this, but to remind you, you should know that there is possibility, in the pastoral life, of an intimacy with God that is nearly impossible, I think, in any other calling.

It has something to do with the time you're given to read the scriptures and pray, I think, and your calling to steward the mysteries of God.

It has something to do with how you're called to watch over people's souls and sit with men and women who love Jesus in their moments of deepest vulnerability and suffering.

It also has to do with the way the ministry strips you of any illusions of control or ultimate competency, and forces you again and again into reliance on Jesus for your strength, your approval, and your confidence.

In the pastoral life, if you can avoid the siren call of false ambition, if you can learn to not begrudge the cost, if you can learn to not cling to all that you must give up in terms of honor, and wealth, and freedom, if you will simply press into your calling, if you press into the Scriptures, if you press into prayer, if you press into the Sacraments, if you press into daily service to the people of God, then I at least can testify to this -- Christ himself will be there waiting for you, and he will give himself you in a way you would never have received him otherwise.

Jesus will sustain you. Jesus will be present with you. Jesus will be your very life. And this will be your reward.

Jeff, as Jesus tells Peter, don't worry other people, other ministries, other callings. Don't worry about what's going to happen to them.

You, our Lord Jesus says, are called to follow him.

And this itself is the reward of the ministry.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!