

Apr. 15, 2018
Lesson 7: Follow Me
Scripture: John 21: 15-25

Context:

Déjà vu is the idea that we have already lived through something and we experience it again somehow. There is a recollection that an event or conversation is familiar. Déjà vu occurs today in our Gospel lesson. After Jesus meets the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias with a breakfast on the beach, they move to conversation. The conversation will reveal that Jesus has a plan for the disciples and the early church.

The main conversation is between Simon Peter and Jesus with some of the same themes present in their relationship before Jesus' death and resurrection. Three times Jesus asks if Peter loves him. Peter responds each time, the last sounding hurt and upset that Jesus would inquire repeatedly. Jesus' response is that Peter is to "feed Jesus' lambs" and then predicts his death that will glorify Jesus. He closes with the line: "Follow me." The passage has a twofold purpose: to confirm Peter's importance in the early church as a lover of the Lord and to describe his death that is foreknown by Jesus.¹ Thus, most would have not been shocked with the early deaths of apostles and other early church leaders. This exchange in the Gospel of John confirmed Peter's primacy and authority in the Gospel of John.

Following Jesus' answer to Simon Peter, there is another point brought up about the fate of the other disciple following them. Throughout John, there is the referral to "the disciple that Jesus loved." This disciple, alongside Simon Peter, is seen with Jesus during important moments. Simon Peter inquires to what will happen to him. Jesus then makes it clear that this is none of Peter's business. For all Simon Peter and the others are to know, the disciple could stay alive until Jesus comes back again.

One could speculate that some of this relate to who is in charge as verse 23 relates that "rumors" began to spread about the identity of this disciple and who would die first and who would live forever. Some scholars think this line was a resurfacing of the question of the two disciples would be greater.² The Gospel of John would be setting the story straight. Now, a point to critique here is that most people use the last lines to assert that John, the disciple of Jesus, is the primary author of the Gospel. However, the author says that the "beloved disciple" wrote these things down and that "we" know the things this author says is true. Thus, the Gospel of John could have writings from the apostle John, as well as an author in the early church piecing everything together.

The author concludes by reminding the audience that Jesus continued to do ministry and that he made several other resurrection appearances. However, the author says that so many things happened, it would be difficult to record every single thing. The last chapter drives the point home though that the disciples are the ones who are to follow Jesus and let their own lives testify to the good news of Jesus Christ.

¹ Gerard Sloyan, "John," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Jon Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1988), 230.

² *Ibid.*, 231.

Application:

When I was at the Sea of Tiberias, it was so moving to picture this scene. Jesus and Simon Peter are walking down the beach together after breakfast with a beautiful sunrise and the feel of the wind whipping across their faces. So much has happened. Where do you begin? Jesus cuts to the chase to ask Simon Peter if he loves him. It's an intimate moment, much like those when we walk along the beach with our friends or loved ones. During the conversation, Jesus makes it clear that the first and foremost job of Simon Peter is to love him by following him. No matter what Simon Peter faces, that is his chief job.

“Do you love me? Follow me. Feed my lambs.” Those are Jesus' final words to Simon Peter, the disciple who denied him three times. Yet this is the same disciple to whom Jesus has entrusted the early church. Those are the same words that Jesus says to us. At times, we mess up in our faith walk. Like Simon Peter we deny him, interrupt him, or ignore him. Yet Jesus still calls us to keep going. Whenever I have a hard day or deal with someone who is difficult, I remember Jesus' words to Simon Peter about feeding the lambs. That means even when those difficult people buck and rebel and don't listen, we are still to love them and feed them, listening to God's nudge about what to do or say. We don't have to change or tell them what they want to hear, but we are calling to be who God has called us be. That is our chief priority and concern.

The second part of this text is also important for our discipleship as we see the early disciples trying to figure who was who and who was the most important. Unfortunately, this is not just the struggle of the early church. Even today in the church we can get caught up in comparing who is the greatest and who is the most important. We see it in both clergy and lay circles.

Some laity believe that because of their family name, the amount of money they give, and their prominence in the community, they are entitled to certain positions or visions for the church. They may even think that they should be able to pick their pastor who will do exactly as they are told. There are some who believe that certain services are more important than others because of this or that factor.

Within clergy, there is even some of that mentality. We hear talk about people “moving up” from a small to a big church. We have others who claim that some churches are more prestigious than others. There is even an occasional moment where a clergy plot their line of appointments. Or they think that they can plot where their next appointment will be. What church will help me to “the next place” I want to be?

We all need to read this passage and remember that God has created all people as equal. All churches are important. All churches need strong, devoted laity. All churches need strong and loving clergy. Different churches need different pastors. All pastors have different gifts and churches that need them during certain seasons.

One of the many things I love about serving the United Methodist Church is that I know God will lead me where I need to be. My job is to follow Jesus, to trust him, and to love him. He will help everything else fall into place and he will use me wherever I am sent. The same goes for all of us. Jesus is calling you by name to follow him and submit to him. See where you are as a place to bloom and grow, and use the gifts and talents that God has given you. Don't compare yourself to others and think you are any less important because of this or that factor. If you're in a small church keep that hospitality

going for newcomers to feel that same way. If you're in a big church, get plugged in and don't just show up to blend in and be entertained. God has created you to be who you are: a disciple who loves the Lord and has open hands to go and serve.

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