

Breakfast Club
John 21:9-19
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We are nearing the close of our Summer Sermon series where we've been looking at the ways in which the Kingdom of God, that life and power and presence of the risen Lord Jesus, comes near to us in our everyday lives. And one of the illustrations that I've used to explore this subject is the acronym TABLE (Trust, Accountability, Belonging, Laughter, and finally today E for Encouragement). The table, whether it's a coffee table, a dinner table, or even a breakfast table is a place where relationships are given new intimacy, and where loving hospitality turns strangers into friends.

And that is what we hope that this community will continue to become through opportunities for fellowship and deep friendship. In fact, beginning soon this fall, we will be offering opportunities for individuals and families to gather together in small affinity or interest-based groups, to share life and pray and care for one another in a way that invites others to the table. We all need table fellowship, and I'm not just talking about at home with your spouse or family, but a more expansive table that draws you into fellowship with strangers and acquaintances at the Table with Christ, through which real friendship and encouragement are born.

So today, in looking at the final letter in the word table, E for encouragement, we are going to actually go backwards in our story to a time in which there was not a lot of encouragement. It begins in a place of shame, a place of betrayal, a place of discouragement and the main character on whom we'll be focused is Peter.

Peter is Jesus' most passionate follower. He is always eager to drop what he's doing, step out from where he's standing, or get out of the boat and come where Jesus calls. But as Jesus journeys with his disciples towards Jerusalem, he explains to them and to Peter that things are going to get hard, life is going to become turbulent, and they as his disciples are probably going to desert him. And yet Peter resolutely says, "Not I, master." In Mark's gospel Peter says this: "Even if all fall away, I will not. Even if I have to die with you I will never disown you." When Jesus comes into Jerusalem and is arrested, Peter is the first one to draw his sword; he's not going down without a fight. For those of you who are football fans, Peter is like the Rudy Ruettiger of the Bible: he's all heart.

Yet as the reality of Jesus' death sets in, Peter chooses to slink into the shadows, opting anonymity over dedication. Peter stands in the flickering candlelight as Jesus is imprisoned in Caiaphas' house, and there three times, as if he had amnesia, Peter quietly denies Jesus three times, just as the master said he would. And there after realizing what had just happened, Peter heaves with remorse, doubled over in disappointment and regret after realizing that he had abandoned his master in his time of need, and Peter just runs away. When push comes to shove, Peter's no more than a coward.

The next day, Jesus is executed as a common criminal, mocked, scorned, beaten, and belittled. He dies and with him all the hopes, all the promise is wrapped in grave clothes and buried in that cold and barren tomb. Heavy silence and inconsolable loss press down on that Sabbath Saturday, the one day in all of history when nobody, not one person, believed. When you add the guilt to the despair, there is no telling what Peter felt that day.

Sunday morning arrives with earthquakes and Easter confusion. What could this mean? Confusion and hope commingle with one another as they try to fathom, What could this possibly mean? And Peter, what does he do? What does he do in the face of this resurrection reality? He goes back home. He just goes back to fishing. He went back to what he did before he met Jesus. We all tend to go back to what we are used to when we're scared; we retreat to the familiar when life seems unbearable.

What Peter does is not so much a safe decision as it is a tragic one. Peter has followed Jesus for the better part of three years. He has seen the lame walk, he has seen the blind restored to sight, he has seen dead people raised. In fact, he has even seen the risen Lord on two different occasions. And yet Peter still chooses not to trust and go back to what he knows. So often this is true of people who call themselves Christian, as well. It seems true enough, the stories are nice and teach sweet lessons, but it doesn't really have much relevance to my daily living.

Something else is holding Peter back in this moment. It's not a lack of knowledge, it's a severed relationship. It's a broken heart. And Jesus is about to show us how to fix all that. So turn with me if you will to John 21 beginning at verse 9, on the lakeshore, perhaps the very lakeshore where Jesus called Peter initially to leave his nets and follow him, because he would fish for people. Only now it is a stranger on the shore who gives a strange suggestion that leads to a monumental catch that leads Peter to jump in and come ashore, and there encounter the risen Lord one more time. And I invite you as you are able to stand with me as we listen to the word of encouragement from our Great God.

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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." 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." 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. 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.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he (Peter) was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.”

We find ourselves at the end of the gospel of John, the end of this monumental retelling of the gospel story that began in the beginning with a cosmic description of the very foundations of the world coming together by the Word. Now we come to the end, and the way John’s gospel comes to a close is with breakfast. Of all the tables that we eat at in our lives, is there anything more ordinary than the breakfast table? After all, that’s where you eat your raisin bran, drink your orange juice and morning coffee, and watch last night’s highlights on Sports Center, at least that’s what I do. Anyone else?

The Last Supper may have been that sacred Passover meal, but his final meal before the ascension is over an open fire with good friends. Breakfast is the simplest of meals and it’s where God can meet us most intimately. All the pretense, all the pomp and circumstance are stripped away and all you’ve got is a bowl of cheerios with good friends. You only eat breakfast with the ones who are closest to you. Who wants to get up early and eat with strangers? Only the most extreme of extraverts.

On their own, these disciples are having no luck fishing. Time after time, their nets come back empty. And then, after a word from Jesus, they bring in a catch they can hardly contain. In an instant they go from empty to full, from absent to complete. Did you notice how many fish they brought in? Precisely 153. Pretty accurate right? Scholars believe that details like this lend to the literal accuracy and validity of these gospel accounts. There’s no reason why someone who is fabricating something would give any thought to a mundane detail like this one, and yet the text says that the catch was so big that it was one of those that fishing buddies tell each other after they count the catch.

I was doing some research on this number this week and there are some very compelling explanations, but the one I found most interesting was by a writer who was speaking from the Hebrew perspective. In the ancient Hebrew language, every letter in the alphabet had with it a corresponding number and so numbers could be translated just like letters. And according to Hebrew lore, the number 153 translates in its alpha-numeric code to the phrase “I am Lord.” Jesus using a little subtle humor and power to make his point.

Just three years ago, Jesus had invited Peter on an amazing journey where they would become fishers of men. Jesus had a grander vision than just fishing for fish, Jesus said Peter would fish for people, but Peter lost sight of the call that Jesus put on his life. Unfortunately, Peter went back to what was familiar to him. So what Jesus is about to do at this breakfast table in Peter’s life is what I pray he will do in your life as well. Over breakfast, Jesus leans in and asks Peter what seems to be a simple question. Gesturing to a huge pile of fish, he says to Simon Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” It’s as if he’s saying, “Is this all you really want? Do you just want to be a fisherman?” And to

hammer this home, Jesus asks again and again and again. “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?”

I don’t believe that this is a story about forgiveness. Of course he needs forgiveness, but it’s just not what’s going on here. It’s more of a commissioning than it is a confession. It’s not so much that Peter’s saying, “O gee, I’m sorry Jesus,” “That’s ok, Peter.” Jesus is saying, “Hey, Peter, it’s time to get back to business. It’s time to get down to work.” Jesus is saying, “Feed my sheep, tend my flock, let’s go fish for some people.”

Jesus’ method of encouragement is not so much a consolation, “There, there.” It’s more direct, “Hey, we’ve got a job to do, now let’s get after it.” It’s one of the primary deficits in our faith today in America, namely our inability to connect who we are in Christ with what we do in our jobs and in our vocations. We lack both vision and vocation. **I think the reason we have so many bored people in churches today is that we are failing to see the connection between our faith and the high calling every one of us has in our daily work.** Most have had some sort of experience with Jesus, and yet so often they fail to take that faith to work, they get stuck in the same old ruts doing the same old routine. They’re still fishing for just fish.

A Barna poll recently found that only 34% of American Christians feel in some way that they are called to what they are doing in their job. This means that 66% don’t feel the call of God in what they do with most of their waking hours. That means that there is a disconnect between what they know about God and what they do with God.

Can I confess something to you? Over the last few months, I have felt as though my prayer life has grown, in a word, dull. There weren’t the times where I was able to, as a pastor, invite God into my daily work. Surprisingly, there are probably many pastors out there who don’t involve God in their work. And for me, that is not ok. Dallas Willard wrote something that completely arrested me, he said: “that people who work together normally have a lot to talk about.” And here in a gesture of vulnerability, I would like to ask you, my congregation in Wabash, to help hold me accountable for something in my daily work among you. Whenever you see me in the next few months, I give you permission to ask how my prayer life is. Not just how much I’m praying, but is my heart beating in time with the very heartbeat of God. Now know that if you do, I’m going to come back to you with a question about how God is working in your daily tasks.

John 21:15: “Simon son of Jonah do you love me more than these?” Because the goal, as Dallas Willard says, is not so much to get more people into heaven, but to get more of heaven into people. And true encouragement does just this.

The very foundation of our church is prayer, and in the coming weeks we are going to begin a new series that will be our focus for this fall, and that focus will be two pronged. If we, as a church are going to know the heart and mind, and then leadership of God, we must 1. Be connected to God in prayer; and 2. Connected to one another in fellowship. And there will be ample opportunities for you and I to grow in that journey together. I

hope you will come along, because to some degree, you and I are the sum total of the encouragement we have received along the way.

Without the gospel, our mistakes and our foibles will define us, rather than his gracious calling. Fishing all on our own will not amount to very much, but when we realize that we are fishing with the Lord of the universe and that we need not be defined by disappointment, we realize that our lives can be crammed full of heaven. It's not how many you catch but whom we catch, or rather who catches you. Because each of us has a job to do and we have the chance to do it with him, and each one of us is there at that open camp fire with him now, and the question he asked of Peter is the same question he asks of each of you. "Do you love me? Then feed my sheep."

You and I, we are elected, chosen by God not to status, but to service, and **what a shame it would be to hear the calling of Jesus and then to simply slip back into our old boring routines of daily life, as if he had never come in the first place.** And it's this functional atheism that has created thousands of weak and anemic churches out there, and I don't believe that is the fate of this one. It's not a lack of skill, it's not a lack of technology or resources, it's a lack of depth and community. But it all comes back to the question, "Do you love me?"

When our salvation and our vocation are fused, only then will the true encouragement of Christ take hold of our lives and set us on a course for great things. Peter now leaves his nets for a second time, only this time it sticks. Peter goes from coward to courageous. And he's so encouraged that even Jesus' revelation of how he will die is not enough to steal his thunder.

If you are here this morning and you don't have a group who will encourage you in your life, people who will press you on to more than you are getting right now, someone who will keep encouraging you, who will keep challenging you, then for God's sake and for your own, find a breakfast club.