

“Follow Through”

*Do you love me...follow me.* John 21:15-19

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Prayer: Dear God, help us be the believers, followers and the wider church Jesus taught us to be.

Message: I am not a baseball history buff. I don't know World Series records or whose who in the rookie field. I don't know batting averages of the great players or who is in the baseball hall of fame. However, I did play baseball from the time I was 7 until I was 17 and loved it. I still smile at the sound of the bat connecting with the ball or the sight of a player snagging a line drive. One of the first things I learned and have held onto about baseball and life for that matter, is that when you are in batters box, you can't do anything if you don't swing, follow through is everything, and you can't steal second with your foot on first.

The pages of baseball history, as recorded on google of course, tell us that old-time baseball fans thought Bobby Bonds was one of the greatest players. Then his son, Barry, came of age and started his thunder run to baseball immortality.

In the summer of 2003, Barry Bonds stole his 500th base, and became the only player in the history of the game to hit 500 home runs and steal 500 bases, demonstrating a unique combination of both power and speed.

No other player has done that. The question was asked, is that the hardest thing to do in sports? To which sports writers at USA Today (March 3, 2003) responded by putting their heads together to list what, in their opinion, were the 10 hardest things to do in sports.

10. Skiing the alpine downhill race at 80 mph.
9. Saving a penalty kick in soccer.
8. Bicycling the Tour de France covering 2,114 miles.

7. Running a marathon.
6. Landing a quadruple toe loop on figure skates — with grace.
5. Returning a 130-140 mph tennis serve.
4. Hitting a golf ball straight and long.
3. Pole vaulting.
2. Driving a race car while enduring 5 G's in the corners in 120 degree heat, knowing a mistake can kill you.

And number 1 is hitting a major-league baseball pitch thrown at 90 plus mph by judging it in 1/1,000th of a second. If you can pull it off successfully three out of 10 times you'll land a multimillion dollar contract.

No doubt about it, sports feats are difficult. They take endurance, skill, training and talent, but ultimately they aren't important. At the end of the day when all is said and done even top notch athletic competitions and world championships, boil down to the fact that it's just a game. I might have a fight on my hands with that comment, but I think a lot of people would say the game of life itself is considerably harder and much more challenging.

So the question changed to "what's the hardest thing to do in life?" Here's a list of life's 10 most challenging events that require daring, hope, talent and skill. Keep in mind that what is number 10 for you may be number one for your neighbors. We all have our own personal challenges that would make our list look different, but here is a list of some major challenges:

10. Raising children. Not having children to raise.
9. Giving forgiveness.
8. Apologizing.
7. Loving your enemy.
6. Quitting cigarettes, getting sober, abandoning an addiction.
5. Regaining the lost trust of loved ones.
4. Keeping faith in God amidst trials and tribulations.
3. Living homeless.

2. Burying a child.

1. Removing hospital life support for a loved one.

This list makes the complicated judgments involved in skiing at 80 mph and hitting a baseball look easy.

The life list is a tough list, but that last one — making decisions about life or death is one of the toughest. Even when all the medical facts are known and understood, after the prognosis is clear, even when the choice is obvious, it is a tremendously agonizing decision to remove a respirator from a loved one. You've become the judge. You're going to decide between life and death. Top world athletes, even on their hardest days, never make that kind of choice.

We make choices everyday. We step into the batter's box everyday and have to decide to swing or not, to back off or lean in, and if we are good enough, to pull a line drive or drop it over second base. Some decisions are more difficult than others. Some require more time, energy, thought, and prayer than others. The question becomes, how do we follow through with our decisions and choices about faith, service, loving God and loving others?

Last weekend, I energetically reminded you we are Easter people. Today, I ask you both as an individual and as a church, are you ready to follow the risen Jesus in a way like never before? Are you ready to take a swing and aim for the bleachers even if it could be the hardest thing to do? Or have you been standing in the batter's box just waiting for the perfect pitch - the sure thing, an easy hit, or maybe even hoping to get a walk?

These are the questions behind the question Jesus asked of his disciple Peter. Peter, the one Jesus said he would build his church upon. Peter, the one who Jesus called to get out of the boat and walk on the water, which he did until fear set in and he sank. Peter, the one who right before today's text, impulsively jumped off the boat without thinking and swam to shore to get to Jesus. Peter, the one who adamantly swore to Jesus' face that he would not, could not deny Jesus in the hours

following Jesus' arrest. Yet he did - three times. Peter, the one who we perhaps have more in common with than any other disciple.

In our text today, we find ourselves with Peter and the other disciples fishing. It has been about 10 days since that early morning we call Easter. Jesus once again reveals himself to his followers. I think the disciples were trying to find some sense of normal after the emotional upheaval and turmoil of the past 10 days. Or, maybe they were trying to find some sense of rhythm and routine again? Or maybe they were still shell shocked and simply trying to wrap their heads around what happened and they needed to get some food for the group.

With hearts open wide and ears ready to listen, I invite you to hear the words of Jesus' third appearance to following his resurrection. Text - John 21:10-19

Often considered an appendix or second ending, this last chapter of the book of John is considered by most scholars as a postscript or epilogue to the Gospel. Evidence indicates the gospel of John circulated with all 21 chapters, despite some scholars arguing it was an add on. John 21 provides an important insight and reminder to the purpose of Jesus' life and what his followers were to carry on once he was gone - how they were to follow through with Jesus' message and teaching.

Last week I told you Easter is never over for those who believe. That just because the baskets are empty, the chocolate eaten and the leftovers tossed out Easter is not over and we as Easter people are not to settle for the day after but instead cling to the hope, joy and promise of the day of. In doing so we fulfill and complete Jesus' joy.

The experience here in John 21 is the follow up for Jesus, and the call to Jesus' band of believers to follow through. Using the baseball analogy, this is Jesus' way of saying "batter up." Last week's farewell discourse challenged the followers to consider what it meant to live as Easter people - what does it look like individually to follow the risen Jesus?

Today's text is Jesus' way of calling believers to come face to face with the questions, "how will our community live in the absence of Jesus here on earth? What shape will our lives take together? How will we experience and share Jesus' presence? What will our identity as a people of faith be?"

In other words, this resurrection encounter is less about the glory of Jesus made manifest in individual hearts and more about what the church - the community of believers will do to show Jesus' great love to a hurting and divided world.

The focus of John 21 moves beyond Jesus' resurrection to the future of which he spoke earlier in the chapter, and invites us to envision how the community of believers can continue to experience Jesus and carry his work forward. Last week was the "get your head in the game" one on one talk where this week is the whole team, locker room pre-game pep talk, and Jesus asks the only question that truly matters: do you love me?

If Peter is the the rock, the foundation on which the church is built, then when Jesus asks Peter, "do you love me," he is really asking us church. Do we love Jesus?

1. Do you love me more than these? Jesus is asking do you love him more than all the stuff you surround and fill your life with - more than your job, your money, your hobbies, your garage full of whatever, your kid's grades or travel sports teams? The man cave, golf clubs, boat, and RV - that's the easy stuff. What about loving Jesus more than your family, your friends, your church, your own life? To love Jesus does not mean we give up all those things and relationships, or that they are not important, but it does mean we must keep perspective, and have our priorities straight.

And that's only the first question. He then goes on to ask Peter three more times, "do you love me." Each time followed by a direct command. Again Jesus is asking us:

2. Church, do you love Jesus? Then feed his *lambs* - bring life emotionally, spiritually, and mentally to those who are young in their faith walk, new to the church, and those who are vulnerable or easy prey to the wolves of this world. Encourage and strengthen them not by criticism and self serving arrogance, but with understanding and empathy. Walk beside those who have more questions than answers. Engage in conversation with those who think differently. Learn from them. Listen to what it is they are searching for and don't assume you already know. Connect before you correct - if correction is needed at all.

3. Church, do you love Jesus? Then *shepherd his sheep*, all of them. Don't set them up to fail, or play favorites or add to their shame. Rather guide, protect, and offer shelter to those who seek God, who ask the tough questions, who are wondering and wandering. Be the safe place - the safe people that many are looking for today. Show God's unconditional love and acceptance no matter what. Come to know them by name. Do you know the sheep of this church by name? The sheep of the children's wing or those upstairs? A shepherd knows the sheep by name. Welcome them and assure them they have a God who sees and knows them too.

4. Church, do you love Jesus? Then *feed his sheep* - don't keep from them what they hunger for by setting stipulations or conditions on who can have what and who can't. Feed them in body, soul and mind. Invite them to the table - take the table to them. Give them something to hold on to in this world of empty promises. Show them that the love of Jesus is bigger than any of us and that there is room for all Christ's table. There are so many hungry souls in our culture today and God wants more for them than our loose change, leftovers and scraps.

To love Jesus is to make life as an individual and as a church community evidence of that love and relationship. To love Jesus is to put no limits on his love. There are no limits to Jesus' love except the ones we put there! The accountability and boundaries will come, but love must come first. Afterall, did Jesus put a limit on his love for you? Did he make sure you had your life all figured out and on the straight and narrow before he loved you? Did you make sure you knew the

answers to life's tough questions before he loved you? Did you make you jump through all the hoops before he accepted you? No. Then why do we?

We do not sit in the judgement seat, God does. Our job as an Easter church is to follow Jesus' example.

Challenges are not going to change. They will keep coming at us, as individuals and as a church - one pitch after another - fast ball, slider, sinker, curve ball, you name and life will throw it. As Easter people living, building and being an Easter church, I pray it is to Jesus we look for to find our direction and example. I pray it is Jesus and not personal agendas, political parties, or denominational rules. I pray we step in that batter's box and swing.

Amen