

“Our World Needs More People Like Pat Tillman”

John 21:15-23

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Perhaps you recall the theme of my Easter message this year, “The end is not the end.” The final chapter of our Lord’s life was not written with his crucifixion and burial. There was more, much more to be written because of his glorious resurrection.

The same can be said of John’s gospel. It does not end where you thought it would, at the end of the twentieth chapter. “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name” John 20:30-31.

About the time you think you have read the last chapter and are ready to close the book, you discover there is more and I am glad there is. The postscript to John’s gospel reveals even more about the nature of the resurrected Jesus and his expectations of us.

This morning, I want to give you an overview of this final chapter, focusing the bulk of my attention upon Peter’s response to Jesus’ invitation to follow him. I’ve discovered something fascinating about human nature in these verses and want to share it with you.

Some time after Easter, seven of the disciples were together around the Sea of Galilee. It appears they were waiting for direction from the Lord about what they were to do and growing impatient in the process. Peter, the fisherman, announced to the others that he was going fishing and they all joined him. While on the water, they heard someone giving them advice about where to cast their nets. When they followed this person’s instructions, they caught more fish than they could haul into the boat.

When John, the beloved disciple, recognized that Jesus was their fishing guide, he told the others. Peter, the impulsive leader of the disciples, jumped into the water and rushed to the shore. There he found Jesus preparing food over a charcoal fire. Jesus invited the disciples to bring some of the fish they caught and join him.

When they finished eating, Jesus had that dramatic dialogue with Peter where he asked Peter three times if he loved him. Each time Peter affirmed that he did to which Jesus replied, “Feed my sheep.” It is at this point that the story takes an unexpected twist. Read along with me.

‘I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then Jesus said to him, ‘Follow me.’

*Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. When Peter saw him, he asked, ‘**Lord, what about him?**’ Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.’ Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die, he only said ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?’ John 21:18-23.*

What is it about human nature that this passage reveals? We have this tendency to compare our lives with others, especially when facing difficult challenges. When we are called upon to make sacrifices, we want to know what others have been asked to do and if they have done them. If they have not been asked to make comparable sacrifices or are unwilling to do them, then this influences our decision.

What’s wrong with this? Why should we do more than others? Why should we suffer while others escape? Why should we take risks when others don’t?

My answer is simple. This may be God’s purpose for us and above all, we need to be faithful to Him.

Listen again to what Jesus said to Peter after Jesus predicted Peter's martyrdom and Peter asked about John's participation in the kingdom. "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" John 21:22.

I wonder how Jesus said this to Peter. Did he gently put his hands on his shoulders and look him squarely in the eye? Did he say it slowly, isolating and emphasizing each word?

Remember when you told a child to go do a chore or his homework? He may have looked at his sister lying on the couch and said, "What about her? What is she going to do?" How did you reply? I imagine you said something like this, "Don't worry about her. You do what I said."

Perhaps this was how Jesus handled Peter when he acted childishly and asked about John's responsibilities. "You must follow me," Jesus said unhesitatingly.

Why was Jesus so adamant and insistent? Jesus knew that Peter had been given specific skills, talents and abilities that were needed to advance the Kingdom of God. He believed that Peter would have opportunities that others would not have to spread the Gospel. If Peter failed to do what Jesus was asking him to do, the lives of people would be adversely affected. Much was at stake.

In addition, Jesus knew that Peter had no control over others and how they would respond to God's call upon their lives. If his decision to follow Jesus was dependent upon what others did, in all likelihood, he would never act. Frustration would paralyze him.

There was a reason Jesus said, "You must follow me," and not, "you and all these other disciples must follow me." The call to follow Jesus is made to individuals that may choose to work with others. However, the decision must be first settled alone.

Pat Tillman understood this. He was the NFL football player that gave up a 3.6 million-dollar contract to become a member of the Army's elite 75th Ranger Regiment. On April 22, at the age of twenty-seven, he was killed in an ambush near Spera, Afghanistan.

Why would a rich, smart, handsome, academic All-American walk away from a multi-million dollar contract with the NFL to go to Iraq and Afghanistan? He felt it was his duty to defend his country and democracy, especially after the Attack on America on September 11, 2001.

Teammates and other friends tried to talk him out of this decision. After all, no other player or celebrity had walked away from their life of fame and fortune to train in swamps, jungles and mountains for twenty hours a day. No other associates were willing to take such high risks, so why would he? He felt called and his decision was not based upon what others had done or would do. He had to answer that call.

Our world needs more people with the courage and sense of personal responsibility that Pat Tillman had. We need people that will discover their talents, skills and abilities and utilize them to make the world a safer and better place. We need disciples that will follow Jesus wherever he leads regardless of what others do. Will you be one?