

## The Future Follower

*Listos! Are You Ready? Pt. 8*

All Fall we have been looking at being a follower of Jesus – specifically at what Jesus wanted his immediate followers to know about *being* followers of Jesus, on the night before his death. He's getting them ready – *listos* – for life without him. And we've seen the foot washing and now the last supper and we've already seen one follower blow it – Judas. This morning we're going to see another. But his story has a different ending. Let's jump right in.

This morning's scripture is found in **John 13:33–38**.  
“My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. 34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

36 Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.” 37 Peter asked, “Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” 38 Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!”

So this is the beginning of a story arch about the disciple Peter, that is one of my favorite stories in all the Bible. It inspires me and comforts me. There are three parts to this story. Here in John 13, you have the prediction of betrayal, then in John 18, you have the account of how it happened. And then in John 21, we have Jesus sitting down with Peter and restoring him. And unfortunately we'll never get beyond John 13, and therefore I'm going to tell you the whole story this morning.

But here's what I want you to see. This is a guide to how you deal with failure. How do you deal with *major* epic failure? And come out on the other side a greater person than you were before? That sounds valuable, doesn't it? And so let's take a look at first of all the *reasons* for Peter's failure - there's two reasons. And then the way Jesus healed him – and there are, once again, two ways. The reasons for the failure, the way that it was healed.

### So, let's start with The Reasons Peter Fails.

There's two. Now setting up the context again, Jesus is explaining that he's about to, about to go to the cross. “Where I'm going you cannot follow.” But the disciples don't get it and Peter *really* doesn't get it. In fact, he's a little miffed and he says, “Wait a minute, wait a minute, *wherever* you're going, even if it means *to death*, I will lay down my life for you. I will go with you.”

#1

And that emotional reaction actually shows us the two reasons why Peter did fail. The first, the most obvious, is overconfidence. He says, “I’m sure that if there were danger, I would have no problem being brave.” He was overconfident. Overconfidence is very serious; it means you *don’t* know who you are you. You think you’re somebody who you’re really not. And so when you try to lean into that identify, you’re going to collapse.

Because we know that within hours - let me just recount what happens - you can read this in John 18, you can read this in Mark 14, you can read this in Luke 22, all the gospels talk about it. Jesus gets arrested, and he’s taken to the high priests’ house for a trial. Peter follows along, trying to be careful not to be seen, and then decides to stay in the courtyard of the high priest’s house where there’s a fire and there are guards and soldiers warming themselves around the fire.

Peter goes to the fire, but he’s recognized. Someone says, “Wait, you’re one of the followers of that guy who’s been arrested.” And he’s accused three times, “Aren’t you one of his followers?” And three times he says “no.” And the last time it actually says, **Mark 14:71**, “*He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.”*”

And, this is nerdy, but it’s important. That Greek word is a transitive, it’s not a reflexive verb. Now, full disclosure, I had to look that up – I haven’t actually had Greek in 24 years. I don’t want to appear overconfident!

But here’s what that means. A reflexive verb would mean he called it down on himself, but he wasn’t calling the curses down on himself; nor was he calling the curses down on anybody else around him. So who is he calling the curses down on? He must have been calling down the curses on Jesus. As a way to prove that he couldn’t be one of his followers because no follower in that culture would dare curse his master in public. That is an *epic* failure. That is bald-faced cowardice, that is “I’m going to save my skin no matter what it takes.” That is the most absolute lack of integrity. It’s shameful!

And yet here, a few hours before, Peter is saying, “I’ll be true no matter what!” So he’s overconfident; to be overconfident means you don’t know who you are. And *especially* you don’t know the depth of your capacities for dishonesty, cruelty and cowardice. And actually, I don’t know hardly anybody who’s not overconfident in some sense. We like to see other people acting poorly and we say, “Well I would never...” You have no idea how you would react in dire circumstances.

You know, between the upper room discourse that we've been studying, and the arrest, Jesus goes to the garden in Gethsemane with Peter and a couple of the disciples to pray. And you remember what he says to Peter, he says, "I'm going to pray, but *you* need to pray, lest ye enter into temptation." In other words, what Jesus is saying is, "Peter, there's a *test* coming, and you're not ready for it. And you need to be asking God for help. You need to be calling out to God, 'God help me'."

So Jesus goes off, he prays, he comes back and Peter's asleep. Why is he asleep? Because he doesn't think he's got a problem. Prayer is boring to Peter because he doesn't feel like he's got a need. He says, "If there's a test coming, I'm up for it." That's a clear sign of his overconfidence.

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Ok, what's the second reason for Peter's failure? It's not just overconfidence. If you look carefully at what he says...and this is especially evident if you read Matthew's account. See in **Matthew 26:33**, we're told that "*Peter replied, 'Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.'*"

*And* we know that in John 21, when Jesus is restoring Peter – which is probably my favorite story in the Bible – the post-Resurrection Jesus sits on the beach with Peter – by a fire, hint-hint! - and three times

asked him if he loves him - you know, 3 denials, 3 assurances, it's perfect. But the first time he says, **(John 21:15)** "*Peter, do you love me more than these?*" See what Jesus is saying? "Peter, are you still saying you love me more than anyone else, that everyone else would flee, but you would stay with me?"

See what Peter has here - I'm gonna give it a name - is a "false identity." Here's what Peter is saying, "Jesus, I'm the most sold out of your disciples. I'm the most passionate of your disciples. None of the others would go to their *death* for you, but I would." Peter is *proud* of his faithfulness. He's *proud* of his obedience.

In fact, Peter is not getting his identity so much from Jesus's unmerited love to him. He's getting his identity from his great love for Jesus. Jesus is Peter's teacher, but Jesus is not Peter's savior. Peter is Peter's savior. See a real Christian identity is, "this unmerited love from Jesus Christ coming to me as a sinner, in spite of anything I have done or can do, and therefore it humbles me to the ground – because I'm a miserable sinner – and lifts me to the heavens – because I'm adopted into the King's family – and now I am absolutely rooted in my identity *in Christ.*" That's a Christian identity. But that's not Peter's identity.

He's got a false identity; "I'm a great person. I'm a religious person. I love Jesus. I'm sold out for Jesus. And that's why Jesus is going to bless me. I'm the best disciple there is." And it's because his identity is rooted in his performance – super disciple - that's actually the reason for his overconfidence. The two feed off each other.

And *any* identity, rooted in *anything* other than the unmerited love of Christ – an identity that you achieve and then you have to live up to - it's always insecure. It always leads to denial - a lack of self-awareness. It leads, in Peter's case, to over aggression. You know, when they come to arrest Jesus, Peter's the one who grabs the sword and cuts off a person's ear. And Jesus rebukes him for that.

Look, we all have our identities, don't we? And our identities are multifaceted, right? So, for example, you've got a race, you've got a class, you've got a nationality, a culture, you've got a gender, maybe your politics, and these are all important parts of your identity. But if any of them is sort of the *ultimate* identity - it's your main identity - then when you talk to somebody on the other side who disagrees with you or opposes you, you're going to cut off their ear. See? You despise them.

But what if *Christ* is your ultimate identity? And that doesn't *eradicate* your race or your class or your gender, it doesn't at all. But what if your most fundamental self-regard is based in Jesus' unmerited love? You know what that means? It means when you talk to people who are different than you, in all those areas, you don't melt down when they oppose you. You don't grab your sword and cut off their ear. You don't fall apart when you don't do well, because your identity is not *based* on your performance. It's based on Christ's performance.

Do you see how freeing that would be? How empowering that would be? Do you see if you had a *Christian* identity you would be the kind of person that our society needs right now? A society where people can talk to one another without cutting off each other's ears...or worse. Peter doesn't have it. Because Jesus is his teacher, but not his Savior. Peter is being his *own* savior. So because of his overconfidence and because of his false identity, Peter fails.

All right, then how does Jesus *heal* him? **Secondly, The Ways Jesus Heals.** Well, there's two things Jesus does. And this is so important. Because you *are* going to fail. Some of you have lately and you haven't really recovered, you haven't been healed from it, some of you are in the middle of it, and all of us will *have* these situations. How will you get through them so on the other side you're not more broken? How do we end up like Peter and not like Judas?

#2

Well, here's the two things: number one, you have to repent, and number two, you have to have a new infusion of Christ's love. And that's the two things Jesus does. See, first of all, you've got to repent. Look what he says, and we'll look at two parts of this verse. **John 13:38b**, "Then Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.'

Usually the rooster would crow somewhere between midnight and 3am. So here's Peter – at dinner - saying, "I would *die* for you!" And Jesus says, "Bro! Within *hours*, you're not only going to fall down once..." You ever make a mistake and instantly wish you had another shot at it? Well, Peter has *three* chances. And each time he just doubles down until he's actually cursing Jesus. This is bad, bad, bad.

So here's what Jesus is saying, "Peter, you say you're the best disciple? Let me just tell you something, *actually*, you're a coward. You're a threefold coward. You are cowardly all the way down. You are in no way ready to follow me, you're not able to do *anything* that I'm doing. You're a wreck and you're going to prove you're a wreck...within hours." This is hard!

But it's vitally important. Because you can never truly repent if you don't see the truth. Truth and reconciliation must always go hand in hand. Because what's the problem? You're blind, you're overconfident, you don't see your true nature. And until you have your eyes opened, you won't be able to repent without excuse making - without minimizing, without blame shifting, without self-pity. You know there's all kinds of ways of saying sorry without being sorry. "Well, I guess I'm sorry, *but* she made me do it."

Look, AA, every twelve-step program, what's the first step? A lot of you know, don't you? It's honesty. We're powerless over our problems. That's the first step. You know what that is? That's ownership. See, our culture says "you've got what it takes, you can handle it." No, the people who go through the twelve steps, the people who have *actually* been out there in life, here's what they know; the number one, the *first* step about getting through, first step of healing after a failure...is what? "I *don't* have what it takes. I am *powerless* over my problems. I am helpless. I don't have the resources in myself, I'm going to have to look outside myself – I need a higher power." That's repentance. And so the first step is always very tough. It's repentance.

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B. Infusion  
of love

But here's the second step: **You have to have a new infusion of Christ's love.** Only when you've faced the truth – the harsh reality of your false identity - can you let the suffering and the hurt, drive you, like a nail, more deeply into the love of Jesus Christ. And obviously this becomes much clearer at the *end* of John with Peter and Jesus on the beach. But even here, look what he's saying in the first part of the verse, **v.38a**, "*Then Jesus answered, 'Will you really lay down your life for me?'*"

What kind of question is that? Some people say he's mocking him. "You think you're gonna lay down your life for me? I doubt it." That's not Jesus's tone, virtually never is. It's not sarcastic. It's ironic, but it's pointing to something wonderful. What is it? Look when Jesus says, "Will *you* really lay down your life for me? Do you realize what night it is? Do you realize what's going to happen tomorrow, Peter?"

Here's what I think Jesus is saying, "Peter, do you really think that *you* will lay down your life for *me* and that will save the day? No, son, I'm about to lay down *my* life for *you*. And *that* will save the day, and will save you, and will save the world." Another way to see it, Jesus is saying, "Peter, lay down the melancholy burden of self-salvation. Basing your identity on *your* love for me and *your* faithfulness and *your* sold-outness...oh my goodness, what a *burden*?"

You have to constantly be trying to prove that because it's all based on you. No wonder you're tired. Lay down the burden of self-salvation and rest in my sacrificial love."

And that leads to this. Remember, Jesus started this by saying, "I've got to go, and where I'm going you can't follow." And Peter says, "Where you going, Jesus? I want to go." He's like a little kid. And look at what Jesus replies in **verse 36**, "*Where I'm going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.*" Isn't that something?

Jesus says, "Right now, I'm going to go die for you. And you are in *no way* able to die for me, Peter. Because your religiosity has been about *you*, not about *me*. All of your religion, all of your good deeds, all of this stuff that you thought was Christianity, was really all about you. And as a result, you're self-absorbed, you're proud. And therefore, when push comes to shove, and it looks like it's going to cost you something, you're going to collapse. So there's no way that right now you can die for me. I'm gonna have to die for you. But *someday...you will.*"

And you know what? We know from history that he did. I have seen with my own eyes, Peter's bones in a tomb deep below the high altar of the Vatican in Rome. There's all kinds of historical accounts that say that Peter was crucified, along with many, many, many other Christians in Rome, under Nero. One of the first big persecutions of Christians occurred about 30 years or so, after Jesus died. And this time Peter *didn't* run, he didn't deny, and he did die. So in one sense, Jesus - by saying, you *will* follow me - is saying that your failure is actually going to *make* you into the person you think you are now but you're not.

See, here's the crazy thing. If you go and read the John 21 account, every time Jesus says "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter says, "Yes, I love you." Jesus follows up with some version of, "Then feed my sheep." And Jesus is using words like poimaino, which means to shepherd or *pastor*. Even now, look up the definition of "pastoral" - "related to grazing sheep, or providing spiritual guidance."

See, Jesus is not saying, "Since you have failed, but repented, I'll let you back into church." He's not just saying that. He says, "Because you've failed and repented, now you can be the leader of the church." Just think about this; Jesus lived in a shame and honor culture. And in a shame and honor culture, the people in authority must be strong and they must be feared. Otherwise, it was thought that society would fall apart.

And so at that time there wasn't a human organization on the face of the earth that would have let someone like Peter - break his promises, curse his master publicly, dishonor himself like that - and then come back in after repentance, and *lead* the whole organization? *Nobody*...there wasn't an organization on the face of the earth that would have allowed that. It was shameful. Almost as shameful as having your founder crucified.

Because you see, Christianity has a completely different understanding of greatness. Do you understand that? It's a vital part of our faith. And it's still distasteful to society today. This is why Paul says crazy things like in **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**, "***But [the Lord] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.***"

Every other religion says if you want to be saved, be strong and live a good life and then maybe you can attain it. But only Christianity says, if you want this salvation, you have to be weak, you have to repent, you have to admit that you're a sinner. You have to admit you're spiritually bankrupt. You have to wholly rely on Jesus Christ.

In other words, the way to become strong in Christianity is to become weak, and therefore, here's what Jesus is saying to Peter. "Now that you're really weak - you were always too strong to be a great disciple, always too full of yourself, always too unbroken - but *now*, you become weak, you've become helpless to save yourself. And now your failure, plunged into *my grace*, will make you the *best* leader, the best disciple."

Who can speak into people's lives better than someone who finally knows their own heart? Who can lead better than someone who's both *humbled* by the grace of God...and yet at the same time *affirmed*, because now your identity is based on something you can't lose. Only love of the eternal will bring tranquility. If you love your family, you can lose your family; if you love your own virtue, if you love your own morality, that can fail you. In other words, if you love *anything* except God Himself - or if you base your identity on anything other than the love of God - you're up and down, up and down. You're going lose it.

But what if you've got the stability of a Christian identity? And the way that Christian identity grows – unfortunately...I wish I didn't have to say it – but generally speaking, the only way that Christian identity becomes liberating is through failure. Because only through failure do we finally pry our fingers off of these other things we identify with – the false identities and idols - and really rest in Christ.

Jesus saw these future followers...Peter denied Jesus viciously, Paul killed Christians. *These* are the kind of people that Jesus says, "You're my chief disciples, you're my chief leaders." Why? "*Because* you're a wreck, because you've been in the gutter, because you've been down at the very bottom. And now if instead of letting that failure drive you *away* from me, but *toward* me, now you can be the greatest."

If you failed recently, in some way, Jesus Christ says to you, "You are *exactly* the kind of material I like to make my chief disciples and leaders out of" - that should give you hope. Just make sure of your identity. What do you boast in? In your strengths? Or in repentance? In weakness? Because when I am weak, then I am strong. And you'll become stronger and stronger, greater and greater, as you plunge your failures into His grace.

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The end



That's the sermon. We're done. But I'm not going to pray...not yet. Because I have an announcement to make. You'll want to wake up and pay attention now. We are done with the *Listos* series – we'll start Christmas messages next week. But what was the theme of this fall series? Jesus was getting his disciple ready for what...? For life *without* him.

Well...I have decided to leave Austin. More so, I have decided to leave Texas. After 20 years, it's become clear that I need a change. And unfortunately, that means I have to leave all of you. // Being a pastor is a challenging profession in a few regards. Look, all of our jobs have challenges. In some ways your job is harder than mine. In some ways mine is harder than yours.

But, if you want to change *your* job, it is often possible for you to do that within the town that you live. If you are an accountant in Austin with X firm, you can take a job with Y firm and stay in your same house with your same friends and your same schools and your same church. Pastors don't get to do that. And that makes life transitions difficult.

I read a statistic recently that the average pastor loses 10 friends a year. That's how many a typical person loses in a lifetime. But that is also typical of an immigration story - immigrants leave their homes, their families, their cultures and their comforts to follow opportunities to new places. And I have been thinking about our transition as an immigration story. I've been feeling for a while God calling me to step outside of my own culture.

You know historically, every immigration story is a mixture of push-pull factors. Things that push you away from the old and pull you toward the new. In the Irish potato famine, for example, *starvation* was a pretty motivating push. But having a cousin that could line you up a job in Brooklyn was a pull. My decision to immigrate – to leave Austin and SWFF – is also the result of a varsity of push-pull factors. People say, “Why are you leaving?” And it's not any one thing. There's a lot of nuance.

And honestly it would be a lot easier to just say, “God is leading us on.” And that's true. But it's also a cop-out. And if you know me, I've always been a fan of the truth, even if it's a hard truth. Maybe because both my savior and my university are fond of saying, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” So I want us to have the truth.

The truth is, this is a very difficult place to do church. And – at 20 years - I have done it longer than most. But while I love the *core* of our church with all my heart, the political tensions that divide Blue-Travis County from Red-Hayes County make it increasingly difficult to reach the *crowds* with a gospel that steps on everyone’s toes.

Our church sits on a cultural fault-line of tectonic plates. And when those plates shift - as they seem to every four years now - things begin to shake and when they shake hard enough stuff falls down. And I will admit that I am at a loss of how to rebuild. Perhaps more importantly, I don’t know if I still have the emotional capacity to do it again.

Austin has changed in the 20-years we’ve been here. The population has doubled, and the infrastructure has not. It’s ironic, on Tuesday morning, the national NPR program IA featured an hour-long story about the effects of rapid urban growth and they featured Austin as a case study. I understood everything they were saying. Many of you have shared with me your own frustrations with the changing nature of our city. I am not the only member of this church community who is leaving. I just can’t seem to enjoy the things I used to enjoy about Austin.

The truth is I can no longer afford some of those things. My house is a push-pull. The rising property taxes are pushing me – they have doubled in the decade since we built our home and made up about 13% of my salary. At the same time, the amount of equity we have gained in our home is a pull. Selling our home will allow us to do a number of things.

I can’t deny that there are financial considerations behind my decision at this stage in my life. Cost of living in Austin over the last decade has outpaced my salary at a time when my kids are the *most* expensive. The elders generously sought to rectify that last year, but frankly the decline in attendance – and giving that goes with it – made it clear that relief is unsustainable. “But Anthony, we could turn that around!” Yes, and I believe it will turn around. But see my previous reason, I don’t have the capacity to be the turn around guy. And financial pressures just exacerbate that.

My age itself is a push-pull. When I turned 50, I definitely began to have a different perspective. 65 looks a lot closer than it used to. I don’t have the energy for rebuilding that I had as a 31-year-old church planter. But I have a whole lot more wisdom and experience that I can put into the next - last? - act of my professional life. And the more I thought about that future, the more I didn’t see it occurring here.

Deanna lost her mother last year, we became empty-nesters this fall - there are fewer things tying us to Austin. And it's just getting so dang hot! So we've been looking for a change. It's no secret that we've been drawn to Europe for some time now - a lot of you asked me if we were just going to stay in Sicily after our sabbatical this summer. And we might one day - but not just yet. But I really want to live in a walkable city with good public transportation. Something with a little more community feel - I'd rather walk to a park than have to maintain a backyard, for instance.

And we considered some opportunities to do missions work in Europe. That's why we quietly traveled to Estonia last month - in case you were wondering. But ultimately, we have decided to relocate to an American city that gives us many of those things that I am desiring.

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So with all that said, I have accepted the pastorate of a church in San Francisco, California. You know me, I zag when others zig - they are all moving here - so I thought I'd try to bring balance to the force and move out there. It's a historically Asian-American church - that has a Chinese service and an English service - but their surrounding neighborhood has changed in recent years. The demographics are now 43% white, 42%

Asian and they realize that their future depends on looking more like their neighborhood.

So, as the first white pastor in their 60-year history, I am a diversity hire! But I am excited about stepping out of my culture and embracing the role - so familiar to the New Testament church - as outsider/insider. I think the Gospel is designed for that sort of diversity. I am excited for the challenge. Sometimes a baseball player needs a new ballpark to start hitting agin.

Speaking of that neighborhood, last month it was listed in an article about the 40 Coolest Neighborhoods in the World as number 27 - 6th in the US. I will be able to walk to the church which sits in the heart of dozens of independent restaurants and businesses - including a 1920's Art Nouveau movie theatre across the street from the church that still shows both old and new films. The weekend I visited, they were showing the *Godfather*, which I took as a sign!

Even more exciting, the church is a block away from Golden Gate Park and a ten-minute walk from the Pacific Ocean. And the Bay Area weather means I may never sweat again. And, unlike Jesus, where I am going, you *can* come. And you should. It's one of the most beautiful spots in the country and I hope you will come and visit us.

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SWFF?

So that's what's happening with the Scomas, let me address what's going to happen with SWFF. The elders have been aware of my search since the spring, and they have been in the loop every step of the way. Last Sunday night we had a meeting with the church health director for my denomination and he is going to be leading an interim process to guide the church in the next steps.

For the greater part of 2024, Mike Harper will be leading the church as interim pastor. You will like Mike, he is very familiar with our culture - he planted a very similar church in the Phoenix area years ago. I trust him completely. He will likely be here three out of four Sundays a month, and Pastor Connor will be picking up more pastoral duties during the week. The elders will be putting together a guiding coalition of people within the church from diverse backgrounds to work through the transition process.

And when the time comes, you all will decide who the second pastor of SWFF will be. This is a sovereign church – you own the property, you set the governance and you decide who the pastor is going to be. They say a rule of thumb is it takes about a week for every year the previous pastor has served in order to get the church ready to start looking. Mike is well connected in ministry circles around the country, and we will help the search committee find qualified candidates for you to consider. Just to set expectations, it's probably realistic

to have a new pastor by next fall or certainly by the end of the year. It's not a decision you want to make quickly.

Speaking of timelines, my last Sunday here will be January 7. We're just going to have the one 11AM service so we can all be together – it will be too emotional for me to do it twice! – and then we're going to have a going-away lunch after church. I know that may seem short, but when it comes to leadership, I'm a fan of long hellos and short goodbyes – I think that's better for an organization.

I read this week that the Miriam Webster Dictionary word of the year for 2023 is "authenticity". That's been a key value at SWFF since day one. We exist "to make Austin and the world a better place by connecting people to God and one another in a safe, *authentic* and vibrant environment." I want to apologize for violating my own rule about authenticity. I need to listen to my sermon and repent of my own failure.

I have had to hide the truth from you for several months now. I hope you can understand why, but nevertheless, I apologize. It has been a torment for me in conversation after conversation. I appreciate you being gracious. To be fair, I have never done this before. Pastoring SWFF is all I have ever known. And to leave that is frightening. But following God's calls is often frightening.

Listen, there will be grief involved in this. Deanna and I will grieve deeply to leave you. And while some of you will be excited – maybe too excited! – I know that you will grieve us leaving as well. And I want you to know that it is ok to feel whatever you feel during that grieving process. You might feel angry. That's ok. You might feel sad, bargaining, denial, everything that grief entails. That's healthy.

But change is good. The Holy Spirit does not work at cross purposes with Himself. What is good for the Scomas will be good for SWFF and vice-versa. I am convinced that the most selfish thing I could do is stay on here just because it's more comfortable than immigrating to the unknown. You deserve a leader with a vision for taking this church to new heights.

And I believe with all my heart that God has just that for you. Please welcome your new pastor with the same love you've shown towards Deanna and me over the years. And let me just say, he or she will do things *differently*. I hope they will! Because I believe the best days of this church are ahead of it. And I promise that I will not meddle in that. This is not my church. It's not even *our* church. It belongs to Jesus. And he will build his church and the gates of hell will not stand against it.

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But there are three things that I hope you will always keep. If I can just end with a little founding pastor bias. It's fine to remodel the kitchen, maybe add a whole new wing, but you have to be very careful when it comes to the foundation. So three things that are foundational to this particular church.

One is a **gospel-focused theology**. I have taught you week after week what the true gospel is - not prosperity gospel, not therapeutic gospel, not a nationalist tribal gospel - but the great exchange of Jesus Christ on the cross in which he freely gave you his glory in exchange for your garbage so that you can have a true identity that can provide comfort, security and purpose.

There are many ways to communicate that gospel message, but I hope you will keep our **belong before you believe** culture in which everyone is welcome to come along, regardless of their stage on the journey of faith. This is a unique church in that regards. It's baked into our DNA.

And finally, I hope this church will stay **Jesus-centric** in everything you do. It's ok to forget about me. That *will* happen. But don't ever forget about Jesus. He must be everything. Jesus is the focus. And one day, we will all gather again – you, me, all the other people that have come and gone from this church over the last two decades – we will gather around the throne of Jesus Christ. And he will say to us all...well done, my good and faithful servants.

Thank you for twenty amazing years. I love you all deeply. But God loves you more.

*Now...let's pray...*