


9-2017

Love in the Ordinary: Leadership in the Gospel of John

Alex Sosler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sosler, Alex (2017) "Love in the Ordinary: Leadership in the Gospel of John," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 11: No. 2, 10-16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol11/iss2/2>

This Biblical Reflections is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Applied Christian Leadership by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

ALEX SOSLER

LOVE IN THE ORDINARY: LEADERSHIP IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Introduction

James K. A. Smith (2016) observes a pair of intriguing questions at the beginning and in the end of the Gospel of John. When Jesus calls His followers He asks, “What do you want?” (John 1:38 NIV). When He calls Peter to leadership in the church, He asks, “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17 ESV). Between these two questions, Jesus forms the disciples’ love by teaching and modeling what it means to be a leader. As Smith (2016) explains, “our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow” (p. 2).

Jesus did extraordinary things. The Gospel of John includes seven miraculous signs that point to Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God. God incarnate is no ordinary concept. However, the first 30 or so years of His life seem rather ordinary. Just look at some of the regular patterns of His ministry as recorded in the Gospels: attending weddings, hiding from crowds, going to the synagogue. At the end of His time on earth, as Jesus asks the question, “Do you love me?” He calls His followers to be ordinary in the ordinary. It is these regular moments that shape our loves and desires. It was the motif of love for Jesus and shepherding His sheep as imaged in the narrative of the Gospel of John that defined leadership for Peter in John 21.

The Question: Do You Love Me?

As one of the earliest leaders in the church, Peter is a telling case study in leadership development. Indeed, he gives hope to all floundering, misdirected leaders. As the last words of a person are usually some of the most important, so Jesus’ last words to Peter take on special emphasis. Furthermore, Jesus repeats His question three times—an emphatic mark on one’s last words. The question Jesus asks is one every human creature must answer: “Do you love me?”

Alex Sosler, is the Associate Pastor at Milwood Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, and an Ed.D. student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

First, note what Jesus does not ask. He does not ask, “Do you know me?” Nor does He ask, “Do you believe in me?” He does not even ask, “Are you willing to serve me, Peter?” The lingering question of Jesus is about desire, longing, and love. And Peter responds affirmatively all three times: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you” (John 21:15–17). By the third time, there is a sense of aggravation and exasperation in Peter's response: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (v.17). At each response, Jesus gives direction: Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. These are ordinary practices of a shepherd. Every day a shepherd leads his sheep to find food. Every day a shepherd guides and protects the sheep. Tending and feeding are very ordinary acts in a pastoral life. They are verbs—ways of being, not positional titles. Even the image of a shepherd proposes an ordinary way of living.

Love demands an object. Unlike the modern, New Age, Oprah sentimentality, love is tangible. It never exists merely ethereally as some type of feeling. Love does not thrive as theory. Jesus ties love to Himself and to people. A love for Jesus executes itself in a concern for His sheep. Notice, too, that Jesus refers to the sheep as “my sheep.” The lambs belong to Jesus. Tending and feeding Jesus' sheep are the means by which Peter shows love toward Jesus. These ordinary activities shape and prove love.

With this story planted in the mind, consider what it means to love and what it means to feed or tend. How might the rest of the Gospel influence these verbs? Johannine imagery is used “as a rhetorical tool” (Van der Watt, 2006). Both love and shepherding are not abstract concepts, but tangible realities that Jesus describes. For Peter, it was a long way to grasp this ethic.

What Does It Mean to Love?

There are two primary verbs in John 21: love (*agape* and *phileo*), and feed or take care of (*bosko* and *poimano*). John 13 defines the way of love in the eyes of Jesus. The chapter opens with these words: “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (v.1). What follows is an image of Jesus' love. Love is displayed in washing the disciples' feet. Merrill Tenney (1948) comments on this act: “Divine love leaped over boundaries of class distinctions and made the Lord of Glory the servant of men” (p. 198). Toward the end of the evening, Jesus gives a new commandment: “That you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 34-35). Jesus provides an example of love. This is not abstract teaching; it is concrete demonstration.

LOVE IN THE ORDINARY

To love means to serve in an ordinary way: like washing the feet of a weary guest. Love is active; it takes the initiative in day-to-day moments.

In John 15, Jesus repeats the command to love one another and intensifies it in the most tangible result. The greatest love in the world, says Jesus, is “that someone lays down his life for his friends” (v. 13). So what does it mean to love? It means laying down one’s life through ordinary service.

Earlier in the narrative, Peter overestimated his ability to love when he insisted that he was willing to die for Jesus (John 13:37). Yet, when his life was on the line, Peter denied Jesus three times (John 18:15-18; 25-27). Faced with possible death, he was not willing to lay down his life for Jesus. Yet, the resurrected Jesus gives Peter a second chance. Would he lay down his life for Jesus by tending and feeding His sheep?

What Does It Mean to Shepherd?

When Peter heard Jesus tell him to guard and feed the sheep, he understood the context regarding what Jesus was asking of him. Jesus did not speak in a vacuum. Augustine explains a necessary connection. In John 10, Jesus had already introduced these pastoral terms. The call for Peter to tend and feed the lambs and sheep was explained in an earlier context. In John 10:12 Jesus declares Himself the Good Shepherd. Following Laniak (2006), the word “good” may better be translated “model.” When Jesus proclaims this identity, He connects it to a purpose: the person of God has come to die. There are at least four explicit times that Jesus states this purpose in these few verses (John 10:11, 15, 17, 18). The shepherd has come down to lay down his life for his chosen sheep.

In the same way, Peter’s call to Shepherd comes by laying down his life, for to love is to lay down one’s life. The Good Shepherd does the same. Thus Jesus calls Peter to do what He does when He says, “Follow me.” To love and to shepherd is to lay down one’s life. Augustine (2008) notices this connection when he writes, “So all of these were good shepherds, not just because they shed their blood, but because they shed it for the sheep. You see they didn’t shed it out of haughty self-esteem, but out of love.” The narrative of John in chapter 21 confirms that this is the exact thing to which Peter is called: “to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God” (v.19).

This love is what fuels the leaders’ suffering for the sheep. Augustine (2008) writes,

Love for Christ in him who shepherds his sheep, should grow into such a spiritual ardor that he could conquer his natural fear of death, because of which we do not want to die even when we want to live with Christ. . . . But great as the annoyance of death might be, it should be conquered by

the force of love with which he is loved who, since he is our life, wanted even to ensure death for our sake. (pp. 446–447)

Peter denied Jesus three times around a charcoal fire. In John 21, Jesus searches Peter’s heart by asking him three times, “Do you love me?” As Jesus asks these questions, the smell of charcoal fire again ascends to sting Peter’s bitter memory (John 18:15-18; 25-27). His fear of death must be met with a greater love for Jesus. And this love displays itself in pastoral care for the sheep.

Ordinary Faithfulness Leads to Great Love

A survey of history may contradict this thesis. On one hand, loving Jesus by tending and feeding His flock is very ordinary. It is the shepherd’s daily rhythm. On the other hand, these daily rhythms are also a call to lay down one’s life—no ordinary thing. The reader may question this above dilemma by pondering the great things to which great leaders are called. After all, extraordinary people do extraordinary things. The world remembers great people as defined by their great acts.

For example, the world remembers George Washington as the first American president, as he is enshrined in the painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware.” His fame is connected to the extraordinary feat of leading troops across a frozen river on Christmas night to the surprise of Hessian forces. Likewise, no one would remember Winston Churchill were it not for his relentless voice of courage in the midst of war with Nazi Germany. Would people remember Christ had He not done the unthinkable: die and rise again three days later? Tradition has it that Peter was crucified upside down—no little, ordinary thing!

On the other hand, these leaders were prepared for the extraordinary leadership situations for which we remember them by ordinary acts of habitual faithfulness. It was Christ who said, “He who is faithful in little will be trusted with much” (Luke 16:10). In essence, habits form virtue—small, repeated acts that shape one’s character. David Brooks (2015) defines character as “a set of dispositions, desires, and habits that are slowly engraved during the struggle against your own weakness. You become more disciplined, considerate, and loving through a thousand small acts of self-control, sharing, service, friendship, and refined enjoyment” (pp. 263-264). Yale Professor Anthony T. Kronman (1995) has defined “character” in a similar way: “an ensemble of settled dispositions—of habitual feelings and desires” (p. 16).

The culture of a generation past valued this ordinary, slow growth. For Dwight Eisenhower “conquering your own soul” was “the moral ecology in

LOVE IN THE ORDINARY

which (he) grew up” (Brooks, 2015, p. 53). This means “the essential drama of life is the drama to construct character, which is an engraved set of disciplined habits, a settled disposition to do good” (Brooks, 2015, p. 53). In this context, Eisenhower, who was by no means a brilliant student, was able to cultivate this steadiness over time. His parents developed these habits, and the military engrained them in him. We remember Eisenhower as a great leader today because he negotiated peace and navigated towards prosperity. But he cultivated these leadership qualities through earlier, ordinary habits.

Albert Schweitzer also valued ordinary gifts. Schweitzer was a German medical doctor, musician, and Biblical scholar who began his missionary career to West Africa in 1913 (Tucker, 1983). He describes how he selected those with whom he wanted to work in the medical compound. He only wanted people who would perform constant acts of service with a no-nonsense attitude to simply do what needed doing. “Only a person who feels his preference to be a matter of course, not something out of the ordinary, and who has no thought of heroism but only of a duty undertaken with sober enthusiasm, is capable of being the sort of spiritual pioneer the world needs” (Schwen & Bass, 2006, p. 34). In short, to use the language of Jesus, ordinary tending and feeding are the regular habits where love is born. This is how a person lays down his life.

Jesus as Teacher and Model

The genius of Jesus’ leadership is how He exemplified the way of ordinary love. In John 13 He washed His disciples’ feet—a servant’s task. No great, amazing, revolutionary thing! He was not focused on building big churches, multiplying campuses, or creating huge organizations, as admirable as those things may be. He was doing a very ordinary, humble thing: washing dirty feet. After modeling love, He taught by explaining its meaning. When Peter put up a fight in receiving Jesus’ service, he asks, “Lord, do you wash my feet?”, the assumption being that this was unbecoming of a person with authority. In the next moment, another objection arises. (Peter seems to be strong-willed). “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus gently insists, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (v. 8).

When opposition to leadership arises, many leaders resort to two basic human responses to conflict: fight or flight. By the authority vested in Him, Jesus could have demanded His right and grabbed Peter’s feet, forcibly washing them. But Jesus does not rage in anger—acting in aggression and fighting. Jesus could have complained saying in effect, “Fine. Have it your way. Do what you want. It is not my problem.” He did not pout in sadness—acting in passivity or fleeing. Rather, Jesus patiently and humbly teaches. He

feeds His lambs with truth, and He guides them into a reality they do not yet see clearly.

What He models, He also explains. As always, He delicately interweaves teaching and modeling. Jesus habituates the disciples to give them a taste of the good life, and then explains why the commitment is worthwhile (Sanders, 2015). Here is the Master Teacher posing a question that starts the disciples on a journey of learning, “Do you understand what I have done?” Explanations give meaning, invite appreciation, and ultimately bid love toward action. As their Teacher and Lord, He has given them an example. Now, they, as His disciples, should do likewise.

The pattern of Jesus is teaching, modeling, and inviting to follow. Jesus is not content with mere cognitive recognition. As Richard Hays (1996) writes, “Those who follow Jesus of the fourth Gospel . . . will learn an ethic that love’s not in words or speech, but in truth and action (1 John 3:18)” (p. 156).

Conclusion

Peter, like all leaders, was a complex being. He was not just a brain; nor just an economic material to manipulate for maximal production. His intellectual capabilities needed cognitive instruction. But his intellect was limited. He needed to also see the teaching at work. And in both, he needed an invitation to practice what he was learning. Jesus provided the example when He called a disciple: “Follow me” (John 1:43). “Example is the best teacher. Moral improvement occurs most reliably when our heart is warmed, when we come into contact with people we admire and love and we consciously and unconsciously bend our lives to mimic theirs” (Brooks, 2015, p. xv). Only love is adequate for this undertaking.

Following Jesus in leadership may not be earth-shattering. It may not be radical or spectacular. Jesus does not ask us to rise from the dead. He already did that. But our Lord calls us to follow Him. Christians follow a Good Shepherd. Now Jesus asks leaders to feed His sheep and tend His lambs. Christian leaders love a Good Shepherd and serve Him as under shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-5) who give their lives for His sheep.

References

- Aphrahat. (2010). *The demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian sage*. Trans. Lehto, A. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias.
- Augustine. (2008). *Homilies on the first epistle of John*. Trans. Ramsey, B., Doyle, D. E., & Martin, T. F. Retrieved January 2, 2017, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.vii.xc.html>
- Borchert, G. L. (2002). *John 12-21*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman.
- Brooks, D. (2015). *The road to character*. New York: Random House.

LOVE IN THE ORDINARY

- Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John. The Pillar New Testament commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Collins, J. C. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap . . . and others don't*. New York, NY: HarperBusiness.
- Frey, J., Zimmermann, R., Van Der Watt, J. G., & Kern, G. (2006). *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, forms, themes, and theology of Johannine figurative language*. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck.
- Hays, R. B. (1996). *The moral vision of the New Testament: community cross, new creation: A contemporary introduction to New Testament ethics*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Houlden, J. L. (1973). *Ethics and the New Testament*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin.
- Kostenberger, A. J. (2009). *A theology of John's Gospel and letters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Kronman, A. T. (1995). *The lost lawyer: Failing ideals of the legal profession*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Laniak, T. S. (2006). *Shepherds after my own heart: Pastoral traditions and leadership in the Bible*. Leicester, England: Apollos.
- Lewis, C. S. (2001). *Mere Christianity: A revised and amplified edition, with a new introduction, of the three books, broadcast talks, Christian behaviour, and beyond personality*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Merkle, B. L., & Schreiner, T. R. (2014). *Shepherding God's flock: Biblical leadership in the New Testament and beyond*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel.
- Mohler, A. R. (2012). *The conviction to lead: 25 principles for leadership that matters*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House.
- Resane, T. K. (2014). Leadership for the church: The shepherd model. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 70(1), 1-6.
- Sanderse, W. (2015). "An Aristotelian model of moral development." *Journal of Philosophy On Education*, 49(3), 382-398.
- Schwehn, M. R., & Bass, D. C. (2006). *Leading lives that matter: What we should do and who we should be*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Smith, J. K. A. (2016). *You are what you love: The spiritual power of habit*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos.
- Smith, D. M., Culpepper, A. R., & Black, C. C. (Eds.). (1996). *Exploring the Gospel of John: In honor of D. Moody Smith*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.
- Tenney, M. C. (1948). *John: The Gospel of belief: An analytic study of the text*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Tucker, R. (1983). *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A biographical history of Christian missions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Wright, N. T. (2010). *After you believe: Why Christian character matters*. New York, NY: HarperOne.