

Today, we come to the end of our sermon series, our final call story of an ordinary person who is called to do God's extraordinary work. However, today's biblical character is different from the others. This biblical character isn't known by name. The character's identity is only known as the Beloved Disciple, or as scripture describes "the one whom Jesus loved" (v. 21).

Scholars have spent a great deal of time and study trying to figure out whom this disciple is. Many think the Beloved Disciple is Lazarus since Jesus wept when he died. Others think it may be Jesus' brother, James, or even Mary Magdalene since she was very close to Jesus. Many think the Beloved Disciple is actually John because this character is only found in the gospel of John. Despite humans' attempt at defining and solving this mystery, none of these theories are proven.

There are also theories as to why this character is not named. Some think it was to protect the disciple from persecution, but what about the other named disciples? Some think if it was Mary Magdalene, concealing her identity as a woman would help their movement. Some think it is a sign of humility. The disciple is only known by relationship with Christ instead of by name. If this character is in fact, John, referring to himself in third person as the "one whom Jesus loved" is not really a sign of humility, in my opinion.

The gospel of John is known for its poetic and symbolic nature. With this in mind, the Beloved Disciple is probably not an actual, historic person. Susan Robb said,

"By intentionally not naming the 'one whom Jesus loved,' this gospel invites us to be the Beloved Disciple."¹

The Beloved Disciple is mentioned five times in the gospel of John, but the particular times are important to note. The first time this character appears is in the scripture for today. The disciples are gathered around the table at the Last Supper, and Jesus tells them that one of them will betray him. Peter asks "the one whom Jesus loved" who was reclining next to Jesus, to ask Jesus who it is.

In our culture, we don't usually recline while we're eating. During Jesus' time, they didn't sit in chairs around a table like we do. The table sat low to the ground, and people sat on floor cushions, "reclining or leaning with their left arm, while their feet angled behind them to the right."² The person to the right could lean in relatively close.

Let's look at verse 23 closer and particularly, the phrase, "reclining next to him." Translated in Greek, the word "**reclining**" can also mean "leaning." "**Next**" can mean "in," "against," or "near." "**To**" means "the," and "**him**" refers to "Jesus, or 'of Jesus'". A word that has been left out from our translation is "kolpo," which means "heart," "bosom," or "breast." So, this verse can literally mean, "the one whom Jesus loved was leaning against Jesus's breast or leaning into his heart. We can interpret this as the disciple was physically leaning against Jesus, or the disciple was symbolically leaning into the

¹ Susan Robb, *Called*, 124.

² *Ibid*, 125.

heart of Jesus.³ Either one shows a close, intimate relationship, which is what Jesus loved about this disciple.

We see this same intimate relationship when the Beloved Disciple appears again at the foot of the cross. Jesus trusts this disciple with his own mother when he places her in the disciple's care. On Easter morning, this disciple outruns Peter to the tomb to see firsthand if the resurrection is true, and this disciple believes it to be true.

The fourth appearance is after the resurrection when the disciples are fishing and coming up short. Jesus appears on the beach and tells them to cast their nets on the other side. The Beloved Disciple recognizes Jesus before the others do, and says, "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7). And, finally, this disciple's last appearance was after their breakfast with Jesus on the beach. Scripture notes that the disciple whom Jesus loved followed Jesus.

After leaning into Jesus, the Beloved Disciple receives God's grace at the Last Supper and experiences an intimate relationship with Christ. This intimate journey begins at the table and then takes the disciple to the cross, to the resurrection, to believing, to seeing the Lord, and to following Christ.

We are the Beloved Disciple. We walk this same path. We receive God's grace at the table. We walk to the cross and die to self. We experience the power and freedom of the resurrection. We see the Lord for ourselves and believe. We make a conscious decision to follow Christ for the rest of our lives. This intimate relationship

with Christ is what Jesus loves about us. We lean in and walk with Christ every step on our journey.

The Beloved Disciple doesn't appear in Jesus' ministry before John 13. It is not until the last supper that this disciple appears when the end is about to unfold. Yet, this is the disciple whom Jesus loved. The Beloved Disciple shows us that it is never too late to lean in to Christ. It is never too late to walk the journey to the cross and believe. We haven't missed our chance to see the risen Lord and shape our lives around Christ. It's not impossible to become the Beloved Disciple after all we've done.

During this sermon series, I hope you have seen parts of yourself in every biblical character. The Bible is filled with ordinary people, just like us, who feel the same yearning that there's got to be more to this life. God called people to do God's work thousands of years ago, and God is still calling us today. The call of the Beloved Disciple is our call -- to follow Christ with a personal relationship in which God does extraordinary work within our hearts and lives. This is where we fit into this series. We are the Beloved Disciple. It's never too late for us to receive God's grace and lean in to the heart of Christ. It's never too late to follow Christ.

³ Ibid.