

## *I'm Fixed Upon It*

**Sermon 215 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 10, 2024**

**Matthew 16:21-23**

They say that what our children learn in team sports will stay with them for the rest of their lives. These are lessons in humility, endurance, teamwork, adaptation, independence, confidence, the list goes on. In fact, when I hear folks talk about all the benefits of team sports I often feel a little regret that I never played soccer or basketball, I wasn't on the volleyball, tennis, or swim teams...never ran track or anything like that. No, I spent my childhood and teenage years dancing. Which was funny considering I was the child of a southern baptist music minister and in those years the southern baptists weren't quite sure what to make of dancing.

But that didn't deter my parents from letting me do the thing I loved to do. I spent 2 years on the school drill team and 8 years at the dance studio perfecting tap, jazz, lyrical, and ballet routines and now looking back, I sometimes wish I had focused on other kinds of sports so that I could have had that iconic pre-game pep talk experience, the kind you never forget and can summon up anytime you need a source of motivation or encouragement later on in life. And I wonder if - despite my love for dancing - if it didn't give more scars and insecurities than it gave lifelong lessons.

But reflecting on today's scripture and the words from our lenten hymn, *Come Thou Fount*, I was able to uncover at least one good lesson from all those years in the dance studio. One of the most iconic skills a ballerina must learn is called the *pirouette*. It is a rite of passage, a dramatic show of skill and ability, for a ballerina to stand in the middle of the dance floor and spin around with perfect posture, perfect speed, perfect balance, as if she were attached to both the floor and ceiling with an invisible axis connecting her body (head, shoulders, torso, hips, knees, ankles, toes) straight to the floor as she spins repeatedly without a single wobble.

The audience wonders *how* anyone could keep their balance, spinning like that. And novice dancers *do* struggle with that very thing. But an experienced ballerina knows exactly how to maintain composure, because she has mastered the physics of the movement: she has learned...how to extend and retract the arms, keep the shoulders relaxed, low and even, foot placed high above the knee when bringing it in to keep the hips in line with one another, and most importantly she has mastered the art of spotting.

Finding and keeping a good spot is critical to mastering the pirouette. While a spot can really be anything the ballerina chooses to focus on, the *best* spots are fixed objects, unobstructed by other dancers or members of the audience. Spots are often lights in the auditorium or fixtures on the walls of a dance classroom. The ballerina chooses one long before the dance even begins so that when the time comes for spins and turns, she knows exactly where to look.

If you watch closely, you will see that the ballerina's body rotates faster than her head. That's because she's focused on the spot. She is spotting. As her body turns for the pirouette, her head never moves from that one chosen spot, until it has to, then it whips around quickly and returns to the spot, long before the rest of her body completes its rotation. This is the key to a balanced turn. This is what makes a series of balanced pirouettes possible, one after the other. *This* is how the ballerina stays upright and on track, never succumbing to dizziness or disorientation, always upright, graceful, and ready for another turn.

I used to be jealous of the ways that those childhood sports lessons helped other preachers with sermon illustrations. I used to think my dance years had nothing to lend to good biblical interpretation. That is until today.

You see, as we continue on this journey with Peter we have encountered him in a number of different scenarios and situations. We have remembered the calling story where Peter is fishing, living a seemingly ordinary life, until he

decides to follow Jesus. We have seen Peter embody some serious courage as he alone stepped out of the boat and onto the water - knowing full well that people sink (!) and yet somehow *Jesus* was standing firm. We have read the story of Peter's profession of faith, naming Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus (in return) naming Peter as the rock. But now we find Peter in a bit of a different situation.

Jesus has begun to tell the disciples about the next chapter of his ministry and mission. How he has to turn toward Jerusalem where he will be beaten and abused, even killed. Peter doesn't like what he is hearing - *who would* - and so he blurts out "*God forbid it! This cannot happen!*" And just like that, the rock becomes a stumbling block for Christ himself.

"Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus says back, "...for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." [*Get behind me Satan!...*] We haven't seen or heard from Satan since the wilderness temptations. Yes it was twelve chapters ago when Matthew wrote that the devil left Jesus after he refused the third temptation, the one where he was offered all the kingdoms of the world. The way Luke tells the story, Satan left Jesus then, but didn't go away for good, rather he waited for an opportune time. Maybe this was that "opportune time," right as Jesus is telling the disciples that God's reign will not be ushered in by a King, an Emperor, or (in our case) a President, because God's reign will arrive through the Suffering Servant.

Peter scholar, Larry Helyer, sees threads of Peter's inclination toward nationalism and militarism throughout the Gospels. Peter wants Jesus to be a king, a ruler, a military leader who overcomes and overthrows the existing powers. Maybe this was the only way Peter could imagine Jesus as the Messiah. It is probably all coming from a good place, a place of loyalty and devotion, a place of friendship, support, and commitment to the cause. But the problem is, it is not what Jesus came to do.

We can easily place ourselves in Peter's shoes because we wear similar blinders when it comes to our understanding of power and leadership. Our world, much like the world of Peter and the disciples, is governed by political actors boasting different priorities relating to our safety, our economic vitality, and our place in the global society. Each one vies for our ultimate loyalty. So... when we think about power, lordship and authority - how can we *not* think in those same terms?

Suffering, serving, and dying will not help us here. These will not usher in any kind of kingdom. At least that is what we are conditioned to believe. So certainly we can understand why Peter cries out: "God forbid it! This must never happen to you, Jesus." We can understand it, because maybe we too want our Savior to come and sit in the highest office.

But even though we can understand it - no - perhaps precisely *because* we understand it, we have to be very careful here and heed Jesus' words of caution and correction: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." It seems Peter's desires for Jesus' reign - though probably rooted in a good place, with the best intentions Peter himself could muster - were misplaced, fixed on the wrong spot.

In his book *The Life and Witness of Peter*, Helyer writes that:

like Peter,

"we too fall prey to equating nationalism and political preferences with Jesus' kingdom. Like Peter, we are guilty of 'setting [our minds] not on divine things but on human things.' Jesus' rebuke of Peter is personal but not unique; that is to say, as the leader and spokesperson for the Twelve, he is rightly chastised. But make no mistake about it, he is not alone in his sentiments; the others also cherish the same confused view as Peter, and his rebuke is theirs as well." (Helyer, 45)

Oh how easy it is to fix our eyes on the wrong spot.

On the heels of our state's primary election and as the political season heats up once again, we must pay close attention. We live in a world where there is artificial intelligence, the ability to edit sounds and images without a trace... there is real news and fake news, cable news, social media news, network news, and printed news, there are complicated algorithms and people in highly paid jobs that exist purely for the purpose of leading us to believe that our future, even our salvation could be determined by a human being sitting in a high office.

What's more... Our politics are not the only "spots" vying for our misplaced attention. In fact, there are many temptations that seem at first like they could be worthy of our fixation. We can be fixed on the past, or the future, failing to live in the present moment, we can be fixed on our careers, ambitions, and financial goals. We can be fixed on our fears and anxieties about all we cannot control. These focal points - spots - can certainly hold our attention, but they can never keep us balanced.

If ever there was an "*opportune time*," friends, this is it.

By now we may be asking ourselves, how in the world are we to find the right spot? ...That steady and constant point upon which to fix our eyes as we spin our way through the dance of life? Fortunately, the whole Bible and especially the Gospels give us some clues.

Reading these ancient stories, we find disciples who are just like us. Disciples who *honestly and earnestly* want to follow Jesus, but who cannot seem to get it right all the time. So Jesus teaches them, coaches them, calls them back time and time again to the same thing, their perfect "spot" (so to speak) the one founding ethic upon which everything is built: Love. The book of First John summarizes this beautifully by saying: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them."

Our Lenten hymn *Come Thou Fount* echoes the same truth in the final line of the last verse,

*Praise the mount I'm fixed upon it  
Mount of God's unchanging love.*

So perhaps if we want to follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, we need to meet him just like Peter did, somewhere between the rock and the stumbling block, with enough humility to know that it never takes much to send us wobbling off course. So we have to practice fixing our eyes upon that spot, which is always love, so that we can easily recognize it in all of life's ballrooms, performance halls, and auditoriums.

Whether we are lacing up ballet slippers or walking shoes, whether we slip our morning feet into dance tights or work clothes We have to practice positioning ourselves on the axis of love so that we know what a balanced pirouette feels like in the real world. That is how the best ballerinas do it. They practice until they know with every cell in their body what a balanced pirouette *feels* like - and then they go and do it over and over and over again.

If we want to live like that, on the axis of love, we have to immerse ourselves in the Gospels so that we know that love always transcends tradition. We have to remind ourselves to spend time with the people Jesus prioritized so that we remember the last are first and the least are greatest.

We have to do what the apostle Paul said to the Christians in Thessalonica when he told them to "Pray continuously" because if we let up even for a minute, asking God to show us the way... Well... that minute just might become the opportune time... and we might just shift our gaze *just barely* enough to send us wobbling of course.

It is bound to happen, but *there is good news:*

No matter how severe the wobble, there is always grace. Ready to help us find our footing in the source of love once again, so that we might fix our

eyes on the spot called Love and start spinning again with all the balance, posture, alignment, and beauty of the Kingdom of God.

Friends, if we fix our eyes upon the love of God and allow that love to be our eternal spot, no matter how much chaos swirls around us, our footing will be on solid ground, and we will move in beautiful alignment, head, shoulders, core, hips, knee, ankle, toe, all dancing.... turning... balanced on the axis of love.

And I cannot imagine a dance more beautiful, more captivating, more *holy* than that.