

## **“A Little Yellow Cross”**

John 10:1-11; 20:15-18

*Series: Recharge: Plug Into the Power of God*

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The Woodside Church

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A new minister in town was asked by a funeral director to perform the burial service for a man who died without any family, friends or church. The cemetery was way back in the country and, coincidentally, this man would be the first laid to rest there. Being new in town, the pastor got lost on the way to the cemetery and, being a typical man, did not stop for directions. Finally, arriving an hour late, he spotted the gravediggers eating their lunch before they filled in the grave. Regrettably the hearse was already gone.

The pastor apologized to the workers for keeping them waiting and went right into action. Stepping to the side of the open grave he saw the vault lid was already in place. He assured the workers he would not hold them up for long but he felt this was the proper thing to do. The workers stopped eating their lunch and gathered around the hole while the minister poured out his heart and soul. As he preached the workers began to say, “Amen,” “Praise the Lord,” and “Glory!” The pastor got into it. He preached and preached like he’d never preached before. Finally, he closed the service with a prayer, thanked the workers. To this one replied, “Thank you Pastor. I ain’t never seen anything like that before and I’ve been putting in septic tanks for twenty years.”

Some tombstones have funny sayings. In a cemetery in England it says:

Remember man, as you walk by, As you are now, so once was I.

As I am now, so shall you be. Remember this and follow me.

To which someone replied by writing on the tombstone:

To follow you I’ll not consent, Until I know which way you went.

The amazing thing about gravestones is the way they summarize your life. Carved into the face of it are all the essentials: your name, the day you were born, the day you died and one more thing: a tiny little dash between the two. That’s it. Your entire life is reduced to a single line. All the triumphs and failures, all the joys and griefs packed into a single scratch on stone between your entrance and exit.

For just a moment: stop and think about your dash. How do you measure your life? Do you measure it by the amount of money or stuff you accumulate? Will your life be full if you accomplish something great or become someone important? Do you measure your life by how well you can retire? John Beukema met a man in his fifties who couldn’t wait for retirement. I told my wife, “When I retire, I’m going to sit and watch TV all day every

day.” Pastor John said, “If you do that you'll be dead in a year.” He asked, “Why?” John replied, “If your lack of purpose doesn't kill you, your wife will.”<sup>1</sup>

How do you measure your life? What makes a life full? The problem is not that our lives are empty. They're too full. In *The Progress Paradox*, Gregg Easterbrook writes,

Most Americans enjoy a higher standard of living than 99.4 percent of the 80 billion human beings who've ever lived. Yet we're not content. Our lives are characterized by too much of a good thing, excess at every turn. We're surrounded by so much food that obesity has become a national crisis, are tempted by so much entertainment and information and stuff to buy that we sleep three hours a day less than our grandparents.<sup>2</sup>

Money and stuff fill up a life but they do not make your life full. In fact, like a depleted cell phone battery, we feel rundown, worn out, exhausted.

We know that's not the way to measure a life. But still we try. Why? It's what we see everyone do. We keep following the herd. In Gevas, Turkey a lone sheep jumped off a nearby cliff and fell to its death. Suddenly a stampede of 1,500 sheep followed the first over the edge. The local newspaper reported “450 of the sheep perished in a billowy, white pile.” The sheep in the middle and back of the herd were saved by landing on the first to die. An American paper called it “Sheep Die in Mass Ewe-icide”<sup>3</sup>

Want to break out of the herd? There was a man who lived a very short life. He saved no money, owned no property and gave up the only job he was trained to do. He earned no diploma, wrote no books, won no awards. His most important contribution came during the final ten percent of his life. His efforts earned him the suspicion of the authorities and a criminal record. In the end he was tortured and executed by the state. His life contained absolutely none of the measures of success we use. By our standards, he was a complete and utter failure. Today some might call him a loser.

But that's not what His Daddy thought. Three days later, God the Father raised Jesus from the dead and defeated our greatest enemies: sin and death. He rose not just to give you eternal life in the hereafter, but a full life in the here and now. Jesus says:

I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10: 9-10

To have a full life, the first step is to **Enter Life through Jesus**. What does Jesus mean when He says, “I am the gate for the sheep”? In His day, sheep are kept in a courtyard with

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<sup>1</sup> John Beukema, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

<sup>2</sup> William Falk, *The Week* (3-26-04).

<sup>3</sup> "450 Sheep Jump to Their Deaths in Turkey", [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com) (7-8-05); "Sheep in Mass 'Ewe-icide,'" [The Sun Online](http://www.sun.com) (7-8-05).

a single opening in the wall. To protect his flock, the shepherd actually lies down in that opening and becomes the gate. The only way in or out is through the shepherd.

How do we enter life through Jesus? By faith in Him. There are a lot of other shepherds you can follow. The media tells you who you should be, how you should look, what you should do. Stress squeezes you. Lust tempts you. Alcohol and drugs calm you down or rev you up. Money drives you. Power, popularity, possessions and pride pull at you. They all say, "Follow me." They all claim to be your friend and savior. They promise to give you life. Jesus calls them what they are: thieves and robbers. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). These false shepherds steal your serenity, kill your relationships, destroy your spirit. That's why we're so exhausted. Jesus came for one purpose. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). He frees you from the chains of power, popularity and possessions.

Success magazine, obviously not a Christian periodical, once asked Americans to complete the sentence, "Success means..." What they found is startling. Only 18.8% said success meant "Making a lot of money." 60% said, "Adding value to the lives of others." When they asked, "What is the single most important element for success?" 7.3% said "Happiness," 25.5% said "Family," and the top response, 41% said, "Faith." When asked, "The most important factors for success" 32.3% said "Money/wealth", 43.4% said "Leaving a Legacy" 86% said a "Good relationship with God."<sup>4</sup> Put your faith in Jesus. He came to give you a great relationship with God. Enter Life through Him.

Next, **Empty Your Life with Jesus**. In order to fill your life with faith, hope and love, Jesus empties out whatever controls you. Jesus says when the Good Shepherd, "has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:4). When you put your faith in Jesus and follow Him as your Shepherd you are saved. You belong to Him. The Bible also says you are adopted into His family. But He doesn't stop there. He leads you away from harmful things. He begins to empty and expel the painful, unhealthy stuff which fills your life. Some things you are happy to let go. But some things you are caressing or clutching He needs to take away. You know they're hurting, poisoning, possibly destroying you. Don't let them define you.

Before the first round of the Master's Tournament started last week in Augusta there were already tears of joy when 9 year old Autumn Solesbee won the annual Drive, Chip and Putt Golf Tournament. Yet more important than the trophy she holds in her hand is the faith she has in her heart. Autumn was adopted by Donnie and Jamie Solesbee after years of living in foster care. In commenting on her faith in Christ, her parents write,

Our daughter Autumn didn't choose the circumstances of her birth or where she spent the first years of her life. She didn't get to decide how long she'd be in foster care or whether someone would adopt her. But she did make a decision that was all her own. She decided to let hope and joy define her.

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<sup>4</sup> "The New American Dream," Success (Summer 2006), p. 88

There's a lot in your life you didn't choose. But it doesn't have to define you. Jesus is calling you. He wants to adopt you and empty all the hurts and harmful habits.

Maybe you don't feel strong enough to let it go. Maybe you're emotionally depleted. Where can you find the power to rise and face each day? The same power that raised Jesus from the grave is available to us today through the Holy Spirit. Starting next week our message series will be "Recharge: Plug Into the Power of the Holy Spirit." Join us each week and discover how Jesus can empty you so He can fill you with His power.

Finally, **Entrust Your Life to Jesus**. Of all the shepherds you could follow, why should you entrust your life into the care of Jesus the Good Shepherd? Other shepherds want to take something from you. Jesus gives His life for you. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11). On the Cross, He took the punishment for our sins. He sacrificed His life in our place. Yet greatest of all: He rose triumphant over sin, death and the grave. He took all your hurts, habits and hang-ups upon Himself and defeated them. He's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He's the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. And the open door of His empty tomb is your doorway to eternal life if you trust your life to Him.

Mary is beside herself with terror and grief. On Friday she witnessed the brutal execution of her beloved Rabbi and now she discovers His body is gone. When the caretaker of the cemetery comes up behind her and asks, "Lady, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" (John 20:15). Without turning she says between sobs, "Mister, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him" (John 20:15). Then the Gardener says one word, "Mary." Recognizing the voice of her Shepherd she turns and sees the best news of all. He is alive!

Today, Jesus the Good Shepherd calls your name. To Jesus you are not a social security number, a student ID number, a case number, a credit score. You are not just the dash between a birth and death date. He knows your name. He's calling your name. He wants to empty out all the junk and fill you with His abundant life. If you answer the call of the Good Shepherd He'll lead you to a full life. Your Shepherd will lead you through the valley of the shadow of death so you may dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

I invite you to break out of the herd and follow Jesus. Make a decision to commit or recommit your life to Jesus the Good Shepherd. Go to the Welcome Center and grab a gift copy of *The Case for Easter* by Lee Strobel. Attend the Recharge Messages series on Sundays this Spring. Join a Growth Group or serve our community in a mission project when we do *The Church Has Left the Building* on Pentecost Sunday, June 5.

Dave was driven. In his youth, Dave Crane pushed himself to excel in hockey, swimming and baseball. He was no less motivated in his career. He scaled the serpentine path of the corporate mountain. From General Manager to Executive Vice President. Ultimately he rose to be President of a company he founded in 2019.

When the cancer appeared, Dave fought it with the same grit and tenacity he attacked every other mountain in his life. Yet this time he knew he needed teammates. So

he asked friends to join Team Crane. Though he was not a very religious person in the past, Dave now realized he needed Jesus' help. He gave out little yellow crosses to all his teammates as a symbol of the Light of Christ. A yellow cross was taped to his hand during surgery and he held one each night as he went to sleep. When his daughter Morgan shared with me her Dad's diagnosis, I invited Dave to join a brand new Microchurch – a gathering of 4-5 believers who help each other and apply God's Word. These guys did not know each other and, because of Covid, we could not meet in person. We are church for each other. We share our struggles, study the Bible and pray for each other. When we meet together, Jesus shows up. Even when Dave was in the hospital in Boston or Philly he still joined us. Dave's faith in Jesus grew deeper.

The first time our Microchurch met in person was at Dave's house just after he made the difficult decision to enter hospice. We met with him to pray and support him. Toward the end Dave asked, "What will heaven be like? How can I be sure it's all true?" I told him, "You learn about a place you've never been, by talking to a person who's been there. Jesus was dead for three days and came back to tell us heaven is a celebration. Heaven is a party. Heaven is His Father's House and He is going to prepare a place just for us." The last time we met in person with Dave, we told him, "We are here for you, Dave. It's okay. You can go home." On June 13 last year Jesus called Dave Crane's name and he followed the Good Shepherd home. On the day of Dave's memorial service the Vineyard was filled with Team Crane. They heard the story of the man who carried the little yellow cross. Dave's dash didn't end. Because of the Cross it goes on forever.