*GETTING DROPPED*

John 14:23-29

May 22, 2022

 I’m kinda strange. You know that by now, I guess. But this is a special case of strange. I like to watch bicycle racing: Tour de France, Olympics, sprint racing, but especially road racing. I don’t *do* it anymore, you understand, (never did race, but I did like to ride. It’s especially fun in a group.)

I’ve titled this sermon “Getting Dropped.” Getting dropped is when you are riding with other cyclists, but can’t maintain the pace the group is pedaling. So you fall behind. If you can’t catch up, the gap widens and eventually, you are so far behind that you’re pedaling solo. You’ve been dropped.

They say virtually every cyclist who rides with a group, whether a professional racer or weekend recreational rider, has been dropped at one time or another. Even the strongest riders have off days. Getting dropped is a humbling experience.

 So common is getting dropped that *Bicycling* magazine not real long ago published interviews with riders across the spectrum – professionals, amateurs, enthusiasts, recreationalists – who talked about what they learned from being outdistanced by the group.

 One of those interviewed was Kelly Krause, a 33 year old publicist from Austin, Texas. She’s been cycling regularly for only two years, and was 100 pounds heavier when she started than she was at interview time. She said, “When I first started, I got dropped . . . a lot. I didn’t see it as failure. I approach every ride as a learning experience. When I look up the road as the group rides away from me, I don’t panic. I simply watch as other riders also drop off the back. Then I work my hardest to . . catch them. Every time, I make it a little farther. It’s the tiny victories that keep me going.”

I identify with Kelly. I rode in college, and usually our rides took us about 20 miles south from Walla Walla, WA down into Oregon, where (among other things we’d do) we’d steal some farmer’s apples -- for energy, you understand, not just to have a bag of apples to take home -- and then turn back around.

I was a little less driven than Kelly, maybe more “recreational,” as the magazine titled their structure. Sure enough, I’d get dropped. But sure enough, later someone else would get dropped too. I’d work hard to get back up to that rider, and then I’d have company, right?

As a cross country guy in high school, we were coached to overtake that straggler ahead of us with so much energy and determination and keep going on, that he’d get demoralized and wouldn’t even try to re-take you. But that’s another story. And another lesson.

Haley Weaver, 22, a student from Austin, TX tells of showing up for an organized ride the first time without any knowledge of what group rides are about. She was on a steel single-speed bike wearing leggings and a T-shirt. The other riders were dressed in spandex and had multi-geared lightweight bikes. Needless to say, she got dropped on the first climb, but one of the other riders slowed down and hung with her. When she gasped, “I’m going to die!” the rider spoke words of encouragement and slowed even more. When she finally got to the top, she found the rest of the group waiting for her.

On each subsequent climb, another rider stayed with her. Weaver soon got a better bike and has become such a strong rider that she now participates in races, which, she says, “Is a whole new world of getting dropped.” Her advice to other riders is, “Be supportive, because you never know when someone needs just a little kindness to keep going.”

At the Last Supper, where Jesus is preparing His disciples for what is soon to come, He talks about what loving Him means going forward. Just a few verses later He adds, “I am going away . . . .” In effect, Jesus tells the disciples that He is, in the cycling—or the cross country racing sense--“dropping” them, and they will be left behind to carry on the Gospel proclamation without Him. See, the governing theological and pastoral concern of John 14:1-31 is to prepare the community of Jesus’ followers for *life in His absence*. And not coincidentally, this text is for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, the Sunday before Ascension Day, when Jesus left the disciples behind in a dramatic way.

Mind you, He didn’t leave them alone, for in this passage, he also talks about the Holy Spirit’s coming to teach them what they need, and to remind them of Jesus’ words. But, for the disciples, the ongoing endeavor of following Jesus would have a whole different feel without Him physically present with them.

And isn’t that where we who follow Jesus are today? While we’ve never known Jesus as a physical presence, we are called to “ride” in the wake of His time on earth, dropped and outdistanced, but still pedaling, making a way in a life in His absence to be the witnesses His reality, the bearers of His Spirit and the practitioners of His teachings.

So maybe we can learn something from the cyclists who have looked for the positive in being dropped, and even from lagging behind other Christians.

Kelly Krause looks at the other riders who’ve been dropped but are still ahead of her, *and works her hardest to catch them.* Even when she doesn’t, she gets a little closer than the last time. While there are no perfect Christians, there certainly are followers of Jesus whose example of discipleship we can emulate, and from which we can learn.

Eunice Holz, a church member in Madison, Wisconsin, tells of asking her son, who was a university student, why he seldom studied at his apartment. He explained that if he really wanted to study, he went to one of the campus libraries. “When I see all those people reading and concentrating, it convinces me to get at it, too.” Holz goes on to say that similarly, seeing the members of her church working on mission projects and tasks that are good for the church inspires her to do her part. She closes her article by addressing her fellow church members: “When I see any of you putting God and church ahead of personal wants, I’m reminded to look at myself to see if, indeed, God is first in my own life. Your lives are my favorite sermons.”

A man named Cedrick Grouse uses getting dropped as an opportunity to analyze what he was dong that led to being left behind. This notion applies to us when we notice how far we are from where and whom Jesus calls us to be. There’s value and help in mentally replaying our failures to love one another or to live holy lives. By such scrutiny, you and I can see where we started slipping from the pack and figure out where we need to do things differently going forward.

None of this is to say we should obsess over, or wallow in, how far behind Jesus we are. In a book by French priest Michel Quoist, there is a prayer in which the author includes not just the words of the person praying but also what the author envisions as God’s answer. In one prayer, the pray-er confesses to having fallen into sin and to now feeling ashamed and soiled. But then the voice of God comes:

*Come, son, look up.*

*Ask my pardon*

*And get up quickly*

*You see, it’s not falling that is the worst,*

*Bt staying on the ground*.

Haley Weaver (the woman on the heavy steel bike who is befriended by another rider who slows down to ride with her, and finds the whole group waiting for her at the top) [Haley]reminds us of the importance of being supportive and encouraging others who are dropped, and are struggling to keep up. Indeed, one of the cool things of being part of a church is that there are others to encourage us. And, it should be part of our ministry to others to speak the word of encouragement when they need it.

 In our text, Jesus tells His followers that He is leaving a heavenly encouragement behind with them. That ‘heavenly encouragement’ is the Holy Spirit Himself. Granted, Jesus doesn’t use that term—‘heavenly encouragement.’ Some translations say “Comforter.” And encouragement is part of the Holy Spirit’s work as comforter.. The Spirit will do the work of encouragement by teaching you everything, and reminding you of all that I have said to you,” Jesus said (v. 26).

 Few metaphors are perfect, and, although this matter of getting dropped while cycling does give us entry into the text for today, it doesn’t cover everything the text says. One thing it misses is that *we who follow Jesus are not being left behind in every sense*. Jesus tells the disciples, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we” – that is, the Father and the Son – “will come to them and make our home with them” (v. 23). At the beginning of chapter 14, Jesus tells the disciples that He is leaving to prepare a place for them” (v. 2), but here, He’s saying something more. As commentator Richard Burridge notes, “Not only does Jesus prepare a place for us in God but He also makes a place for God in us.”

 Yes, Jesus has outdistanced us. He’s returned to His Father. But He has, at the same time, made His home in us – we who struggle to keep up with Him. And that struggle, as the cyclists remind us, can make us stronger followers, and even narrow the distance somewhat.

 Amen.