

5 Things You Should Always Find at Church.

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this morning we are concluding our study in John's Gospel. We actually started this in August 2022, and although we've taken a couple of breaks in the time between then and now, the Gospel of John has been a big, big part of our church's life for nearly two years.

It's been great to go through this wonderful book together. I hope that it's something that you found helpful. I hope that you've learned a lot from it. But most of all, I hope that all of us are responding in faith.

That's John's great goal. That's what he wants for us. And that's true for all of us, whether as a believer you are being built up and re-energized through your study of this Gospel, or whether you're maybe not yet a believer or not sure where you stand.

The great prayer we have for this study is that God uses this book to take you to the point where you can say, Yes, I believe in Jesus.

So it's been a great book to look at. I've enjoyed it very much. And we're going to bring it to a conclusion by looking together at chapter 21. We're going to look at the whole chapter, but I want to start by reading the very last verse as is there on the screen.

[1 : 1 0] Now, there are many other things that Jesus did where every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Our title today is Five Things You Should Always Find in Church. And as that title tells you, that's what we're going to look at. We're going to get five things that are in this chapter that you should always find in the Christian church.

You should always find in a church that's shaped by the gospel, five things that you should always find in our church as well. And here they are. You should find normal stuff, extraordinary stuff, mistakes and restoration, no weird nonsense and never ending amazement.

We're going to look at these one by one. So starting off here, in church you should always find normal stuff. And that's one of the striking things about this chapter. There's a lot of stuff that's just very normal.

The disciples are doing their old jobs again, fishing. Jesus is cooking and they're eating an ordinary breakfast. And whilst, yes, there are many things in this chapter that are remarkable, there's also a lot of value in just meditating on the stuff that's normal.

[2 : 2 3] In verse three, we see the disciples going fishing. They're just doing the job that they've done for years. Now, there's actually a little bit of a debate as to how to view Peter's words here.

Peter said to the other disciples, I'm going fishing. They said, we'll go with you. There's debate about that statement because some people have viewed that quite negatively, as though Peter is like, well, I'm giving up serving Jesus. I'm going back to my old job.

And so some have seen it in a kind of negative sense in that regard. But others argue that it's not so negative. It's more just a case of Peter recognizing, well, I need to put food in the table. This is, and that's the way I do it.

So some negative, some not so negative. I think I'm, well, as you guessed, I'm always positive. So I'm the more positive one. I'm not so negative. And I do think this is more just a case of Peter still just needing to put food on the table.

And so, yes, maybe there was a sense of uncertainty. I'm sure there was. Maybe there was a sense of discouragement in Peter as he said this, but I don't think it's right to jump to the conclusion that, you know, this is a sign of abandoning following Jesus.

[3 : 34] And I read a helpful quote from a commentator who said, even though Jesus be crucified and risen from the dead, the disciples must still eat. And so I thought that was a helpful thing, a helpful summary of the situation.

But even when we look at Jesus, we also see normal stuff happening. You look, you see at verse nine, they saw that Jesus had made a charcoal fire.

So that meant he had got up. This is early in the morning, so he had got up. He'd taken the charcoal. He'd lit it. He'd waited for it to get warm. He had placed fish over it that he must have got from somewhere.

And he had bread, which he must have either baked or bought as well. It's all beautifully normal. And although there are some extraordinary things in this chapter, we must never, ever forget that all the normal stuff in life is also the handy work of God.

And that's such an easy mistake for us to make, because when we think about God's work, whether that's in our own lives or in the lives of the church more collectively, we can so easily focus on the times when amazing, remarkable things happen.

[4 : 46] And we view those moments as the handy work of God. And the danger is that if we always think like that, it means that if things are just normal, then we think that God's not working and God's not really with us.

And that's just not true. It's actually a very big theological error, because actually our fundamental theological doctrines tell us that that's not the case. Two of the most fundamental doctrines of Christianity are the doctrines of creation and providence.

Creation tells us that everything, everything finds its origin in God. And that means that the most spectacular parts of life and the most normal parts of life are all the work of His hands.

And providence, the doctrine of providence tells us that God didn't just make the world and leave it to run by itself, but He is governing and ordering and maintaining His creation so that life thrives.

And so as planets orbit, seasons change, sowing and harvesting continues, all of that is the handy work of God. So you might go for a walk in a field and you might spot a single beautiful flower, and you look at that flower and you think, wow, the colors and the design and the fragrance is pointing me to God's glory as created. And that's true.

[6 : 11] But if you focus entirely on the flower in the field, you miss the tens of millions of blades of grass that are also the handy work of God as well.

And if we only ever look for flowers, we're going to miss the wonder of the grass as well. And it's reminding us that all the normal stuff in life is from God.

It's reminding us that our church should be full of lots of normal stuff. So meeting together each week, talking together, eating together, laughing together, helping out with door duty or with a cup of tea and coffee after the church, paying the bills, planning the next few months, opening in the morning, closing up at night.

It's all crucial. It's all normal. It's all part of the work that God's given us to do. And that's something you see so beautifully in Jesus in this chapter, the risen Lord.

The one who can fill the boat with a miraculous catch of fish is also the one who took the time to get a fire going and to cook some very normal breakfast.

- [7 : 16] In God's eyes, normal is precious. In fact, the church should be the place where you find the best normal stuff.
- You should find the best normal conversations at church, the best normal cup of coffee. Now, I don't just mean the quality of the coffee, but just the time spent together over a cup of coffee.
- You should find the best normal organizing of our time, the best normal use of our resources, the best normal laughter, the best normal friendship, the best normal smiles.
- And sometimes we make the mistake of having the wrong understanding of spectacular. And so we're here today. Everything's pretty normal. What we're doing today is pretty much the same as what it was a week ago, not that different to what it was a year ago, and even not that different to what was being done 10 years ago.
- This is just normal life for us coming together on a Sunday morning for church. As you come here today, it's so easy to forget that even your own body is an incredible balance of nutrients, cells, bacteria, electricity, and you're part of a precious community living in an absolutely stunning location.
- [8 : 30] We're united together as a family of people together in church, all from different circumstances, but we all share the same joy, the same hope, the same peace, because we have the same saviour.
- It's all just so normal the truth is it is all utterly spectacular. The church should be full of normal stuff, but we must never forget that none of that normal would be impossible.
- None of that normal would be possible without God. But normal is also the setting where extraordinary things take place. That's the second thing that we see in this chapter, verses 4 to 8, described by the disciples, fished all night and they caught nothing.
- That's actually another very normal thing in church where you work hard and you don't see much success. That can very often be our normal experience. Jesus, however, changes things.
- Just as he had done at the startles to put their nets out again, at the end of this gospel he commands the disciples to put their nets out again, and as they do so they bring in a huge haul of fish.
- [9 : 40] And when that happens they realise it's Jesus, they rush to him, and it's a beautiful moment. It teaches us about Jesus' power, he's the one who reigns over creation, he gives them the command and a miracle occurs.
- It shows the resources that Jesus has because he provides him with a massive pile of fish, and it speaks of Jesus' generosity. They go from having nothing to having an abundance.
- And the really important thing is that it shows that Jesus can do utterly astonishing things through very, very ordinary people.
- If you look carefully you'll see that although we look at that and we think Jesus did a miracle, you have to also note that he still works through people because Jesus didn't cast the net, and Jesus didn't haul it in, and Jesus didn't actually catch a fish.
- Instead he enabled his disciples to do it. He just gave them the instructions they needed. And that's exactly how Jesus works.
- [10 : 44] He empowers his church, he empowers you and me. That's why he sends his Holy Spirit, that's how his ministry continues. That's how God's purposes are going to be accomplished.
- Jesus does extraordinary things through his church. So yes, there's lots and lots of ordinary things, normal things happening in church each week, but that normal stuff is the setting where Jesus does amazing things.

And you see that if you look at the history of the church, it is amazing how God has worked across the nations. You see that in our own island, even in our communities here, in the last 100 years there's been amazing revivals where God has done extraordinary things.

But most of all you see it in our own church family today, you see it in you and in me. Because every believer here has had their lives transformed by Jesus.

He's given us and done for us what we could never do for ourselves. He's transforming us into the people that he's made us to be. And he has brought us together into a church family that actually extends all across the globe.

[11 : 58] And often when we think about extraordinary things, even like this miracle, we tend to think of external stuff. When you think about Jesus and the miracles he performed, we think about external stuff, providing a massive catch of fish, healing those who are unwell, even raising back to life those who had died.

We always think of external stuff when we think of the extraordinary. But what we must never forget is that the external miracles in Scripture are always only just signs.

John himself is the one who gives us that language. He talks about Jesus' miracles as signs. The external stuff are signposts to the internal miracles that God is actually more concerned about.

The miracle of God opening our eyes to our sin. The miracle of God softening our hearts towards his grace. The miracle of him turning us towards him in repentance.

The miracle of him renewing our wills to love him and obey him and serve him. That is the most extraordinary stuff of all. Those internal miracles of a changed heart through the grace of God.

[13 : 15] And you know, I can say, just to speak personally, I can say that being a minister proves that that's true. Because I could actually go and catch 153 fish.

I could go down to the pier and I could fish with a rod. And if I waited long enough, I would catch a fish. If I had the right tools, I could actually go in a boat and I could maybe even catch 153 fish on my own.

Humanity is constantly learning and developing and advancing. Today we enjoy so many blessings and resources that to previous generations would have seemed miraculous.

So we are able to accomplish and achieve a lot of external stuff. But I've been a minister for 10 years. There is one thing that I have learned.

I cannot soften someone's heart on my own. I cannot open people's eyes on my own. I cannot change people's wills on my own.

[14 : 20] But God can. And God has done it so many times in our community. You're the evidence of that. Every believer in here. And he is still doing it. And that's the biggest miracle of all.

And it's reminding us that every time someone comes to faith in Jesus, something extraordinary is happening. And that's what we should expect in church. And that should fill us with excitement.

The imagery of this bulging net that we have here, if it's telling us anything, it tells us that the church is not fly fishing. What do I mean by that? Well, when you go fly fishing, you stand at a river or a loch for ages.

And a whole lot of nothing happens. And if you're lucky, you catch one fish, maybe two. That's not the imagery that Jesus is using here.

Jesus is wanting us to think and work and expect in terms of a big haul. Now, yes, sometimes we have to wait and sometimes we have to sow and be patient. That's true.

[15 : 26] But we should not be expecting dribbles of one or two here and there. That's not the way it should be. Our expectations should be so much bigger because the mission of the church is to fish with a big net.

And two thousand years ago, Jesus says, I'm going to build my church now. There are billions of believers around the world.

And God has not stopped doing that extraordinary work. And so what I want you to think about, especially if you're maybe not yet a believer or if you're not sure, when we think about this extraordinary miracle of somebody's been hearted, someone's heart been turned towards Jesus, I wanted to ask the question, is it happening to you?

Is it happening to you? Because for some of you, it is happening. And I don't think you realize it.

If you are thinking about God, if you're finding that God's word is speaking to you, if you have a desire in your heart to know Jesus, if you find that your love for the church family is growing and your satisfaction and fulfillment in stuff in the world around us is fading, all of that is telling you that something's happening.

[16 : 52] It's telling you that something extraordinary is happening. It's telling you that God is calling you. He is drawing you. He is working in you. And the one piece of advice I would give you is don't fight it.

Don't fight it. Because when you do reach that point where you can say, I believe in Jesus, you will only have one regret.

And the one regret you will feel is the sense, why did I not do this sooner? And so if God is drawing you, just go for it.

That's the extraordinary stuff that he is doing. The church is full of extraordinary stuff. But alongside the normality of fishing, cooking, normal stuff, and the extraordinary moment when a whole of fish comes in and when we see people coming to faith in Jesus, this chapter also contains beautiful details of the restoration of Peter.

And we have that in verses 15 and 17. Jesus asks Peter three questions, do you love me? And it's clear that these three questions are corresponding to the three denials that Peter had given in chapter 18.

[18 : 08] And it's a beautiful picture of restoration of how Peter is restored after that huge mistake and that agonizing regret that he felt.

And reminding us of such an important point that the church is the place where we should always find mistakes and restoration. And that's so crucial. And it's so crucial for us.

And I think we just have to recognize that this is, I think, a lesson that needs to be learned maybe in the Isle of Lewis more than most places. Because we so often think that church is the place where you must put on your best impression.

And so you have to come in looking strong and together and well presented. And when it comes to our mistakes, we do two things. We either hide them so no one can see them, or if they do come out, we hide ourselves and we stay away.

And it's so tragic because that's not what church should be like. And one of the biggest mistakes that church can make is when we don't allow room for mistakes.

[19 : 13] Because the whole Christian life is one of learning, of growing, and it's one where we stumble. And we frequently make foolish choices. We frequently get things wrong.

And that happens all the time. A healthy church is not a church where people don't make mistakes. A healthy church is where people are restored and healed and helped when they do.

And as most of you know, I was an engineer before I became a minister. And when I first started, I used to think, oh man, there are so much expensive tools here. It's so easy to break stuff. It's so easy to make mistakes.

And I used to think, well, one day I'll be a good engineer and I'll never make mistakes. And I soon realized a good engineer is not one who never makes mistakes. A good engineer is one who knows how to fix his mistakes.

Because we make them all the time. And that's exactly what it's like in church. We go on together as a church family. As we do so, mistakes will be made. We make mistakes as individuals.

[20 : 11] Bad choices, misjudgments, sinful reactions. And maybe you can think of an example this week where you did something where you think, oh, I wish I hadn't done that.

As a church collectively, we will make mistakes. We miss opportunities. We get our priorities mixed up. Sometimes we turn a blind eye to sin. Sometimes we judge people far too harshly.

As leaders, we make mistakes. As elders, sometimes we'll get the balance and focus wrong. And I make mistakes. I've made tons of mistakes as your pastor in my years with you.

Mistakes are going to be made. The church is never meant to be the place where mistakes don't happen. Church is meant to be the place where mistakes get healed.

And that's exactly what Jesus does with Peter. He does it so beautifully. I just want to highlight a few things that you see in Jesus. First of all, Jesus doesn't ignore the issue.

[21 : 08] He speaks to Peter about it, but he does it very tenderly. But as Jesus does that, I think this is crucial, he doesn't go digging into the problem. He could so easily have opened the wounds in Peter's heart further.

I said, you know, why did you do it? You know, see in that moment, why did you think, you know, when that servant girl said, you know, are you a follower of Jesus? Why did you think that her opinion was more important than mine? Why weren't you on guard? What happened to all that you said about laying down your life for me?

Why didn't you do it? Did you not realize that that was such a wrong and silly thing to do? It's so beautiful that Jesus doesn't do that. Because he knows fine that the person who knows they've stuffed up the most is Peter.

And instead of digging into the problem, Jesus focuses on what will actually fix it. The beautiful question, do you love me? Because when Peter says yes to that question, all the other questions get answered as well.

And the crucial point is that Jesus is more concerned about setting a better path for the future than he is about going round and round in circles in Peter's past. And that doesn't mean he's turning a blind eye to it as we said a second ago.

[22 : 10] Jesus is having a conversation. He's not ignoring it. He's not sweeping things under the carpet, but he's trying to find a way forward. He's trying to find a pathway towards healing for the person who's made a mistake.

And as Jesus looks to the future, there's another crucial point. He restored Peter to our role of responsibility. He says, feed my sheep. And so Jesus wasn't saying, okay, you're back in, but you're demoted.

You're not going to be back to where you were. You just got to accept that. Jesus didn't do that. Jesus restored Peter to fulfill the calling that God had in his life.

He didn't give him back the responsibility that he had previously held. And of course, it's interesting and important to note that this whole process was painful for Peter, especially the third time.

You see that there, Peter was grieved because Jesus said to him the third time, do you love me? I think that's so interesting.

[23 : 11] I'm not sure if at that moment Peter realized what Jesus was doing. But at this moment, Jesus realized that Jesus's three questions are corresponding to his three denials.

But I have no doubt that when Peter did realize the connection, he would have thought, oh, man, I am so glad he asked me the third time.

Even though he was grieved at the moment, he was so thankful, I'm sure. And it's always reminding us that in church, we will always find mistakes. And therefore, we must always find people who are being healed and restored.

And surely the way Jesus dealt with Peter has to be the model for how we deal with people when naming mistakes. I read a beautiful version of Hebrews the other day that I thought captured this.

Therefore, lift your dripping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather healed. Peter was lame and the whole point is don't dislocate his joints, but heal him and restore him.

[24 : 21] I thought that was such a beautiful description of it. Number four, then the last two are going to be quicker. Immediately after Peter's conversation with Jesus, you have these fascinating verses talking about John in verse 24.

And these verses are highlighting the fact that one of the things that you should always find in church is no weird nonsense. What am I meaning here? Well, clearly there was a kind of rumor going round that John wasn't going to die until Jesus returned.

And this arose from the conversation that Peter had said to Jesus, what about this man? What about John? And Jesus said to him, if it's my will that he remained like him, what's that to you? And from that, there was this rumor emerging that John wasn't going to die.

And John's making it very, very clear that that's not what Jesus said. And in doing so, John is steering his readers away from weird nonsense.

He jumped to this conclusion, oh, Jesus said something about John not dying until I came. Oh, John's not going to die. And all this weird nonsense was emerging amongst the church community. And John says, stop it.

[25 : 33] Don't follow those foolish conclusions. He steers them away from daft ideas that don't actually correspond to what Jesus taught. And boy, is that such an important lesson.

Because for 2,000 years, the church has been pretty good at making up weird nonsense that doesn't actually have a basis in Jesus' teaching. And maybe even at times we've done it in some of our traditions.

And most seriously of all, as individuals, we make up weird nonsense in our hearts. And this is probably going to sound rude, but some of you have got a lot of weird nonsense in your hearts in terms of your relationship with Jesus.

Let me give you some examples. I hear people say, I lost my chance. I should have followed Jesus. When I was younger, I had a chance. I've lost my chance.

That's nonsense. It's not true. I hear other people say, I've got nothing to offer. Like, I just got nothing to offer the church. That's actually not true. It's nonsense.

[26 : 39] I hear people say, look, I need to learn a whole lot more in the Bible before I come to faith. No, you don't. You don't. Not true. That's nonsense. I've heard people say, you know, I need to kind of, if I'm going to pray, I'll need to use complicated language.

Not true. You don't need to do that. And maybe more frequently than any of the others, I hear people say, you know, well, yes, I do believe, but I can't go to the Lord's table.

I don't belong there. It's not true. That's just not true. It's nonsense. It has no basis on the teaching of Jesus. And interestingly, this chapter gives us a kind of hint as to where sometimes that nonsense comes from.

It comes from obsessing over other people instead of listening to Jesus. What did Peter do? He says, what about John? He's just obsessed with the other person rather than focusing on Jesus.

And there's a beautiful response from Jesus. He just says, follow me. And that's an amazing reminder that that's the command we need. Jesus gave that command at the start of his gospel. He gives it at the end.

[27 : 44] And it's a reminder for us whether you're not yet a Christian or not sure, that's the command you need. But if you are a Christian, whether you're getting on well or you've made mistakes like Peter, as we go on with the mission of Jesus, that's the same command.

We need to follow Jesus. Keep following him this week and every week of our lives. We need to keep listening to him and keep following him.

So, five things you should always find in church. You should definitely find normal stuff, extraordinary stuff, mistakes and restoration, no weird nonsense. And finally, you should always find never ending amazement.

And that's captured in the last verse of John's gospel, which is one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible. There's lots of other things that Jesus did and if everyone was written down, the world itself would not be big enough to contain the books.

We've spent nearly two years studying this most magnificent gospel. One of the most magnificent works of literature ever penned and it's teaching us about the most magnificent person who's ever lived.

[28 : 48] And John concludes it by saying, we don't know the half of it. There's so much more to learn and we're going to keep learning as we study other parts of the Bible together.

And as we do that, we'll discover more and more about how utterly amazing Jesus is. And that's why the church is the place of never ending amazement because Jesus is never endingly amazing.

So, that's our study of John done. And as we conclude it, I want to conclude with the famous theological question that the greatest minds in history have wrestled with.

So, it's a very famous question that has been wrestled with for thousands of years.

What's the crack with your faith? Now, they maybe didn't use those words, but they asked the same question.

[29 : 56] What is the crack with your faith? Every one of us has to think about that question. Maybe, you know, you've felt, maybe things have been a bit rubbish in terms of your faith.

Maybe you feel like you've wandered or gone cold, happens to repeat it, happens to all of us. John's gospel is calling us back. Maybe you've just felt encouraged and enriched and built up by John's gospel.

That's amazing. That needs to just keep on happening. That's what should be happening every week. Maybe you're just not quite sure where you stand in terms of your faith.

Well, if that's you, John is calling you, and Jesus is calling you through John to put your trust in Jesus. And that's the key question. How are you going to respond?

And I want to leave you with a sentence that you have to finish. I am going to...what?

[30 : 59] Let's pray.