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John 21:15-23
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Do You Love Me?

Today's scripture continues the story we heard two weeks ago when Jesus found Peter and some of the other disciples returning to their nets and fishing. Remember how we saw the playful side of Jesus as he called these expert fishermen "Rookies" since they had been fishing all night and had not caught anything? That sense of humor set the stage for the more serious conversation that Jesus would have with Peter...the first one since Peter denied knowing Jesus not just once, but three times as Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified. No doubt Peter had been stewing on that blatant disregard of his friend ever since. But in this story, Jesus lovingly forgives and restores Peter, putting him back on track to being the disciple on whom Jesus would build his church.

Please join me as we read from John 21:15-23.

15 When Jesus and the disciples had finished eating [the breakfast that Jesus had prepared for them], Jesus [turned and] spoke to Simon Peter. He asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these others do?"

"Yes, Lord," he answered. "You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

16 Again Jesus asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

17 Jesus spoke to him a third time. He asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Peter felt bad because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He answered, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. **18** What I'm about to tell you is true. When you were younger, you dressed yourself. You went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands. Someone else will dress you. Someone else will lead you where you do not want to go." **19** Jesus said this to point out how Peter would die. His death would bring glory to God. Then Jesus said to him, "Follow me!"

20 Peter turned around. He saw that the disciple Jesus loved was following them. He was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper. He had said, "Lord, who is going to hand you over to your enemies?" **21** When Peter saw that disciple, he asked, "Lord, what will happen to him?"

22 Jesus answered, “Suppose I want him to remain alive until I return. What does that matter to you? You must follow me.” **23** Because of what Jesus said, a false report spread among the believers. The story was told that the disciple Jesus loved wouldn’t die. But Jesus did not say he would not die. He only said, “Suppose I want him to remain alive until I return. What does that matter to you?”

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

I want to address several things this morning as we engage this text which is probably one of the most intimate conversations recorded that Jesus has with his disciples. First I want circle back to the diagrams I shared last week about three different kinds of people and their relationship with Jesus. Then I want to dive into the Greek behind in the conversation which I believe gets to the heart of what Jesus was communicating to his friend. And finally we will consider Jesus’ question for ourselves today.

So first, let’s revisit the diagrams from last week. If you recall, I described three kinds of people in the world and how they relate to Jesus.

The first is the carnal person. This person’s world view revolves around themselves. In the center of the sphere is a chair or throne. The person sitting on the throne is them. They call the shots. They control the circumstances of their lives. Jesus is outside somewhere but they don’t pay him much attention.

Then we have the carnal believer. This person has accepted Jesus into their life. We see that by the cross is not located with the sphere of their world view. To them, Jesus is a friend, a counselor, a guide, but he has yet to be made Lord of their life. Notice who still sits on the throne. They do. They call the shots. They control the circumstances of their lives.

Then we have the mature disciple. This person not only has accepted Jesus not their life, but has stepped off the throne and has invited Jesus to take their place instead. Now, Jesus calls the shots. Jesus controls the circumstances of their lives. Jesus has become their Lord and Savior.

At this point in the story that we just heard, which world view would we say most represents Peter’s life? I would say that it is the carnal believer. I’m going to come back to that in a moment.

If we look at the text which is the New International Version, we can see that the editor has taken some liberty with the translation that isn’t in the original Greek. On top of that, we lose some of the depth of understanding because English has only one word for love whereas Greek has three. What we notice is that seven times in just two verses, the word love is used.

Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?”

Notice how three times, Jesus called Peter by his formal name. “Simon son of John.” Up unto this point in John’s gospel, Jesus had called him by his given name Peter, which means “rock.” But here, Jesus reverted back to the name that Peter had before Jesus first called Peter to follow him.¹

When we were kids which name would our parents use when they wanted our full attention? Our familiar or nick names? Our our formal names? When I heard Joseph Christopher Montovino, then I knew something was coming!

It is the same thing here. Jesus called Peter by his formal name, Simon son of John, to get his full attention. And he had it.

In the first of three questions that Jesus asked Peter, Jesus used the Greek word “agapatas” for love. Agapatas is a sacrificial kind of love. One that would lay down ones life down for another. I think the reason Jesus did that was because it circled back to a conversation that Jesus had previously with his disciples when he told them that he was going away.

“Peter, ‘Lord, where are you going?’

Jesus replied, ‘Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.’

Peter asked, ‘Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.’

Jesus answered, ‘Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’²

And so returning to our story today, we hear echo Peter’s previous empty declarations of his love and devotion.

Peter responded, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” But Peter doesn’t use the same word for love that Jesus used. He used the Greek word phileo which means to be fond of or to love someone like a friend or a brother. He did not use the sacrificial love of agapatas that Jesus used.

So Jesus asked him again, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me.” Again using the same agapatas or sacrificial love.

And Peter again said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I am really fond of you, like a brother or a friend.” He still would not use the same words that Jesus used.

So Jesus, knowing that Peter was not able to fully commit to the sacrificial love Jesus expected, then lowered his standard of love to Peter’s.

A third time, Jesus said to Peter, “So Simon son of John, do you [at least] love me like a friend?”

One commentator wrote, “Do you love me” is, in reality, a very searching question. We may know much, and do much, and profess much and talk much, and

¹ John 1:42

² John 13:36-38

work much, and give much, and go through much, and make much show in our religion, and yet be dead before God from lack of love and at last go down to the pit. Do we love Christ? That is the great question... There is no life where there is no love.”³

Now some versions of our text translate the Greek word “tauton” in Jesus’ question “Do you love me more than these” as “these others,” possibly referring to the other disciples sitting around the fire. But I wonder if the “these” that Jesus was referring to was the 153 large fish that they had just caught. It was as if Jesus were saying “Come on Peter. Do you love me more than fishing? Then why are you out here, abandoning your call to preach the gospel and fish for people?”

Then Jesus said, “Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

Three times, Jesus reminded Peter of his true calling as a disciple, as a shepherd of people, and the rock upon which he would later build his Church.

The text tells us that Peter was hurt because of this.

The Greek word for hurt is *lupeo*. It means to be sorry for something, or grieved. Peter was grieved because he knew that when Jesus needed him most, Peter abandoned him. Not once, but three times.

Every word in scripture is extremely purposeful. We get a window into Peter’s soul. He is deeply sorry for the fact that he didn’t live up to his previous proclamations of being willing to die for Jesus.

But this also gives us a window into Jesus’ heart for Peter. He deeply cared about Peter. And like a skillful surgeon, Jesus sometimes dives deep into the recesses of our pain and exposes the root cause of our sin so that we can be healed and restored.

Have we ever felt like Peter before?

Have we promised Jesus one thing, but failed to deliver entirely?

Have we professed our love and devotion to Jesus and yet lived in such a way as if we never knew him?

We all have. Peter did. And Peter was one of Jesus’ closest friends.

I want to draw attention to yet one more detail in the text that I think is easy to skip that I think brings so much understanding. After Peter’s response to Jesus’ final question “Do you love me?” Peter said, “Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you as a friend.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

³J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on The Gospel of John* (Abbotsford, WI: Ankeo Press, 2019), 364.

What was that about?

Some commentators believe that the phrase “stretch out your hands” was referring to the fact that Peter would one day be crucified on a cross just like Jesus was. There is indeed historical evidence that that was how Peter died.

But I wonder if Jesus was alluding to something else instead.

Go back with me to the three world views we heard about earlier. Which world view would we represent Peter’s life at this point? Who would we say was on the throne of Peter’s life? Peter was, right? Yes, Jesus was in his life, but he hadn’t made him Lord of his life. Who was calling the shots up to this point? Peter. Who was in control of the circumstances of Peter’s life? Peter. As an expert fisherman, when he felt completely out of control by the circumstances playing out in Jerusalem with Jesus’ death and resurrection, Peter must have felt pretty powerless. So what did he do. He went back to fishing where he could exercise some control.

So this was when Jesus reiterated his initial calling to Peter, “Follow me. Be a fisher of people.”

Now my friends, wouldn’t that be the kind of life and death that would glorify God? One that says, “Jesus I want you not only as my friend, but I turn over my control and invite you be Lord and Savior.”

So where do we see ourselves in the story today?

Are we in the crowd watching all this unfold?

Are we among the closest disciples who were equally complicit in abandoning their call to follow Jesus?

Or are we most like Peter?

My friends, Jesus is asking us, “Do you love me sacrificially and want me to call the shots in your lives?” If so then get off the throne in your life and let me reign.

Jesus also said, “If you love me, then you would keep my commandments.”⁴ And what are his commandments. The first one is, “Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. And the second one is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”⁵

So may we surrender all to Jesus and humbly bow at his feet. May we love him and others with the same sacrificial love that he demonstrated for us. And may the world know that we are his followers by the way we love.

Amen!

⁴ John 14:15

⁵ Mark 12:30-31