

SERMON John 21: 15- 19 Do you Love Me?

Last Sunday we explored the story of Jesus' disciples who went fishing and caught nothing all night. When morning came, Jesus stood on the shore and told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat and their net miraculously filled with fish. Then Jesus invited his disciples to bring some of their fish to add to the breakfast he already had ready. And we wrote down our commitments to bring our gifts to God to use. Today we explore the other half of the story.

After breakfast, Jesus took Peter aside and asked him a very pointed question. "Peter, do you love me more than these?" Over the years, people have wondered what Jesus meant by the word, "*these*." Was it "Peter, do you love me more than **these fish**," perhaps meaning do you love me more than your work, the things you're good at? Not likely, Peter had already left his fishing career to follow Jesus. OR did Jesus point to the other disciples, "Peter, do you love me more than you love **these disciples**?" Probably not because Jesus had clearly told them to love one another. The answer that makes the most sense is "Peter, do you love me more than **these other disciples love me**?" It seems like a rude question. How would you feel if I came down and asked you if you loved Jesus more than the person next to you does? Should we even be comparing our love with someone else's love? Except Peter was known for comparing himself to the other disciples. He had said things like, "Jesus, even if these other disciples all run away, I will never deny you!" "Jesus, I will lay down my life for you," something the other disciples never claimed they were brave enough to do. Peter had a tendency to have absolute confidence that his own faith was stronger than the faith of the other disciples. But when the moment came for him to stand with Jesus at his arrest, what did he do? Sitting around a campfire, he denied that he even knew who Jesus was three times. So, rather than being rude, perhaps Jesus was testing whether Peter had outgrown his tendency to be more sure of himself than he ought. "Peter, do you love me more than these disciples love me?"

Before Jesus' arrest, he would probably have said, "Of course, I love you more than these other guys, Jesus. I know I've messed up sometimes, but we all have, and you can count on me now." But in today's story, Peter answered much more humbly. "Jesus, you know I love you. You know everything." Peter had learned that Jesus knew his heart, so there was no reason to try to impress Jesus with his prideful bluster. And Jesus gave Peter three times to declare his love - once for each time Peter had denied him- Peter knew he had been forgiven.

Jesus responses to Peter were short and to the point, “If you love me, feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep.” In other words, “Be a shepherd and take care of the people that I bring into your life.” He didn’t tell Peter to do something amazing or fantastic. No miracles were needed, no special bravery, no need to sing beautifully, or preach famous sermons, or build extravagant buildings to prove how much he loved Jesus. Just “Take care of my people.” *“Feed them, take care of their needs, encourage their hearts, like a shepherd gently correct them when they go astray, welcome them back home, show them how much I love them. Take care of my people.”* That was to be Peter’s purpose in life as Jesus, the Good Shepherd, ascends back to the Father. That was how he was to show his love for Jesus.

There is an amazing story of grace here. Peter was the disciple Jesus counted on most and yet, he had failed him no matter how brave he had said he would be. Three times Peter had denied even knowing Jesus much less stand up for him. And three times he was given the opportunity to be forgiven as he declared his love. He was forgiven and restored even though he didn’t deserve to be at all. That’s grace-receiving from God what we do not deserve. Grace is what we receive every time we confess our sins and God forgives us. Grace, undeserved grace.

Grace is also what God calls us to give to others in return for receiving grace ourselves. Forgiving others because we’ve been forgiven. Restoring one another when we fall or fail because we’ve been restored. **Colossians 3:13** – *Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* Forgiving one another is part of following Jesus. Forgiving others is challenging, but Jesus modeled it for us here in this story of Peter and calls us to follow in his steps.

Jesus’s next words are just as challenging. ¹⁸ *Very truly I tell you, 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 else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.* ¹⁹ *Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”*

Jesus described aging as it is. When we are younger and full of energy and ability, we take pride in taking care of ourselves, earning our own way, having our own space, and we prize being able to go where we want to go. We begin way back as a toddler, yelling, “Me do, Mommy. Me do it myself!” We want to stand on our own two feet, think our own thoughts. We want to be in charge of our own lives. But for most people, there comes a time as we get older when we need more

help. Jesus described it as “when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” It’s an image of losing our independence, and other people, maybe our kids, making the choices we used to make. Notice Jesus says we won’t like it- we’ll need help with the basic things like dressing ourselves, and we’ll go where **we don’t want to go**. We know what this is like don’t we? Think of how hard it is to accept using a walker, or give up driving even when we know we should. Or moving out of our home into a small apartment or retirement community. Sometimes we fight the very things we need the most. We don’t **want** to need more help.

Jesus was telling Peter that as he grew older he would lose his prized independence, and would eventually die as one of the early martyrs of the faith. It wouldn’t be a choice he would make; it would be made for him. John tells us “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” Do we ever think about our dying as a way of glorifying God? Or is death always a tragedy, a sad experience, something to be avoided at all costs? Jesus painted the Christian’s death as one more opportunity to glorify God instead. Paul said something similar, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” For Paul, living was about living for Christ, and dying was nothing more than changing his address from earth to heaven to be with Christ. What would it take for us to see our own death that way? It freed Paul from the fear of death that holds so many of us back from really living.

And what does Jesus say we are to do as the effects of aging bring changes we don’t like? Keep following him, keep living the way he calls us to live, keep serving others, keep loving others, forgiving others, keep using our gifts to make a difference in Jesus’ name. Even as we slow down, even as our memory isn’t as strong as it once was. When we can’t do what we want to do, it doesn’t mean we can’t do anything. I want to share two examples of older followers of Jesus who didn’t let getting older stop them from following him.

My very first memorial service as Chaplain at Judson Park Retirement Community was for a woman I knew for only 3 weeks. But in that short time, I had already heard all about her from the staff members who loved her. She was 83 years old, had been a widow for 30 years, and she was confined to bed and wheelchair after breaking her hip. Her beloved son and only child, had died only the year before. So many changes she did not like at all, none of us would. And yet, she was known for her kindness, for always greeting the staff and asking about how life was going for them, and cheering them up with her smiles and her gentle

words of encouragement. Even at the end of her life, she found her place of service in her bed, praying for her church, and the people God brought into her life everyday. She was an amazing follower of Jesus.

Second, I invite you to watch a CNN report about Paul Smith, a man who also never stopped making a difference. Paul has died since this video was made, but his legacy of faith lives on.

Jesus calls us to follow him whatever stage of life we are in. Young or old, strong or weak, follow Jesus. We won't like everything that happens to us or in our bodies. Follow Jesus. We won't like losing our independence. Follow Jesus. Other people may have a longer or better or easier life than us- follow Jesus. In this way we glorify God in our living, and as we breathe our final breath, we glorify him in our dying. Every moment, follow Jesus. No turning back.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we are so thankful for your grace and forgiveness. Thank you for never giving up on us even when we give up on ourselves, or others give up on us. We ask for the ability to see the people around us with your eyes, the easy fun people, the people who inspire us, and also the challenging people you have placed in our lives who often drain our energy and make life hard. Help us spend our lives loving you by caring for your people. Help us accept the changes that come with aging with faith, not complaints. And when our time of dying comes, may we glorify you all the way to our eternal home.