May 7, 2017

John 21:15-19

*I Don’t Understand*

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John 21:15-19 New Revised Standard Version

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Yesterday my husband Lee and I celebrated our 17th wedding anniversary. It is hard to believe, but when you look at the wedding photos we looked like babies. In the newsletter that Trish sends out on Thursdays, I included this wonderful exchange between Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her soon to be mother-in-law that I read in this fun book I’m reading called Notorious RBG. Ruth’s mother-in-law showed Ruth some earplugs and said it helps sometimes to be a little deaf. Ruth said on her honeymoon it became clear what her mother-in-law meant, “Sometimes people say unkind or thoughtless things, and when they do, it is best to be a little hard of hearing - to tune out and not snap back in anger or impatience.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

When I read our scripture I think that Jesus is being mean and that Simon Peter needs to be a little hard of hearing. I feel like I am right there with Simon Peter and completely and totally confused about why Jesus keeps asking the same thing. Simon Peter does not understand. Is Jesus losing it? Three times Jesus asks do you love me. But we are supposed to remember that night not too long ago when Jesus has been arrested and Peter is sitting by a charcoal fire in the high priest’s courtyard and three times he denies knowing Jesus. Weren’t you one of Jesus’ disciples? No. Don’t you follow Jesus? No. Weren’t you in the garden with Jesus? No. Now Peter is sitting by a charcoal fire, this time for a fish barbecue, but we hear three times Peter say he loves Jesus.

When Peter denies knowing Jesus, he is denying his own identity as a child of God who follows Jesus. Jesus is giving Peter a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. Can you imagine someone you care about asking whether you really love them not one time, not two times, but three times? It would be painful. It would push all of my people pleasing buttons. I wonder if Peter realized what Jesus was doing? Jesus was reinstating Peter to the family of faith by inviting him to confess faith the same number of times he denied faith earlier. This is Peter’s rehabilitation and commissioning. Jesus is drawing Peter back into the community and showing him that he belongs and that he is accepted for who he is. He belongs, and he has work to do. If you love me, feed my sheep. Continue to show the world that dead people don’t stay dead. Be a leader. Look out for others. Feed my sheep, that’s how you love God. Feeding God’s sheep is how we experience God’s life changing love. It is how we realize that dead people don’t have to stay dead. We are called to feed all the sheep, our friends and family, our enemies, the unknown and the unnoticed, and ourselves.

We are accepted for who we are by God’s grace. We are embraced as a child of God. And we have a job to do. God will use us wherever we are to take care of God’s people and world. We are called to make a difference in this world that God loves so much.

Jesus is giving Peter another opportunity to participate and be a co-creator with God. It reminds me of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words, “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men [and women] willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.” Peter is being invited to be the presence of Jesus when Jesus is gone. We are being invited to be the presence of Jesus today.

The words that kept sticking out when I read this scripture is “Follow me.” I was with one of our confirmation families this week and after we had talked about what it means to be a member of the church, we prayed together. I asked what we should pray for, and a mom asked that we pray that we would all be who God calls us to be. When we follow Jesus, we are our true selves, we are who God calls us to be because our lives imitate Jesus’ life, our joys imitate Jesus’ joys, and our heartaches imitate Jesus’ heartaches.

We tell children that Jesus lives in our hearts, which means that Jesus lives in us. That means that we are Jesus’ presence in this world. We are Jesus’ presence when we package 12,096 meals for hungry children around the world like we did last week. We are Jesus’ presence when we say hello to someone that we don’t know. We are Jesus’ presence when we treat the homeless person as a real person, when we ask their name and begin to develop a relationship. We are Jesus’ presence when we love one another as I have loved you. That is one of my favorite Bible verses in John. John 13:34. Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet on the night before he dies and he said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” My children know this verse by heart because I say it when they are fighting with each other. Love one another!

The good news for us is that our God is a God of grace. Grace upon grace. When we fall short, when we fail to give witness in word or deed to our faith in Jesus the Christ, there is forgiveness and grace upon grace. When it feels like all hope is gone, when we wonder what we are doing, when we think there is no future, when our well has dried up, when we doubt that grace is true, when we question if grace is for us, there is forgiveness and grace upon grace. There is always a chance to redeem ourselves and to go forward and redeem others. This is the resurrection story we desperately all need.

After Easter is a time for us to be reminded that dead people don’t stay dead and dead things don’t think dead. It is a time for us to remember that something has to be dead in order to be resurrected and just because something or someone dies death is not the end of the story. Roy shared last week that Jesus comes back from the dead to tell us to get out of our comfort zones and throw our nets on the other side of the boat. It is going to look different for all us. Reaching out to an estranged friend or family member or making intentional sacrifices in order to give more to charity and those in need. It may be altering a career path toward something more directly benefiting society as a whole. We are called to listen to the teachings of Jesus and go out of our way to do the extraordinary. We are called to be a church that uses radical, revolutionary, alternative methods of communicating unconditional love with the world.

Last year I heard that a church member was not going to return to Greenland Hills because they were angry with me that I said black lives matter too much. This person felt like I should have said that blue lives matter as well. It hurt my heart so much and I wanted to have a conversation with this person. I called, I texted, I emailed, I wrote a letter, but I received no response. I looked back at my sermon’s and yes, I did say black lives matter. I said it when 12-year-old Tamir Rice was killed in Cleveland holding a toy gun, when Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri, when Freddie Gray died in a police van after being arrested for having a switchblade. I talked about Eric Garder’s last words as he placed in a fatal chokehold, “I can’t breathe.” I said that 1 in 3 black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime. Our African-American brothers in this country are more likely to be arrested, more likely to be executed, more likely to be killed.

When a house is on fire, you direct the firefighters to that house. That does not mean that you are saying that all of the other houses in the neighborhood don’t matter. You are saying that this house is on fire and it needs attention.[[2]](#footnote-3) This week black lives matter came again to our doors with the shooting death of Mesquite High School freshman Jordan Edwards. I pray for police and community relations especially after the tragic killing of five of our own Dallas police officers last summer. We have to repair this breach of trust.[[3]](#footnote-4) We have to acknowledge past failures and work towards reconciliation and partnership. People distrust the police and the police put themselves in harm’s way each and every day.

John’s Gospel ends with these words, “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (John 21:25). The story is not finished because Jesus is still doing things through us, through you and me. And Jesus doesn’t give up on us, ever. After each failure, Jesus invites us to try again. We come together to worship to be nourished, sustained, and encouraged to go into the world and do the work that God has called us to do. We may try to hide like Simon Peter does, but Jesus stands on the shores of our lives. Jesus stands in front of our front doors, and when we answer the knock we are asked two questions. Do you love me and what are you going to do about it? Amen.

1. Notorious RBG. Carmon, Irin and Shana Knizhnik. HarperCollins, 2015. P. 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2016/01/epiphany-3-c-a-peculiar-power/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2017/05/02/community-policing-answer [↑](#footnote-ref-4)