

How Much Do You Love Me?
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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scripture: John 21:15-19
Prayer

Some people say life is like an ice cream cone. The moment you think you have it licked, it drips on you! Have you had some drips and misses in life? I have had a few. Have you ever traveled the road of good intentions, only to fail to reach that intended destination? Mistakes, faults, failures. I have had my share, and if you are honest with yourself, you have, too. When it comes to faults and failures, how can we find our way through? What can take us as we are and get us to where God wants us to be?

The Peter Principle

For those of you who know an organizational definition of this term, that is not where I am. I want us to look at Peter – not as Bishop of Rome – but as a flawed, impetuous, and vulnerable disciple who had done everything he said he would not do and not done the things he said he would do. Sound familiar? We find Simon Peter today, back in Galilee with six other disciples. He is fishing and catching nothing. The same Peter who saw the empty tomb first-hand and encountered the risen Christ in person is now back where he started. Seven of them who had seen the risen Lord were now back in Galilee fishing. Seven of the eleven had given up, even in the face of the resurrection, when things had not gone well. Instead of spreading the gospel news, they are seemingly content to go about "business as usual."

What is it about the human personality that drives us into isolation when we miss the mark of our high calling? When Adam ate the apple, he went into hiding. When God called Jonah, he ran right into the belly of a whale. The prodigal found himself feeding pigs, and no one gave him anything. Peter dealt with his denial by going fishing to forget it all. There are at least four stories in John 21, but the fishing scene teaches us that real success comes only after we have heard and obeyed the voice of Jesus. When we don't, we come up empty just as Peter and the others did.

For quite a while in my ministry, I wondered why people drop out of church. Were they mad at me or someone else in leadership? Or did they feel neglected while I felt like I was doing all that was humanly possible to keep the ministry going. That can put you on a real guilt trip. Occasionally, people do get their feelings hurt. We do blow it from time to time. One reason people come in the front door and seemingly go out the back is that the disciples – clergy and laity – fail them. Like Peter, they start their Christian walk with high hopes. However, their reach exceeds their grasp. Practice proves to be much harder than profession. God has a way of wanting to transform our whole lives. Sometimes it all gets to be too much. As a lady once said, "I couldn't keep listening to you preach on Sunday and still sleep with my boss on Thursday. So it just seemed easier to stop coming to church." Most people say nothing. They just disappear, and we seemingly don't care.

If you are feeling all alone in your sinfulness today, hear Paul's word from Romans 3:23, "All sin and all fall short of the glory of God." "There is none righteousness, no not one" (Romans 3:10). "We err and stray from God's ways like lost sheep. We follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts" (Isaiah 53:6). People who identify with those passages are my kind of people. They recognize the hopelessness of the human condition.

Why do we fail? The reasons are as numerous as the sands of the seas. But a few seem all too common.

Power intoxicates us. Peter was a natural leader. He thought he could walk on water and never hesitated when it came to jumping out of the boat. Here is the point. Our strengths can become our greatest weaknesses. We allow pride in personal accomplishments and position to blind us to the great love God has for us and the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. The last time Jesus and Peter shared a meal together, it was in the upper room. Jesus was talking about self-denial, service, and sacrifice. Jesus wondered out loud if the disciples had what it takes to endure. Peter responded, "Even if all fall away, I will not!" Oh, what false notions we come to hold about ourselves. Coasting down some highway, we believe ourselves to be powerful 8-cylinder turbocharged disciples only to discover on the next hill, we are a pattering 4-cylinder at best.

Pressure tests us. The campfire by the sea had to remind Peter of another campfire in the courtyard. For there, warming himself by the fire, Peter had denied his Lord. Temptations are real. Temptations are strong. Temptations are bound to come along. And in those moments, how we react tells Jesus how much we love him.

In the midst of all this, Jesus questions Peter: "Do you love me more than these? (meaning more than these disciples love me)...Feed my Lambs....do you love me? ...Tend my sheep.... Do you love me? ...Feed my sheep." The problem with this entire exchange is that Jesus was asking for one thing and Peter was not willing to respond as Jesus had asked. It is an often overlooked function of the Greek words used for love. In Jesus' first two questions to Peter, he used the Greek word *agape*, which means unconditional or sacrificial love. In the third question, he uses the Greek word *phileo*, which means friendship or loyalty. In all of Peter's responses, he used the word *phileo*. Some say that John used these terms interchangeably, but the distinction is intriguing. Even after Peter had seen and believed, he was not yet willing to be all that Jesus was asking of him. Jesus was calling Peter to reconciliation, but he was not ready to go all the way with Jesus – not ready to love unconditionally and sacrificially. Does that describe you in any way this morning? How much do you love him? More than the others do? Are you willing to put him first and serve him, even if it means giving him your life? Even if it means giving up things that are now a part of your life?

God's Grace for Peter – and Us

God gave. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." Why? Because you are worth it. "Where sin abounds, grace abounds more, Paul said." Why? Because you deserve to be set free. Max Lucado tells the story about his 4-year-old, Jenna. Jenna confessed that she wrote on the wall with a crayon. Trying to be a wise father, Max took Jenna up in his lap and asked, "Is that a good thing to do?" Through her tears, Jenna replied, "No." "What does daddy do when you write on the wall?" Max inquired. "Spank me," sobbed Jenna. "What do you think daddy should do this time?" "Love me."

Is that not what happens here by the sea? Jesus loves Peter anyway. He could have said, "I told you so." He could have ridiculed Peter in the presence of his brothers in the faith. "Let this be a lesson to you." "Church leaders don't behave this way. I don't want this to ever happen again." But instead, Jesus fixes breakfast and loves Peter with a love that will not end. That is what grace is about.

Grace does not cure all our cancers, correct all our faults, transform us into greater successes, or even guarantee that we will get it right the next time around. Grace is the gracious hand of a loving God reaching out to his own saying, "Could we start again, please, could we start again?" Grace is God Almighty saying, "I love you anyway." Grace

fits faulty people. It finds the fault in you and me, and with the love of the Lord says, "I love you anyway."

Restoration Can Be Yours

I love antique shops. I don't go often because I will spend more time and money than I should. It is so gratifying to me to see the old pieces of furniture and other items restored to their former glory. It's like going back in time to see first-hand what real quality and craftsmanship was all about. And when I buy an item, I get the sense of having rescued it from a future of deterioration and destruction. I can now continue to enjoy it in all its glory. If people can restore old cars and beat up furniture, making them look like new, can you even begin to imagine what God can do for you?

There is no question that one of the primary reasons for Jesus' questions of Peter was to give him the opportunity to be reconciled from his three-fold denial of Christ. By a fire, three questions were again asked and answered. Even though Jesus may not have liked the way Peter answered, he accepted Peter anyway, and Peter was restored to the place Jesus had given to him earlier in his ministry. The question, "How much do you love me?" was not fully answered until much later at Pentecost, but the reconciliation and restoration had begun in Peter's life. Often it is a process that we must commit to and stick with, God being our strength.

Restore - it is one of our finest words. It means to reconstruct, rejuvenate, repair, refresh, renew, revitalize, reinstall, reinstate. Remember how it is stated in the world's most favorite Psalm, "He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." The church is not a warehouse for saints. Jesus restored Peter – not for the sake of just Peter- but for the sake of the whole world. Peter would not be the Rock unless his relationship with the Rock of Ages was restored. He could not be the leader of the church unless he has a personal relationship with the Savior who is its Cornerstone. Like Peter, Jesus calls us to be fishers of men, not keepers of the aquarium. The church is a place for all of us who have messed up, fallen short, done wrong, and need help. It is a place for people like you and me! Restoration for Peter and for us means that we can truly mean the words of the Chris Tomlin song we sang last week: *Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)*. The words, "My chains are gone, I've been set free. My God, my Savior has ransomed me. And like a flood His mercy reigns, unending love, amazing grace."¹

The question Jesus asked Peter is as relevant to us as it was to Peter. He continues to ask each of us today, "How much do you love me?" Do you love me enough to tend, that is care for and teach and shepherd, my people? Do you love me enough to take your place in the Body of Christ, the Church, and out of that love for Jesus take on a task that will make a transforming difference in the lives of others? Do you love me enough to follow me? Even old Peter with all of his human frailties was reconciled and sent forth to lead the church. If God can do that for Peter, he will do it for you. Jesus is calling, questioning, plaintively searching for an honest answer to the question, "How much do you love me?" Reconcile your life to his calling, and follow him today.

Prayer

¹ **Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone) by Chris Tomlin**

Amazing grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed

Chorus:

My chains are gone
I've been set free
My God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, Amazing grace

The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures

Chorus(x2)

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow
The sun forbear to shine
But God, Who called me here below
Will be forever mine
Will be forever mine
You are forever mine