

ZIONSVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REV. JIM CAPPS- MAY 13, 2012

“PETER FINDS FORGIVENESS”

JOHN 21:15-19

On this Mother’s Day, our Senior High Youth Group has worked closely with us in introducing our subject of today. You’ll see what I mean as you watch this video when several of them answer the question, “Share a time that your mother has forgiven you.”

Video of Senior High Youth

All of us who are members of the Family of Faith, God’s family, have times when we need forgiveness. That’s because as Paul puts it in Romans 3:23, all of us have sinned and therefore have fallen short of God’s best intentions or expectations for us. This is true of mothers and fathers as well as children. All of us are in need of God’s forgiveness.

Today as we continue this series between Easter and Pentecost, “Basking in the Resurrection Light,” we are going to look at the best known of the disciples, Peter. We’ll see how important it was for him and the future of the Church for Peter to receive forgiveness from Jesus at the end of the Breakfast on the Beach.

I am going to ask and attempt to answer three critical questions as we read and grapple with this wonderful passage. See if you can anticipate my questions as I read John 21:15-19.

Read: John 21:15-19

FIRST QUESTION: WHAT DID JESUS MEAN BY “MORE THAN THESE” IN VERSE 15?

Let me begin by setting the stage for this first question. Jesus had appeared to His disciples twice while they were in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. They went to Galilee, quite a ways north of Jerusalem and the religious leaders who certainly were a threat. Last week, we talked about the possibility that Peter and 6 of the disciples may have become impatient and unsettled with Jesus not be present with them. They didn’t know what was next.

In his frustration, Peter goes back to the fishing business, maybe believing that those three years with Jesus were only a detour. Now he had to get on with his life. Peter and the others, even though expert fishermen on those waters, catch nothing on the first day of their new business. It’s after their long, hard night of despair that the Risen Lord appears to them from the shore and tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. Even though they don’t recognize Jesus by sight or the sound of his voice, they take his advice and catch a net full of 153 large fish.

To make a long story short, led by Peter, who jumped out of the boat to get to Jesus first, the disciples move to shore with their great catch. Jesus has prepared a wonderful breakfast on the beach. It’s at the

end of this breakfast with Jesus, that Jesus focuses his attention on Peter. The conversation takes place in the presence of the other 6 followers of Jesus at the end of the meal as they relish the moment.

As He addresses the big fisherman, Jesus doesn't use the nickname, Peter, that He had previously given to Him. He uses his full, formal name, Simon son of John. Peter must have known that something was up in the same way I knew I'd better listen carefully if my mother addressed me by James Arthur Capps, which, gratefully, happened only a handful of times.

In that first of 3 times, Jesus asks, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" What did he mean by "more than these." Was Jesus pointing at the net full of fish? There had to be a rush of adrenalin and joyful accomplishment in such a large catch. This was the epitome of success in his business.

When Jesus said "more than these," was he pointing to the boat and all the fishing equipment which symbolized Peter's way of life? He was the boss, had a great deal of freedom, and owned the equipment.

When Jesus asked about "more than these," could it be that he was talking about the other disciples and the sense of deep commitment they had to each other? They had experienced a lot together and the deep fellowship they experienced was wonderful. I remember once talking to a defensive lineman for the old St. Louis Football Cardinals who talked about the worst part of a career-ending injury in training camp was not being with his team mates on a daily basis working closely together. Is that what Jesus meant?

Or, could it have been that Jesus remembered Peter saying after he predicted that he would deny him that all of the others might fail him, but he never would. Now He is saying, do you still believe you love me "more than these" other disciples.

After having left behind his call to follow Jesus and starting out on his own, I don't know for certain what Jesus meant by "more than these." Maybe it was just one of these explanations and maybe it was all of them put together. I do believe that Peter knew exactly about which Jesus was speaking.

If you were sitting next to Jesus around a campfire and he called you by your full name and then asked, "Do you love me more than these?", to what would He be referring by "more than these" for you? Would it be more than your family? More than your life style? More than your job? More than the degrees after your name? More than your material possessions? More than your pedigree or credentials? More than the people you hang out with? More than the dreams of what you want to do or be? You fill in the blank. To what would he be referring of you?

Like Peter, if it's any of the responses I just gave, you will be disappointed. If you put your spouse or your children or your parents above your love for the Risen Lord, you have put them in an impossible position which they can't possibly fill. If you love your job, material things, aspirations, or anything else instead of Jesus, it or they will not be able to deliver.

As Pascal put it, you and I were created with a vacuum which only God can fill. When we try to fill that God-shaped space with anything else, ultimately we will be disappointed.

SECOND QUESTION: WHY DID JESUS ASK PETER IF HE LOVED HIM THREE TIMES? VERSES 15-17

In Jesus' important interchange with Peter He asks him three times if Peter loves him. Each time, Peter answers in the affirmative, "You know that I love you," "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," and finally, "Lord, you know all things; you know I love you." We are told this final time that Peter is "hurt because Jesus asked him the third time." The word "hurt," describing his feelings, has the idea of being deeply grieved.

Then Jesus responds, "Feed my lambs," "Take care of my sheep," and "Feed my sheep."

There have been different ideas as to why Jesus asks Peter these questions and then tells him to do the work of a shepherd. Some would say the answer is found in the Greek words used for love by both Jesus and Peter.

Jesus first uses the word "agape", which is the strongest and deepest form of love. Peter answers with "phileo," which isn't as strong, speaking of the love families have for each other. In the second question, Jesus again uses "agape" and Peter responds with "phileo," once more. Finally, in the third question, Jesus changes to "phileo," to which Peter responds again with "phileo."

Is Jesus somehow lowering the bar of commitment, asking about a lesser form of love? That certainly doesn't seem like Jesus who always seems instead to be raising the bar. I would agree with those scholars who say that John uses those words for love interchangeably and that answer to the question isn't found in those words for love.

As we look closer at the scene, what kind of fire are they sitting by? It's described as being "coals" something like the charcoal we know. The other time the word for "coals" is used in the Bible is the fire in the courtyard of the high priest when Jesus was being unfairly tried. Was Jesus setting all this up to bring back to Peter's memory the scene where he denied Jesus? If so, did the 3 times He asked the question about Peter's love for Him coincide with Peter's 3-fold denial?

It seems to me that the answer is "yes." It was not by chance or that Jesus randomly questioned Peter's love for him 3 times. It's definitely by design. I believe Jesus was trying to help Peter deal with his guilt and self-doubt.

While I'm not sure we know exactly why 3 times Jesus questioned Peter's love for Him, I do know that our relationship with God centers around this idea of love. The first 4 of the 10 Commandments deals with our love for and complete commitment to God. When Jesus is asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" He answers that the first is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." Then, "Love your neighbor as yourself." It all starts with our love for God.

In Henry Blackaby's powerful study, *"Experiencing God"*, he starts with each one of us loving the God who first loved us.

Again, if you are sitting next to Jesus around the campfire and He asks, "Do you love me?" how would you respond? Like Peter, we know that He already knows the answer. He's asking for our benefit, not His. How would you answer? Based on the way you are living your life, how many times might He ask you the question? Frankly, are there times in the past when you have loved Him more than you do today?

How about us as a church? How would we respond if he asked, "Do you love me more than these?" I pray that it wouldn't be like the statement Jesus makes about the Church in Ephesus in Revelation when after affirming them in the first 3 verses of chapter 2, in verse 4 He says, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love." Could that sad indictment be made for ZPC and many churches in the United States?

WHAT WAS JESUS' PURPOSE FOR THIS CONVERSATION?

Certainly, since it was in the presence of 6 of the other disciples, it was good for them to see Jesus giving Peter a second chance by calling and re-commissioning him again. This is crucial for them to know since Peter would be the first leader in the Early Church, preaching the first message at Pentecost.

But more than anything else, it's for Peter's sake that Jesus leads this pensive conversation. When Peter is grieved as Jesus questions His love for the third time, could it be that real repentance is taking place. Peter's arrogant self-confidence and his subsequent 3-fold denial must have weighed heavily on him. His desire to jump ship and go back to the fishing business caused him to be genuinely ashamed as He sat next to the Risen Lord who had every right to question his love.

Someone once said that before God can ever use someone in a significant way, he must first deal with that person in the area of pride. Another way to look at it, when people come face to face with the God who is calling them to do meaningful ministry, they always feel sinful and undone, too small and unclean to accomplish God's purpose for them. That's how it must have been for the big fisherman, the Rock, who was known for his strength and bravado.

Then and only then is Peter ready to be used by God. Jesus commissions him to the task of being a shepherd to His flock. He was to feed and tend the young and the old. He was to follow the example of the Good Shepherd who met the needs of and nurtured all kinds of people and was calling Peter to do the same.

When you look at the leaders of the Early Church, young John would be a great communicator. Paul would be called to be a missionary statesman and evangelist. Peter would be the shepherd who would lead and tend the flock, the Community of Faith whom God would call into being.

Just as Jesus the Good Shepherd became the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world, so Peter would be the Shepherd who was sacrificed because of his love for Jesus. In verse 18, Jesus predicts his death that will take place as his hands are stretched out on a cross. This impetuous disciple often spoke and then thought; to the great chagrin of Jesus cut off the ear of the high priest's servant; who denied Jesus 3 times; and who was wonderfully challenged to love Jesus , re-commissioned and called at that

breakfast on the beach, was willing to be crucified upside down, because he didn't feel worthy to be crucified like Jesus.

Then in a wonderful way, after all of that, Jesus looks at Peter and says, once again, "Follow Me!" That was the beginning of a revolutionary adventure.

APPLICATION

When I was a young pastor, I was having a difficult time balancing my ambition and my family life. I was working 80-90 hours a week and pursuing a doctorate. Every day off and every vacation day was spent in meeting deadlines and attending classes for that coveted degree which would put the big "DR" in front of my name and make me more marketable to become the senior pastor of a large church.

I'll never forget a day off when I was sitting on the couch in our den and my then 4-year old daughter, Becky, nestled up next to me. I was in the middle of meeting a deadline and had a book in hand. I kind of turned away from her, but she turned toward me. She looked up at me with her big brown eyes as if to say, "Dad, you and I really have fun when we play. But we haven't played in a long time."

As I looked at this beautiful gift God had graciously given to us, it was a moment of grief like Peter must have felt. I wasn't loving her very well, so wrapped up in my work and studies. Likewise, I wasn't loving God very well, even though all I was doing was supposed to be for His glory, but, in fact, was more for mine.

I closed my book and to her delight we began to play. I had to re-order my life. I dropped out of the doctoral program. If churches didn't want me because I didn't have the proper credentials, then I shouldn't go there any way. I worked at trying to work less.

God has a great sense of humor. Fast forward 7 years and I was receiving an honorary doctorate that I didn't seek. The other recipients that day were the Director of the FBI who was becoming the Director of the CIA and the former CEO of Proctor and Gamble. It was what Alice calls a "Forest Gump moment." Who insisted on being there even though she still had scabs on her face from chicken pox? It was my smiling, vivacious daughter.

Fast forward 10 years when I received one of the greatest affirmations of my life, when Becky was doing her capstone class in her psychology major in college. She had to do a gen-o-gram and I was the last person in our family tree she interviewed. At the end of the conversation, she said, "Dad, thanks for always having time for me." My mind went careening back to that moment on the couch in the den and I realized I almost blew it. I was so grateful for that moment of awakening.

Somehow, I bet Peter must have had a similar moment when his mind went back to that conversation with Jesus where he found forgiveness, was re-commissioned and heard Jesus say once again, "Follow me!"

Dear friends, Jesus sits next to you today and like he did with Peter wants to call you to a point of faith in Him, if you have never began that journey. For some of us who have responded to the call in the past

but we have abandoned the path or forsaken our first love, He is saying, “Do you love me more than these?” Only you know what that means for you.

If you tell Him you love Him, he replies, “Then show it by feeding and tending my lambs and sheep.” If you are a parent, it is realizing a new that like me on that couch in the den, your children are your first responsibility before God. Maybe you need to set your ambitions aside and reorder your life.

If you are in a different situation in life, maybe God is calling you to be in a 1 to 1 relationship where you can be mentored so that you can mentor others. Maybe it’s a small group where you grow and help others grow. There are materials and sign-up sheets at the Welcome Center giving you information about how you can do that.

If you would like to sort through what all of this means, we as pastors as well other trained staff and leaders would consider it a privilege to listen and process things with you.

Finally, if you would like to pray with someone after we are finished, there will be people who love to share with you in the prayer alcove over by the cross.