

“Restored”
Acts 3:17-24; Galatians 6:1-5;
John 21:1-19

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As I think back to when the disciples were huddled in that upper room, I have the feeling that right after Jesus' death they were very afraid. Then they had Jesus appear to them twice. That's where we pick up the story today. It's interesting to me because they are still together, but they are no longer huddling in the upper room. Some of that fear seems to have dissipated. They can at least go back out into the world. But it feels like they are not sure exactly what to do. So Peter suggests, "Let's go fishing because that what I've always done." At least, that's the way it feels.

As we go through this passage, I'm going to try to think a little bit about what might have been going on. It's not in the text. We're left with the simple facts. But they went fishing and I'm assuming Peter was saying, "Well, we don't have to stay in the upper room, so I think I'll just go do what I know how to do. Maybe I was overreaching a little bit wanting to be a disciple of a famous rabbi. At least I don't have to be afraid so much anymore, but I'll go back to just being who I was." I don't know if that's exactly what he was thinking, but for some reason they went fishing.

I suppose we could think back—there's an initial moment where Jesus invited them to go fishing as they were mending their nets. He invited them to go fishing for people. And here, we find them back fishing for fish. Maybe that's getting a little too metaphorical, but it's interesting because then Jesus comes and asks, "Did you catch anything?" They say, "No." It's interesting to me that they just say "no." They don't want to go into it. It's been a long night. Who's this guy on the shore asking if they caught any fish? When he said to throw the net on the right side, my response would probably be to say, "Oh, come on. Have we really been throwing it on the wrong side all night?" There's none of that. They seem to just do it.

And that is the moment where it feels a lot like my own life. I go off and do my own kind of stuff. I throw my own nets all the time. I quit thinking about what Jesus might be saying. Here we have that situation where Jesus again says to do something, and something wonderful happens—a fullness happens. It might be saying something to us.

Of course, then we have this wonderful vision of Peter. Peter always seems to be the impetuous one. So immediately, and I always love this, he puts his clothes back on to jump in the water. Maybe he realized he wasn't going to walk on water this time. Or maybe he thought he was, I don't know. We assume he didn't because it didn't say so, but he gets in the water and heads to shore because he's so excited to see Jesus.

I have this vision of him coming out of the water dripping wet. Jesus is sitting there, and what would you do if you saw this guy dripping wet come at you. I get this image of Jesus playing the part of the father with the prodigal son. As Peter comes dripping wet, Jesus just throws his arms around him and welcomes him. It's this wonderful moment. Jesus getting all wet and Peter getting a sense of being loved. And then I have a sense of them stepping back, and then the awkwardness begins. I get the sense that there's a

moment that Peter realizes, "I denied him. I don't know how to be his disciple at this moment."

What happens in that awkwardness? Jesus fills it in, it seems to me. He gives Peter something to do. "Why don't you go get some fish," even though there are fish already cooked on the fire. It feels like he's just giving him something to do to get through this moment, because it wasn't quite the right moment to deal with that awkwardness. So they go get the fish and have breakfast together.

In that moment, it makes me feel like maybe as they brought the fish back and as they started to have breakfast, Peter starts to back away a little bit, wondering what his role is, who he should be. He's gone through this crisis. He knows he denied Jesus, denied him three times at the very moment when Jesus was arrested and going through the most difficult time in his life.

So we have this encounter again and it leads to this moment after breakfast when Jesus speaks directly to Peter and says, "Peter, do you love me? Do you love me?" The first time he says, "Do you love me more than these?" It's a little awkward to figure out exactly what he's saying. Does he mean, "Do you love me more than the rest of these folks love me?" or does he mean "Do you love me in a way that gives me priority over these others?" I would tend to go with the idea that he's asking, "Do you give priority? Do you recognize how important this love is that we have, that you have?"

I think it's important at this point to begin to think about that word "love" because as I understand it, this passage contains two different words for love. The first two times, it's *agape*. The last time it's the word *phileo*, and we'll talk about that in a second. *Agape* is an interesting word because it's not used much in Greek, but it's used almost all the time in the New Testament for the love of God and the love that God would have us have for one another. This word, when it's defined, tends to have this idea of choice in it.

When we think about love, oftentimes when I think about love, anyway, I think about the affection part of love, the falling in love idea. In some way our feelings lead us into this love. *Agape* almost seems to be the other way around, where you recognize the importance, the value of the other and then you choose to care for them. In that choice, the relationship begins so that the affection then grows from that relationship. So it seems a little reversed from what I often think about in terms of love, but I think that's the sense that this word *agape* has.

There's a real choice. We have a choice to make about what and who is important and in caring for that other who is important to us, that we value. Then affection grows in the relationship, as well. The relationship grows.

Usually when I have read through this passage I have thought that the *agape* is what's important. So the *agape*, *agape*, then it's like "I know you're not really going to be able to do that, so just give me your loyalty (*phileo*)." But this time I read it differently. It was interesting. As I was reading it through it was like, OK, after you recognize the gift you are given, the grace I'm giving you, the forgiveness, the relationship, the love of God that comes through me and the value you place on that

love, you then make that choice to care (agape). That begins this relationship that we have, then it moves into this loyalty, this sense of friendship (phileo).

It takes me back to John 15:15, where he says, “No longer do I call you servants, but now I call you friends because the servant doesn’t know what the master is doing, but I’m revealing it all to you.” There’s this idea that as we recognize the value of who Jesus is and choose to care about who he is and what he does, and as our affection then, the joy of that, the relational nature of that grows in us it becomes something that’s almost akin to friendship. Or it *is* friendship—Jesus says, “I call you friends.”

There’s this journeying together. What it does, then, is it invites Peter to come out of that moment of crisis, to know the love of God for him, and to be able to choose that love of God, and to see how then it changes him to become Christ’s friend in spite of the denial. God can go beyond our crises and then invites him in the end to “follow me.” And really, that idea of following me is to walk beside me, to walk through life with me.

There’s always a little question in my mind. It’s wonderful to see all of this work out in Peter’s life, but how does it translate into our lives? It feels like that’s exactly what it does for us as well. Maybe none of you have felt like you denied or you felt like you were out of step with Jesus or your faith was struggling and you didn’t know how to come back, but I certainly have. It feels like that kind of story to me. About that story of how we come back. It sometimes isn’t really dependent on my coming back as much as Jesus coming again and welcoming me back, telling me that in spite of the struggles I’ve had, the denials I’ve made, however wet I might be, he will grab ahold. He will remind me of the love we share and how that love creates the community we are, that *phileo*, that idea of loyalty, the sense of friendship. It makes us into those who are friends and we want to do what our friends do. Our friend, Jesus. As we follow, as we walk with him, we begin to show what he does.

It’s interesting to me what Jesus says about the restoration, then. It’s not that you have to do this kind of penance to show you are really my friend. You don’t have to be the greatest theologian to show you are really my friend. He simply says, “Feed my sheep. Care for my people. Care for the people of God.”

Sometimes I think I try to take things too metaphorically, but here Jesus certainly isn’t talking about a pen of baaing sheep out back that are really to be taken care of. He invites us to take this metaphorically. We have to think back on the way he used the word “sheep.” At one point he talks about how there may be 99 sheep in a pen, but he’s going to go looking for the one that’s lost. So when he’s talking about feeding his sheep he’s not talking just about the ones that are in the pen. He’s talking about the lost sheep as well. He says, “Feed my sheep and tend them. Help my sheep have what makes for life and guide them into life.”

So when he is restoring Peter, he simply says to care for each other so that we can have a flock to be part of, to be tended in, where we can know the joy of God’s grace, the love God has given us and where we become God’s hands and feet and eyes, that we become for each other the tenders, that we gently bring each other the joy of grace, the wonder of God’s love, the hope of forgiveness, the incredible vision of resurrection, the open arms of Jesus, no matter how wet we are. Amen.