

“Understand?”
Deuteronomy 6:3-9;
Hebrews 3:6-15; Matthew 15:7-21

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Who is this Peter? We get to this point where Peter is asking questions of Jesus. We know, after all, that Jesus is both man and God. We know that Jesus is the one who has all the answers. Why is Peter questioning him? When I read this I can easily get to the point where I wonder why Peter is questioning him. It seems pretty obvious what Jesus is saying. Why is he asking again? Part of it is that we've had a lot of years in between that moment and today which help make it obvious. But there are other reasons we might take seriously what and why Peter, along with the disciples, might be asking Jesus to help them understand.

What does it mean to say “understand?” It feels like there a little exasperation on Jesus' part here. “You *still* don't understand?” It's interesting that the word for “understanding” in that phrase is the word for “to use your mind, to think.” Have you ever wanted to say to somebody, “Can't you just think about it? Use your head!” It feels a little bit like what Jesus is saying. A little earlier he uses the phrase “you might understand.” The idea there is to comprehend, to think carefully about, to consider seriously what he is saying. Jesus is inviting first the crowd and then the disciples into thinking about this. He is doing that in response to this question.

Where does this question come from? I began to think about what I know about Peter. It's not clear that I know tons, but I get this image of Peter as a boy growing up in Palestine in a family that fishes for a living, so he learned how to fish at an early age. At the same time he is going to synagogue. At the synagogue he is beginning to learn along with the other boys. If I understand correctly, they would memorize good chunks of scripture. The ones who were best at it got to go on. I can just see Peter at age 9 or 10 having a dream of one day being a rabbi; one day being the one who is doing the teaching; one day being the one who is speaking in the synagogue. Perhaps he wasn't really good at memorization or perhaps he was so busy with the family business that he couldn't always participate or didn't have time to do all the memorization. So as time went along he realized that his dream was fading and that he was going to be, just like his father before him, a fisherman.

Then he began to hear that in the country there was a new rabbi, a rabbi that seemed to be making quite a splash. He seemed to talk with authority in a way that the other rabbis didn't. Maybe he heard some of what John the Baptist said about him. By the time Jesus came walking along the lake, you wonder if that old dream didn't spring into action as Jesus asked him, “Will you follow me?” and Peter says yes. My sense is that what Peter expected is that he would now be following and would be able to be part of that rabbi's school and become a rabbi. Perhaps his dream was coming to fruition.

A lot of things happened before we get to this point in Chapter 15. Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, so we have the Beatitudes. We have him reframing

the Old Testament in some ways. We have him telling them not to just love those who love you, but love your enemies. There is a lot that Peter has heard so you would expect that he's beginning to get a clue that this guy is a little different. Then, he's had that experience where people have pulled the roof apart to let somebody down to be healed, and Jesus said, "Does it matter whether I say he's healed or whether I say his sins are forgiven? Get up, take your mat, and go." Peter has had all these experiences—Jesus just fed the 5,000 and walked on the water. All of this goes into what Peter has experienced.

Peter says yes to following Jesus and then he hears all Jesus' teachings, then the feeding of the 5,000, the experience on the lake. Peter has gotten to this point in Chapter 15, and then the Pharisees get mad at them. The disciples come to Jesus and say, "Do you know they are not happy with you?" I don't think they expected his answer to be that it doesn't matter; they are like blind people leading the blind. I wonder if part of what is going on is that Peter is still thinking that that's what he is supposed to become. "How am I going to become one of those rabbis, the Pharisees, those special folks?" Jesus says no, they are empty and what you are doing is empty.

Now I don't know if that's exactly the way it went, whether Peter felt all those different things and if that's how Peter's life actually went, but we can guess it's probably not too incredibly far off. What we do see here is Jesus telling Peter that he's paying attention to appearances. By appearances, a balloon is pretty big, but is it really? We know that it's really all air. There's really not much to it. That's what Jesus is talking with Peter about. It's not the appearances.

We see that Peter has grown up a certain way in a certain society. He's begun to see certain people as important and think about them as defining who he might want to be, and then Jesus says no. It's like if you wanted to be a basketball player, and you had the skill, and you go to a coach who's supposed to get you there, and he makes everybody at the places you want to go mad. What would you think? Or if you wanted to be a famous singer, and you had the ability to do so, and you went to the right coach thinking that the coach was going to make you a famous singer, and then that coach makes everybody mad and you know you're not going to be that famous singer. You're not going to be what you thought you were going to be.

It feels to me like what Jesus is telling Peter is, "You are going to have to use your mind." You are going to have to consider this carefully and think about what I'm saying to you because it's not the same as what the world is telling you. It's not the same as what you grew up with. It's not the same as what you are thinking. You have to open your heart to God and use your mind and thought to help you do that. Notice that he says to the crowd, "Let your heart be near to God."

What is keeping the heart from being near? Sometimes it's that we don't hear. I think about when I was a boy, and I've seen it throughout my years, that my mother would tell me, "Wear a coat." I would just walk out the door without it. It was like I didn't hear her. Why? Because that's not what my crowd did. It wasn't cool to be wearing a coat.

That's what this is about. We hear what we want to hear sometimes, lots of the time. Jesus is saying you have to use your mind, you have to consider carefully, you have to use your thought to be able to hear. It's not just accepting what you think you know to form who you are because you need to let God form who you are. So the question is what's in the way? I'm guessing what was in the way for Peter is that he wanted to eventually be a rabbi. He wanted to be part of a rabbi school. He thought that's what he wanted to do. It wasn't clear yet that what he was really part of was God's work of bringing the Messiah into the world, which is even greater, but he didn't notice that, even with all the teaching and healing that was going on.

So the question for us is what is the thing that gets in our way and leads us to not hear? What is it that we want so badly but recognize that it's not necessarily what God wants? It's clear to me that I have those kinds of conceptions. I get to a certain point in my life and believe that I'm supposed to be a certain way and do a certain thing and have a certain life. The more I try to force myself into that, the more I realize that I'm not really listening to what God is doing. What I think I'm supposed to be is not necessarily what God is telling me I'm to do to truly live.

As we go into Lent, the question for us is how are we hearing? Are we hard of hearing because we don't want to hear something? Are we allowing it to come in? Is it more than sounds? How is God speaking into our lives and are we willing to listen, think about it, allow it to reshape us? I think there are lots of forces in our lives that are shaping us. We have to accept which forces do that. Some of those forces will misshape us. It's as we follow God that we will be shaped in a way that fits who we are able to be.

Lent invites us to look and ask, "Am I being misshapen? What are the forces in my life?" We have all kinds of forces in our lives: family, friends, community, jobs, institutions, larger societal issues, ways of thinking and being. We each have a way in which how we grew up shapes how we see the world. The question that Jesus is asking is, do you not understand? Are you taking the time to think and to see and to allow your heart to be near to God?

So as we go forward into Lent, into this week, our invitation from this passage and the others we have read is to ask ourselves what's in the way. What's shaping me in ways that I feel misshapen and how do I let God in? How do I let go of all I think I'm supposed to be so I can let God make me into who God wants me to be? What are the things in my life? How do I listen, hear, and understand? Amen.