

The Risen Christ and the Quality of Our Love

John 21 is an epilogue to the gospel, featuring some crucially important words of the risen Jesus to his disciples regarding our ongoing mission. Sitting around the coals of the fire, Peter no doubt recalled the night of Jesus' arrest when he had followed his Lord "at a distance" (Luke 22:54). Jesus had warned Peter that he would deny him three times, a warning he totally disregarded as unnecessary. But, while he was warming himself by the fire, a young girl asked him if he was a follower of Jesus, and Peter adamantly denied that he ever knew him (John 18:15-18; 25-27). Now Jesus prepares to ask Peter a thrice-repeated question that calls for his response.

Follow as I read **John 21:15-19**

¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

Simon Peter came to understand something about the demands of love, and in particular, loving Jesus, who confronts the quality of Peter's love. Jesus confronted Peter, as he does us, with remembering our failures in our relationship with him (15-17). A relationship of love and trust requires work. If there has been a breach of that trust and a violation of that love, there must be reconciliation and restoration. For a marriage relationship, the most difficult yet most important words are "I'm sorry," or "I was wrong," words that were not easy for me to say but were necessary throughout my nearly 48 years of marriage.

Simon Peter had never lost his love for Jesus, yet was made painfully aware of his sinful failure of having denied the Lord. After his denial, Peter had seen Jesus' face, and "went outside and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). The now-risen Lord met the broken-hearted disciple. The charcoal fire was a vivid reminder of the same kind of fire where Peter was warming himself when confronted by the young girl and denied Jesus three times (John 18:18). Now Jesus repeats to Peter a searching question three times.

Jesus addressed Peter as Simon, reverting to his old name before he gave him his new name, Cephas/Peter, which means "rock" (21:15; 1:42). Peter had acted like anything but a rock. He had been weak and unstable, and he

needed to be restored in order to become a solid rock in faith and service. Jesus asked him if he loved him more than these, probably meaning, “Do you love me more than these other disciples do, like you said you did?” Peter in response replied with uncharacteristic humility and reticence, “Yes, Lord...you know that I love you.” By now Peter understood that he had failed to uphold his pledges to the Lord, and was reluctant to make any bold declarations.

To be reinstated is to be forgiven and restored and to be given a second chance. Peter was in the process of a new beginning by which he would become useful in the kingdom of God. Likely Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him on the night of the Last Supper:

“Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus had prayed for him, which means that even though Peter’s faith would falter, it indeed would not finally fail. He would be given an opportunity to repent, and would be restored to Jesus and reinstated as a servant leader of his fellow disciples.

The reason many are unable or unqualified for kingdom service, according to Gary Burge, is the lack of what he calls “recovered joy.” This is because for many in Christian service there has been no true repentance for and repentance over past sins. Often, with many who are self-disqualified and unable to offer true and effective service, there has been no healing of past hurts. Thus, there is lingering bitterness. With some, there is suppressed anger, or a feeling of unworthiness that causes some to be driven as they try to prove to God and others their worthiness to be ministers or kingdom servants.

Many hide their insecurities and unresolved guilt behind a legalistic ministry that makes inordinate demands of self and of others, perhaps in an effort to gain God’s approval. As Burge says, “Many pastors and lay persons in ministry need to visit the shores of Galilee and re-read John 21.” Only a visit with the risen Lord Jesus can give us “recovered joy,” and the “second chance” we all need for effective ministry. This recovered joy that comes through broken-ness and transparency before God is the only solution for ministerial competitiveness and lack of transparency, says Burge.

Loving Jesus, Simon was learning, was costly. He would need to have an ongoing sense of repentance, and the realization of his failure, broken-ness and weakness before God. God uses broken people who never forget the ongoing need for grace and forgiveness and who are continually repentant before God. In those three years of Jesus’ earthly ministry, Peter never liked the idea that his Lord would face a cross. After his magnificent confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Peter immediately reacted when Jesus spoke of his approaching cross. “‘God forbid it, Lord!’ he said. ‘This must never happen to you!’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’” (Matthew 16:22-23). Peter

had to learn that the cross was necessary for Jesus, for him to be our Savior. And then he was to learn what Jesus meant about the cross each one of us must carry—the cross of repentance, self-denial, weakness and suffering (Matthew 16:24-25). We're useful in Christ's service only to the extent that we follow the way of the cross.

Sometimes relationships that are being healed require renewed vows. I've had the privilege of ministry to couples who, after a time of total forgiveness and reconciliation by the grace of God, have then restated their marriage vows. Jesus asked Simon Peter this thrice-repeated question for the purpose of the renewal of Simon's love vow. If this was Peter's ministry "ordination" service, the Lord had three questions for Simon. In my ordination examination council in April of 1967, I was asked a round of theological questions and inquiries about my personal life and background, as the examination council was testing my fitness for the preaching and pastoral ministry. But Jesus asked three times just this one question: "Simon Peter, do you love me?"

And, as a Jew growing up, Simon learned the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your strength." Peter came to confess Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Then Peter had denied the Lord, after having been so self confident. Now Jesus visited with him and full forgiveness and restoration was granted. But no longer could Peter trust in his resolve to demonstrate loyalty and love. He would now be less certain of himself and more dependent on Jesus. But how was he to love Jesus, now that Jesus would be departing and returning to the Father in glory?

Jesus said that Simon must express his love for Jesus by feeding his lambs and taking care of his sheep. Simon Peter was familiar with this analogy. Jesus had declared himself to be the Good Shepherd who would lay down his life for the sheep. And he would have many more sheep who would hear his voice and follow him. (John 10:11).

Being called sheep is not a flattering designation. As Philip Keller states so eloquently, sheep are lovely and harmless, but also quite stupid, stubborn, helpless and wayward. Thus shepherding is hard work. We who are far removed from the culture of sheep farming tend to think of shepherding in terms of the bucolic religious art paintings we see of Jesus in clean robes holding a crook in one hand and a cute little lamb in the other. But shepherding is hard, dirty, and dangerous work. And particularly in that time and setting, shepherds often had to fight off wild beasts and robbers.

Peter came to realize this calling to love Jesus meant loving his sheep and feeding and caring for them (1 Peter 5:1-4). As Jesus made clear, we who are being saved are God's sheep (Matthew 25:31-46). And if we're truly God's sheep who love him, we'll find ourselves quite naturally and unwittingly loving Jesus by loving his sheep. We'll feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, invite the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the

imprisoned. And the failure to express such love in such tangible ways will be evidence against us on the day of judgement (Matthew 25:31-46).

How often do we realize the opportunities God gives us every day to love him by loving people, by ministering his grace and love, in simple and caring ways? If we love him, we'll feed his sheep and take care of his lambs, including those next door, in the next cubicle at the office or desk in the classroom. Jesus loves us and he wants us to share his love by loving his sheep, including the lonely and forgotten, the sick and those in need of practical assistance and encouragement.

In the Brussels neighborhood where we lived for nearly nine years, was a small pasture where graze two sheep, a white and a black one. As Nancy and I often walked by that "pastoral" scene in the midst of a suburban neighborhood, I thought about the lost sheep in our neighborhood, who are (as Jesus saw the multitudes around him) "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36) There are many who're in need of the Good Shepherd. There are sheep around you that need care and feeding, such as those "little lambs" that you feed every mealtime around your table.

Relationships don't come cheaply, and ones that last involve commitment and staying power. That's true in marriage and strong friendship. The life of following Jesus is not an easy one, but requires that walk in step with the Holy Spirit, producing and displaying of the fruit of the Spirit in and through our lives (Galatians 5:22-23). And the life of following Jesus is never sporadic, but requires our time, patience and perseverance.

Jesus told Peter that the price of following would be to follow him unto death. Jesus spoke of the binding of Peter's hands, which would be stretched out on a crossbeam. Church tradition says that Simon Peter was himself crucified about the year AD 69 or 70 in Rome. So, for well over thirty years, Peter lived knowing that he would be led to a martyr's death. The demand of following Jesus includes the price of following Jesus where we don't want to go. The life of discipleship is one of greatest joy, meaning and fulfillment, yet it is also one of submitting to the Father's will, which includes the way of difficulty and suffering, which is never our human choice. God doesn't expect us to become masochists, but demands we be realists, following in the way of the cross.

But it's also the way of joy, Peter would find his joy, not in the fulfillment of his personal wants and ambitions, but in the will of God. The demands of a relationship with Jesus Christ are all the way till the end, but yet they end in everlasting glory. This relationship of loving and serving Jesus is the one with everlasting consequences and rewards.

The risen Jesus confronts us with the quality and cost of our love. You alone know the cost for you to love Jesus. It may be that there are sins and broken vows in your relationship with God. God will forgive all sins and whatever our failures, he will give us a new beginning. But for there to be that forgiveness and new beginning, there must not be repression and denial. There must be

honest confession, repentance and forsaking the sinful behavior of the past. A right relationship, a love relationship with Jesus, will cost you true repentance and transparency before God. He has paid the awful price for your cleansing and forgiveness. Now you must accept it by way of the cost of your remembering and repenting. And he will give you a new beginning.

The Lord may have led you where you didn't want to go, and may yet lead you where you don't want to go. But be assured that the one who is leading you loves you and plans blessings for you now and glory for the life to come. But in the meantime, the way of his love is not always comfortable and easy. As Paul Scherer says, "God is almost intolerably careless about crosses and swords, arenas and scaffolds, and about all the 'evils' and all the 'plagues.' His caring doesn't mean he goes in for 'upholstering'!"

A love relationship with Jesus is costly and rarely comfortable. Yet it is the only path to life's greatest purpose and joy. And by his grace we'll be able to pay the price. Each one of us must decide what it will mean to truly love him. There are demands in this most important of all relationships. When we follow him by serving others we learn what it means to truly love him. If we love him, we'll take care of his lambs.