

Sermon: A Love Willing to be Changed by Grace

Series: Believe and Encounter

Scripture Reading: John 21:15-19

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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.”

I have been thinking a lot about this exchange between Jesus and Peter. It is one of those stories that is so familiar, so deeply woven into the fabric of our faith, that it honestly makes it difficult to preach on.

But here we are.

I couldn’t miss the opportunity to preach on this beautiful and inspiring ending to John’s gospel. I love how John pays attention to the power of reconciliation and second chances, of a love that refuses to let failure have the final word.

What makes this resurrection encounter so unique is the famous question, “Peter, do you love me?” For centuries, this question has been an important part of our understanding of

what it means to follow the risen Christ because Jesus is not only concerned with Peter's ability to fulfill his calling but also with Peter's heart.

As this story teaches us, true discipleship cannot be sustained by obligation alone, but by a love strong enough to remain true even after failure, disappointments, and obstacles.

Unlike the other three gospel accounts, John tells us the story of Jesus and Peter to show us how when love is fractured, it is not repaired through denial or avoidance, but through honest confrontation, forbearing grace, and a willingness to change for the better, into the people God calls us to be.

For John, restoration cannot happen without resurrection.

As a familiar story, we may think we know everything we need to know about this exchange between Jesus and Peter.

On the surface, this conversation seems pretty straightforward, right? Jesus seeks out Peter to restore him so that Peter can faithfully return to his calling. A few questions are asked, a few answers are given, and just like that, Peter is reinstated.

Wow... Is that it?

For someone who explicitly denied Jesus multiple times and then questioned his commitment to Jesus even after witnessing his resurrection, his restoration process surely seems a little too simple to me.
And perhaps to you, too.

As we all know, forgiveness is not that simple. Reconciliation doesn't just happen because someone decided to apologize. Restoration does not happen in the blink of an eye.

This could be why I have been struggling so much with this story. I hear Jesus ask Peter, "Do you love me?" and I imagine that a few exchanged words were enough to erase betrayal, shame, and grief.

But human hearts rarely heal that quickly.

Psychology teaches us that forgiveness is not just a decision we make when we feel ready; it is a tedious process that involves memory, emotion, identity, and safety.

Research shows that when someone hurts us deeply, our brains do not simply "move on." The emotional centers, especially those connected to fear and threat, hold onto the experience. If trust was broken once, our minds try to ensure it does not happen again. So even when we want to forgive, there is often a gap between our intention and our emotional reality.

That is why forgiveness, in real life, rarely feels clean or immediate. It certainly doesn't look like what Jesus offers to Peter in this conversation.

Unlike Jesus, we want proof before we can offer forgiveness. We need certainty before we can offer any form of restoration. We want to know that the person won't fail again, that the apology is sincere enough, and that the change they are promising is permanent.

Our community, and the whole country, really, have witnessed exactly this in the heartbreaking hearings regarding Camp Mystic and the 25 beautiful girls whose lives were lost in the flood last year.

I am not here to tell you my opinion on this tragic moment.

But I hope you see the connection I am trying to build here - the impossible task of forgiveness, restoration, and even resurrection between two groups that were immensely affected by a natural event no one expected.

I cannot imagine the pain of the parents who lost children, siblings who lost sisters, students who didn't see their friends come back to school, and even counselors who witnessed unimaginable fear and chaos.

Life for these people and their families will never be the same.

For many of them, the idea of forgiveness may feel distant, even offensive, because forgiveness cannot erase absence. It cannot bring back the light and laughter that once made a family complete. And for that reason, restoration seems nothing but impossible.

And yet, this is precisely why Peter's restoration matters so much to us this day.

Jesus forgives and restores Peter even though...

Peter doesn't promise anything - something like, "Yes, Lord, I will tend your sheep. Or I promise I will do my best!"

Peter doesn't even ask forgiveness.

Peter gets his feelings hurt when Jesus asks the same question repeatedly. Oh, poor Peter!

Despite all that, Jesus meets Peter in the aftermath of great failure, unimaginable shame, and tremendous grief to be with him and tend to his heart.

If you have ever wondered what grace looks, feels, or sounds like, you can find it here in this story.

This is who God is - a God whose grace is beyond everything we do and do not do. A God who redeems the worst part of ourselves and uses them for purposes we cannot even begin to imagine.

This story is about God's grace. Absolutely!

But it is also about how, when grace is given, it asks something in return, not as a condition to earn it or as a transaction between God and us, but as an honest response that makes it real, as a symbol of genuine gratitude, of a commitment to change.

If we pay close attention to this story, we will see how Peter not only receives restoration, but he also receives a new commission - a new calling that will take him places where he didn't want to go.

That is why Jesus does not simply tell Peter, "I forgive you," and send him back to business as usual. Instead, Jesus gives Peter a new way to live: "Feed my sheep." "Tend my lambs." "Follow me."

In preparation for this sermon, I read an article titled "Peter and the Pursuit of Happiness" by a Lutheran Pastor in Minneapolis. While I found parts of this writing somewhat helpful and quite intriguing, the section that stood out to me the most was the following. The pastor writes:

I come, after all, from a tradition founded upon the proposition that there is nothing we can do that can secure for ourselves God's good grace, nothing we can attempt or accomplish to establish our merit before God. But sometimes I wonder if we haven't developed such an allergic reaction to "justification by works" that we dismiss the idea of God expecting us to do anything. Is being justified by grace through faith really an excuse to do nothing, to be unchanged, unaffected by the gospel; to live as if Christ's life, death, and resurrection make no difference?

In other words, forgiveness is not and cannot be the end of the story. It is the beginning of a transformed life, of a life that is justified by grace but commissioned to live a life where grace is embodied in what we do, say, and believe.

A grace that restores us does not leave us unchanged; it calls us into a different way of living because that's the turning point when we begin to see life the way God sees life and all its beauty and complexities.

Peter cannot remain the same fearful disciple who once stood around a fire denying he even knew Jesus. He cannot be the same disciple who questioned everything Jesus said and was prompt to give answers even he wasn't supposed to.

If Peter is going to receive this restoration genuinely, he must step into a new identity shaped by commitment, courage, and sacrificial love. The same Peter who once protected himself at all costs will eventually become the Peter who gives himself away for the sake of others.

That is why Jesus does not merely restore Peter's relationship with him; Jesus restores Peter's heart so that he can live out his calling with responsibility, purpose, and in community.

That's exactly what God's grace does in our lives.

It changes our hearts.

These times, more than ever, call for this kind of grace, this kind of transformation, this kind of resurrection.

So perhaps the question Jesus asks Peter is also the question Christ asks the church today: "Do you love me?"

Not with words alone.

Not with good intentions alone.

But with a love willing to be changed by grace.

Amen.