

Do you Love Me?

Sometimes I'll be reading or studying a passage of Scripture and I'll be thinking that I understand it, but I'm not really sure that I do. There's a vague sense that I'm not quite getting it and so I'll want to dig in and try to find the real meaning. Sometimes the "digging in" part is even more confusing, with so many different opinions on the text that I have an even harder time deciding which point of view is most convincing.

One of those passages is at the end of John's Gospel, after the scene on the beach that we looked at last week, with Jesus cooking up some fish and breaking bread with His disciples. This last section begins with "after breakfast", so we're still on the beach, Peter is still cold and wet from swimming in to shore in the cool light of dawn and Jesus takes him aside for a private conversation.

Let's listen in:

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you."

"Then feed My lambs," Jesus told him.

Jesus repeated the question: "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter said, "you know I love You."

"Then take care of My sheep," Jesus said.

Once more He asked him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was grieved that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord you know everything. You know I love you."

Jesus said, "Then feed My sheep."

There are lots of questions and varying opinions about the meaning of this passage. Why did Jesus use one word for 'love' - agape - on the first two occasions he asked His question, and then switch to another - phileo - the third time? Why did Peter answer with *phileo* on all three occasions when Jesus was asking with *agape*? Why does Jesus switch from lambs to sheep? Why different words for 'feed' and why different words for 'know'? After reading some differing suggestions about these word switches, the most convincing one seems to be that this was John's style of writing. He often mixed up his terms, using different words that had very close to the same meanings, with no particular agenda other than to offer a little variety. Jesus' conversation with Peter would have been in Aramaic, not in Greek, so John would have to interpret that Aramaic to write in Greek -- and this is what he came up with.

All of which should make it simpler to understand what Jesus was saying to the once-confident fisherman turned fisher of men.

Why do I say that this was a private conversation? There is no hint at the beginning of the story that Jesus and Peter were separate from the other disciples, but there is a clear indication in v. 20 where Peter turned around and saw John following them. If John is following them, then Jesus and Peter have walked away from the six others on the beach and, a little later, John has decided to follow them and find out what's up.

And when Jesus starts to talk to Peter, He doesn't use the name that He had given this man near the beginning of their time together, but He uses the name given to him at birth - Simon. "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" It's like He's not talking to Peter, which means rock, the rock on which Jesus promised that He would build His church. But He's talking to the fisherman that He met by these same shores of Galilee some three years earlier . . . "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?"

More than what? These fish? These other disciples? And if the disciples, then does He mean, "Do you love Me more than they do?" or does He mean, "Do you love Me more than you love them?" It's hard for me to imagine Jesus asking Peter to tell Him who or what Peter loved the most without Peter actually answering the question. "You know I love You more than I love fishing or than I love my fishing buddies." But Peter doesn't answer that question -- he simply tells Jesus, "You know I love You."

Most scholars seem to agree that Jesus was asking Peter if he loved Him more than the other disciples did -- which would be a fair question for Peter to leave unanswered. But why would Jesus ask it? Remember back to the Last Supper, Jesus celebrating the Passover with His disciples on the night He would be betrayed. After they had left to go to the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem, Jesus said to His disciples, "Tonight all of you will desert Me. For the Scriptures say, 'God will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'" What was Peter's response to this prophetic statement? "Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will."

"Peter," Jesus replied, "the truth is, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

"No!" Peter insisted. "Not even if I have to die with You! I will never deny You!"

This passage at the end of John's Gospel is the bookend to the account I just read from Matthew, in at least these two ways:

1. In the first place, Peter declared that his love for Jesus was greater than that of the others, that even if everyone else deserted the Master, Peter would never do that.
2. In the second place, Peter had declared that he would never deny His Lord, that he would remain loyal to the death -- and then denied him three times.

Jesus didn't forget that Peter had said that he would never deny his Master, nor that he said, "Even if everyone else deserts You, I never will." And so He takes Peter for a little walk and asks him, "Do you love Me more than these?" Or, "Is your love for Me really that much greater than the love all these other men have for Me?" And, to Peter's credit, he doesn't make excuses or comparisons, but simply says, "You know I love You."

In that answer, Peter is letting go of the bravado and the big talk that has embarrassed him so badly and is doing nothing more than telling Jesus how much he cares for his Master. And I think that's exactly what Jesus wanted from him. He wanted Peter's heart, not his big talk. He wanted Peter's love and loyalty within a recognition that he wasn't a hero, and wasn't able to do it all in his own strength.

Jesus also hadn't forgotten that Peter had denied that he even knew Him three times in the wee hours of the morning of His crucifixion. And so He asks him the same question three times: "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" After the third time of asking, we're told that Peter was grieved that Jesus asked the question a third time and answered, "Lord you know everything. You know I love You." Three times he trembled in fear and denied that he knew who Jesus was or that he had been one of his disciples and now three times he is being asked if he truly loves his Lord.

Jesus didn't need to say why He was asking Peter the same question three times; he knew, he was grieved, he remembered it all and it was humbling. He felt the hurt of his own failure, one that he would never forget and never fail to learn from. But that wasn't why Jesus was having this conversation. He didn't bring this up to embarrass Peter or to remind him that he'd blown it badly. No, the purpose is contained in the final phrase of each of these three questions and responses: "Then feed My lambs", "then take care of My sheep" and, "Then feed My sheep." Jesus was commissioning Peter again, telling him what He expected from him in the days ahead. "Peter, I want you to take care of those who choose to follow Me. I want you to feed them spiritually, to help them grow as I've helped you to grow."

So Jesus brings together these two things -- Peter's failure and his calling. He lets Peter know that the Master is aware that His leading disciple has denied Him three times, but He also lets him know that his failure does not disqualify him from serving Jesus as a significant leader among his brothers and sisters.

Sometimes in the history of the church we have gotten to step one which is to tell people that they've blown it and that they need to change, to repent, to seek forgiveness. And when they respond well and show an eagerness to learn and grow, we're happy and grateful for the changes we've seen. But we don't find it easy to forget the failures and we may keep those things in the back of our minds as part of the way we see their Christian lives unfolding. But do we go to the place Jesus went with Peter and say, "There's a place of significant ministry for you within the Kingdom of God. Take care of people. Help them to grow in their faith. Encourage them, build them up, make a difference in their lives"?

I came across a story this week that spoke to me about the power of encouragement, about letting someone else know that you are believing great things for them. In 2009, Adam Scott's golfing career was at its all-time low. After the U.S. Open tournament in 2008 he had been ranked the number 3 golfer in the world and now he'd fallen to 53rd. He had missed the cut in 10 of his last 14 events, which means he didn't get to play on the weekend for a paycheck. In the major events, and there are four each year, he had missed the cut in four of the last five. He had broken up with a long-time girl friend and had made some dubious business decisions, like buying a Gulfstream G450 jet, which means he needed to play good golf in order to keep that from being grounded. But his golf game had gone into a nosedive.

Still, a couple of people believed in him. When it came time to choose the international team that would play against the American team in a competition called

the Presidents Cup, captain Greg Norman chose Scott. He came under intense criticism for choosing the underachieving Scott, but he had a plan. Nobody was eager to be paired with this talented but struggling golfer, as those who played with him seemed to be infected by the same struggles he was having. But Norman thought that being partnered with an older, calmer golf veteran from Argentina, Angel Cabrera, who had won the Masters that year, would help to settle him down and find his game again. During the Presidents Cup, Cabrera took Scott aside and said to him, "You're a great, great player."

Whether coincidence or not, Scott's career started an upturn during the next year. He only missed one cut at a major in 2010, finished in the top ten at two majors in the next year and last year came within a stroke of winning the Open Championship in Great Britain.

Last Sunday he made a long putt for birdie on the 18th hole to take a one-stroke lead in the Masters. Who was coming up behind him but Angel Cabrera who also birdied to tie for the lead and force a playoff. On the second extra hole, after the golfers had hit their second shots onto the green, Angel looked over at Adam from under his umbrella and gave him the thumbs up -- and Scott returned the gesture. A few minutes later, Adam Scott was the Masters champion for 2013. As he embraced Cabrera after his winning putt, the microphones picked up Scott's voice asking Cabrera if he remembered in San Francisco telling him that he was a great player and then told him how much that had meant to him. Cabrera responded by saying how happy he was for Adam and how much he had deserved this victory.

Empowerment comes to people when others believe good things about you. When you speak words of life and hope into the lives of those around you. Jesus' words to Peter drew him back to the core of his feelings about the Master: "Do you love Me, Simon?" And when Peter was brought back to that place, the place where he could simply affirm that he did love Jesus, despite all his failure and weakness in the past, then the words of empowerment and challenge came to him: "Feed My lambs, take care of My sheep." Jesus didn't put a whole bunch of conditions on Peter, tell him he was on probation until he could prove his loyalty. He just asked him three times if he loved his Lord -- that's all He wanted to hear.

Then Jesus spoke some words that would challenge Peter further:

"The truth is, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked and go wherever you wanted to. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and others will direct you and take you where you don't want to go." Jesus said this to let him know what kind of death he would die to glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me." Peter turned around and saw the disciple Jesus loved (John) following them -- the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, "Lord, who among us will betray you?" Peter asked Jesus, "What about him, Lord?"

The key phrase in that entire passage is made up of two short words, "Follow Me."

Jesus has told Peter that he would follow Him in the manner of his death, that others would lead him where he did not want to go. In this he would, ultimately, follow Jesus in the way the Master had given His life.

Then Peter looks around and sees John coming behind them and he asks, "What's going to happen to him?" He had just heard Jesus say that he was going to be martyred and so his thought is on their fate as disciples of Christ - "what's going to happen to John?" And Jesus says, "Don't you worry about John -- you follow Me." That's a paraphrase, I know, but that's the heart of Jesus' message to Peter here -- "Don't you trouble yourself about someone else's story. Just focus on being My disciple, on following Me where I lead you and on fulfilling the purposes that I have for you."

When it comes to applications, it seems that that's a good place to start. It's very easy for us to get distracted by the struggles that others are going through. We can become judgmental, impatient, angry or offended. Or we may just be curious about how God is going to handle their situation. Or sometimes we may find ourselves feeling a bit envious of others who *seem* to be having a much easier time than we are of coping with life. We may be tempted to ask, "But what about that person, Lord? Why is she able to gain favour in this area and I haven't been able? Why does he seem so carefree and my life is a daily struggle?" And Jesus' answer to all of those kinds of questions is, "You follow Me. If I want that person to live until I come again, that shouldn't make any difference to you at all -- just keep following, keep your eyes on your Saviour, your Leader, and walk where He leads you." Like Aslan in the Narnia tales, whenever the children ask, "But what about ...?" and He just says, "That's not for you to know, not your story, I can't tell you that."

The primary lesson from this story is the power of belief, of trusting what God can do in a person's life more than the simple evidence of where he or she may be "at" right now. When we see people in terms of their potential, in terms of an undeveloped strength or ability, we can speak words of hope and affirmation and faith that will encourage and build that individual's capacity to pursue areas of ministry that reflect that strength. Jesus wasn't going to waste much time on telling Peter what he'd done wrong -- and most folks in the church are more aware of their weaknesses than they are of their strengths -- so He spoke words of commissioning, of challenge, of purpose. "Feed My lambs, take care of people, nurture and love the body of Christ."

We need to take up the challenge, both of fulfilling those roles of being builders in the body of Christ and of helping others to see their potential to be builders as well. If each one of us grabs hold of a vision for the things we can do and be to one another, then the church becomes more vibrant and alive, more likely to grow and more likely to demonstrate the power of the resurrected Jesus living among us. So look for things to encourage, to nurture and to bless and then be intentional about building up the body of Christ for the glory of God -- and watch what He does.