

Sermon AMC- Do you love me

Scripture: John 21: 15-23

Sunday, May 17, 2015

We are coming to the end of a series of sermons I have preached on Jesus' earthly ministry that happened between this Resurrection and Ascension. Last Sunday we looked at the fishing miracle that Jesus performed on the Sea of Galilee at the close of Jesus' ministry with his disciples, and we compared it with the first fishing miracle he performed at the same place when he first called the disciples. Jesus was using this powerful image of a miraculous and abundant catch of fish to indicate to them the kind of miraculous impact they were going to have on people as fishers of men. I will be uploading the sermons of the last few weeks on our website so if you missed any of the sermons you can catch up on in. But before the disciples were ready to go do their thing there was some unfinished business with Peter that Jesus needed to take care of and that is what we are going to focus on today.

Remember Peter, the disciple who always was the first one to respond to Jesus or the first one to put his foot in his mouth whichever way you want to look at it? Not too long ago when Jesus was arrested and taken to the High priest's house, in spite of all Peter's grand promises of never deserting Jesus, he denies that he even knew Jesus three times that very night. Peter's denial if not dealt with would go on to pose a serious problem for the early church. Let me explain. You see by the time of the writing of John's Gospel which is around 90 AD, the early church was undergoing a tremendous amount of persecution. The choice placed before the early Christ followers was to say Caesar is Lord and deny Jesus or face extreme torture and death. To give you an example of what torture looked like at the time, listen to this. In those days, the main source of entertainment for the Romans were gladiator fights, where people would fight each other or wild animals in huge arenas till someone died. In those days Christians were being dipped in boiling tar, set on fire and placed as human torches for the flood lighting of the arenas. Now you can imagine that some believers whose faith was not of the level where they could handle such torture would have denied Jesus. Many of these believers even though they denied Jesus would regret their decision and want to come back to the church. So the church in those days had to figure out what it would do to reinstate such a believer. Some churches would draw a very hard line and say you cannot come back. Others were willing to bring these deniers back quite easily. So the church needed to be given some guidance about how to test and handle these deniers in an appropriate manner. At this time, the disciple who lived the longest, as he sees the problems that the church all around him are facing remembers this incident on the

shores of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus deals with this exact problem and so he introduces it in the Epilogue to his Gospel.

To look at how Jesus handles the problem of Peter's denial we have zoom back into this breakfast of fish and bread on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is there with breakfast ready and his disciples and making their way to where Jesus has set up breakfast. The first thing to note is that as these men gather Jesus is very mindful that they are very tired and hungry, having worked hard all night. And so even though he has an important task ahead he lets everything wait while he first serves them a very good breakfast. Then he lets them eat in silence. You see even in Jesus' silence you can literally hear his love and concern for his disciples.... But there is one not so prominent detail about this breakfast that hints at what Jesus is about to do. You see this breakfast that Jesus has prepared is sitting on a charcoal fire. If you recall the traumatic events in the run up to his crucifixion you might remember that Peter was by a charcoal fire just like this, at the home of the High priest when he denied Jesus.

After they had finished eating Jesus turns to Peter and asks him a very uncomfortable question. "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me, more than these?" You can imagine what a loaded question this is. Do you love me more than everybody else? Wow Jesus. Coming from anyone else it would have a different ring to it, but coming from Jesus this question has a completely different meaning. Scholars have debated what Jesus might have meant when he said "more than these". Some people have noted that it would be very awkward to ask Peter to answer if he loved Jesus more than the other disciples who were sitting there with him. So they suggest that perhaps Jesus was asking Peter if he loved Jesus more than his profession or more than the things of this world. But when you look at the details in Peter's denial of Jesus in Matt 26:33 you find that there Peter is making a very strong claim to Jesus in front of all the other disciples, saying, "even if everyone deserts you, I will not desert you". Clearly, Jesus wanted to give Peter an opportunity to address the full scope of his own words in front of the same group. Of course Peter in his usual spontaneous way replies "Lord, you know that I love you". To that now Jesus replies with a commission, "then feed my lambs". But Jesus is not done. Now Jesus repeats the same question a second time, now dropping the "more than these" asking the more basic question, "Simon, son of John do you love me?" This second question you see turns up the heat on Peter because in the first question Jesus was just grading on a curve. You know he was saying Peter how does you love compare to others in the class. When you grade on a curve, someone will get an A and everyone else will be compared to the A student. So in the second question by dropping the "more than these", Jesus is asking Peter if he loved him at all. If you though the first

question was difficult, the second gets even more difficult. However Peter respectfully answers in the same way as earlier saying, "Lord you know I love you". Jesus responds by reiterating the commission he was giving him to feed my sheep. Then Jesus turns to Peter and puts the same question to him a third time. At this point Peter must have been feeling the heat like the roasted fish on coals that he just ate. You see on the third attempt Jesus was probing and challenging Peter to look deep within himself and address Jesus' question in a way he had not addressed the first two times. Jesus was in a way forcing a spontaneous person into introspection.

At this point Peter feels hurt that Jesus is asking him this question the third time. But at the same time it takes Jesus' third question to fully trigger memories of Peter's own triple denial. At this time Peter's sin is being fully exposed. Simultaneously, God's grace is also acting in Peter enabling him to respond the way he does. So this time, even though he was hurt, Peter appeals to same power of omniscience that Jesus used to predict his triple denial saying, "Lord, you know everything". "And if you know everything, surely you should know this one fact about me, that I really do love you". Now it is true that Peter does love Jesus and Jesus sees it. He then once again commissions Peter to feed his sheep. Three times Peter had denied him, but even though Peter felt hurt, Jesus gives Peter an opportunity to affirm his love for Jesus three times in front of all the other disciples. And three times Jesus reiterates his new commission to Peter to feed his flock. This is a tremendous act of grace on God's part. You see in Psalm 103 the Psalmist says that God remembers that we are made of nothing grander than dust. God remembers our weakness. But God is also compassionate and full of love and so he takes great pains to absorb human sin for those who are willing to turn it into him and receive a new start from God himself. This is exactly what Jesus does for Peter. Jesus forgives Peter of his past sins and once again makes him part of his incredible plan of not just fishing for people but feeding them spiritual food once they are in. We have to also note something of great importance.

Even though Jesus was commissioning Peter, the primary purpose of the commission was not to honor Peter although there is great honor in serving Jesus, but to give him a special responsibility of serving Jesus' flock. There is one more thing we need to deal with though in this text. You see if Jesus had simply reinstated Peter, given him responsibilities and left it at that, it would have been just fine. But this is Jesus we are talking about and with Jesus we don't get to decide what is just fine and what is not. And Jesus has one more prophesy for Peter. So immediately after Peter is re-commissioned, Jesus makes this statement to him, "I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands,

and others^[1] will dress you and take you where you don't want to go." If this language is too coded for you then the Gospel writer explains it in the next verse saying Jesus was explaining to Peter by what manner of death Peter was going to die. Well, from what we know about crucifixion in those days scholars would all agree that what Jesus was prophesying was Peter's crucifixion. The person being crucified was stripped of all their clothing, a loin cloth was placed on them. Then their hands would be stretched and tied to the heavy horizontal beam of the cross and they would have to walk to the crucifixion site dragged by the guards carrying the beam on their shoulders. This would have been quite clear to understand for Peter and the other disciples. And it did not look pretty for Peter. Now you must be thinking, could Jesus have not stopped at reinstating Peter. Did he have to go the next step and put crucifixion in Peter's job requirements? To answer this question we have to go back to Matt 26 where Peter made his very bombastic promises and would soon be broken. You see, at that time when Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times before the cock crows, Peter had insisted saying that even if he has to die with Jesus, he would never deny him. Now you see at that time Jesus does not respond to Peter's promise because he had his own crucifixion on his mind. Now after reinstating Peter, Jesus had a second reinstatement in mind for Peter. And this is exactly what he does. He tells Peter, as part of the deal in the reinstatement, he would give Peter the privilege of dying for Jesus as well and not just dying but dying the way Jesus died. This is an honor as great as the physical pain involved. What Jesus is doing here is reaching back in time and allowing even Peter's previously uttered words to have a truth and value to them beyond what Peter could have imagined himself. With this declaration Peter here experiences two reinstatements. In the first reinstatement Jesus is pronouncing value to Peter's future words. The old Peter's words could not even last 24 hours, the new Peter's words would now become the spiritual nourishment of Jesus' flock. In the second reinstatement, Jesus is pronouncing value to Peter's past words. He may not have fully meant it then but even his past promises made in haste Jesus would make true. What Jesus did there is simply amazing.

So how do you think Peter would have reacted to such an honor? Well, all I can say is Peter can't seem to catch a break in this portrayal of him. Because the moment Jesus tells Peter, that Jesus would indeed give him the honor of dying like Jesus himself, Peter immediately turns around and looking at the beloved disciple, asks Jesus, "now what about him?" In other words Peter is asking Jesus, "now how is your beloved disciple going to die? What about him?" To that Jesus simply tells Peter, "if I want to keep him alive till I return what is that to you. What I have in store for some other disciple is none of your business, Peter. It is human nature to compare ourselves to others on every

front. We want to compare our giftedness, we want to compare ministry, we want to compare looks we want to compare life situations, we as human beings are constantly comparing ourselves with everyone else. Jesus is saying in this passage, the deck of cards your neighbor or colleague is dealt is none of your business. Your business is one thing and one thing only. To follow Jesus.

So Jesus is engaging us today in the same way he engaged Peter. He is asking you the most important question you will ever be asked in your life, do you love Jesus. And if you answer yes to that question he will be sure to ask you the follow-up question, really, do you really love Jesus? Now if you absolutely love Jesus, then he can really use you in an amazing way that will bring glory to him. He will redeem your past and bless your future. And while you are at it, don't worry about what is going to happen to the person sitting next to you. Your job is to follow Jesus without looking to the left or the right. May we as a church be single minded followers of Jesus, remembering that the way Jesus walked was full of challenges, yet it was a glorious road in the end. Let us pray.