

DNA of Discipleship: Learning to Love

Scripture: John 21: 15-17

Sunday, March 21, 2021

Last week we looked at the miraculous catch of fish. We saw that there were two elements to the miracle, one was the disciples working all night doing very thing they knew how to do, and we also saw Jesus coming into that scene and giving them instructions, the disciples obeying and a miraculous catch as a result. Jesus then cooks and feeds them breakfast making sure to include the disciples catch as well. We learned the importance of obeying and are assured that God takes pride in the fruit that we help produce. We also learned that Jesus has also made provision for our tiredness from our labors for him. But once the disciples were rested and well fed, there were some things that Jesus wanted to discuss with two of his disciples, one at a time. First he needed to deal with Peter and that is what we are going to focus on today.

First, we will walk through the narrative to make sure we have it pictured well in our minds eye. Jesus opens the conversation by asking Peter an interesting question, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” If you are wondering what the word “these” was referring to we know that it is was not a reference to the fishing profession because when he was called 3 and a half years ago, Peter dropped his nets and follow Jesus in a flash. We know “these” was not a reference to people in general because the average person who followed Jesus when he had large crowds at the peak on Palm Sunday deserted Jesus very quickly in the days following so they were not any measure to hold up to Peter. So “these” could only meaningfully be the other six disciples sitting right there with them. To that question, Peter blurts out with his

characteristic enthusiasm, “yes, Lord, you know I love you”. When Jesus hears that he calmly asks, “feed my lambs”.

Then Jesus repeats the question, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”. “Yes Lord, you know I love you”, “then take care of my sheep” Jesus says.

A third time Jesus asks him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”. At that point, Peter breaks emotionally. We are told that Peter was hurt by that question. And he says, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you”. Once again Jesus says to him, “Feed my sheep”.

Ok, that is the conversation we are going to focus on. Few things to get out of the way. First, I used to think that the focus of this passage was on building up from a regular common love, to a progressively higher kind of love to finally get to the highest kind of love like agape or godly love. But the problem is, of the four kinds of love used in the Greek language only two kinds, phileo and agape are used in the New Testament, and to make matters worse these two words phileo and agape are used interchangeable. The final nail in the coffin is that Jesus would have had this conversation with his disciples not in Greek but in Aramaic. So discussing which Greek word for love was used in each of the three questions is completely irrelevant. There is another unhelpful interpretation of these verses that points to Jesus giving Peter a special authority that was used by the catholic church to justify the papacy. The problem with that view is that Raymond Brown, one of the most well-known Catholic scholars who served on the theological advisory council to the Pope himself has said that these verse don't indicate that Peter was given any special authority over the other disciples and neither is there any indication of the doctrine of “infallibility” present here, both of which are crucial aspects of the Papacy. Anyway, that is simply saying, these are ways to not interpret this conversation.

So the question we are considering is, what exactly is Jesus doing here with Peter and what does it teach us? Ok so lets get to the meat. What we do know is that Jesus is using this opportunity to restore Peter from his earlier three denials. But how he does it is of special significance and that is what we want to pay attention to. There are three aspects to this restoration of Peter. Let me go through these with you carefully.

The first aspect of the restoration is redefining a very powerful image associated with Peter's denial. You see the denial occurred in front of a charcoal fire in Pilot's courtyard. The first thing that Jesus wanted to do was break this powerful image in Peter's mind of his charcoal fire denial. Now Jesus did not have to literally take Peter to the courtyard of Pilots home for this. What Jesus did was really ingenious. He simply recreates a charcoal fire similar to the one in Pilot's courtyard. Then Jesus set's up shop around this fire and asks Peter a question three times. So while Peter denied Jesus three times, now Peter is able to declare his love for Jesus three times with the other disciples watching. So the charcoal fire is no more associated with Peter's denial now, but rather it is now more powerfully associated with Peter's declarations of his love for Jesus.

The second aspect to this restoration process was to bring Peter to face himself by questioning Peter's love three times. Let me explain this a little more. You see, when Jesus asks Peter the first time, do you love me more than these, it is a trick question that no one can really answer. How can anyone answer how their love for Jesus compares with someone elses? The only way to answer such a question is to admit your ignorance of where you stand with respect to any other disciple but declare your own desire to love Jesus as best as you can. But Jesus poses this question, not to trick Peter but to open Peter's eyes because before Peter denied Jesus he had declared according to Matthew's Gospel 26:22, "***even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you***". Such a declaration was naïve on Peter's part when he first made it because he was presuming he knew how he would act in comparison to others. So the first time Jesus

asks the question, he asks about Peter's love for him in comparison to the others to see if Peter had learnt any lessons. Now Peter as soon as he hears the question is quick to say, "Yes" without it seems much thought to what he is saying yes to. Now Jesus knows that commitments made without thinking are also commitments that are broken without much thinking. But Jesus also being patient and gracious, receives this answer, gives Peter his assignment and presumably after taking a pause presents Peter with the same question, this time dropping the comparative part. If Peter missed it the first time, he may have figured out his mistake when he heard the question posed to him again with this slight adjustment. Again he answers, "Yes, Lord you know that I love you".

I believe there had to be a pause here again although the Gospel does not mention it. And then Jesus asks the question to Peter again. That would have been tough for Peter to hear. Because now it becomes clear to Peter that while he is quick to give his responses to Jesus, what Jesus is really interested in is not hastily blurted commitments. What Jesus is really after is deeply though through and wrestled with commitments. Commitments which are made keeping the price of those commitments in mind. Because if you don't then when the going gets tough the one who made this love commitment will suddenly feel that this was a situation they are in is not what they anticipated and it is not worth the commitment they made and decide to bail out. This is exactly what Peter had done and if Peter was going to be restored, Jesus wanted to make sure that Peter even with his hasty personality knew that he had to think three times about a situation before he jumped into something. At the same time, it is painful when your weakness is exposed. That is why the Gospel says Peter was hurt because Jesus had exposed his weakness. But the question was, was Peter going to love Jesus in spite of his tendency to make hasty and weak commitments exposed? Well, even though Peter was hurt, he still said yes to Jesus. Not with the hasty "yes Lords" of the first two rounds but with a more deliberate and broken plea of a response, "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you".

This is Peter undone. This is a response in which even though he is speaking about his personal commitment, he is relying not on himself but Jesus. Because that sentence says more about Jesus than about himself. “Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.” In that sentence there are three “yous” to his one “I”. It is a declaration of Peter’s love but it is a declaration that is propped up by the Lordship of what Jesus and what He knows. And as far as the “I” in that statement goes, Peter has come to face himself and realizes his weakness. Because Jesus helped Peter face himself, and have a deeper understanding of who Jesus was, He helped Peter make his love declarations to have real value.

There is a third aspect of these conversations that we have not talked about so far. Every time Peter made his love declarations, Jesus would always respond with the phrase, “feed my sheep” or “feed my lambs”. You see for an “I love you” statement to carry its full weight, we also have to account for the word in the center of that phrase, “love”. For Peter’s love for Jesus to mean something, it is also important that Peter knows, when he is committing to love Jesus, what does that actually mean? When it comes to Peter, it means that loving Jesus means, feeding Jesus’ flock. To love someone is to commit to doing what benefits and blesses them. For Peter’s love declaration to mean anything, he has to be obedient to what he is being called to do. It is understandable that Peter may have not known what was expected of him when he first told Jesus he loved him. But Jesus made it so clear to Peter and after the third time, there was no ambiguity about it. Jesus was calling Peter to a Pastoral call. So as Peter was repeating his declarations of love to Jesus, Jesus was making it clear what loving Jesus should look like for Peter.

So Jesus restored Peter by doing three things for him. He redefined the associations of the charcoal pit for Peter. So now instead of having a strong negative association to Peter, the pit now was given an even stronger positive association as the location where

Peter was given his divine calling. The second thing that Jesus did for Peter was he enabled him to face his own weakness. When he has a deeper insight into himself, it means more when he says, I love you to Jesus. Finally we looked at the middle word in Peter's "I love you" declaration to Jesus. For Peter to love Jesus, he was told, he would have to "feed Jesus' flock".

While Peter made the declaration, Jesus gave all three words in his declaration real meaning. In other words, Jesus, taught Peter how to really love in that after breakfast conversation.

So you must be wondering, how does this interaction Jesus had with Peter apply to your life?

Well, the first thing to know is anything you have done in the past however terrible is not a disqualification. Jesus can redeem the worst of your actions and your worst memories by rewiring them all into new positive associations. The biggest example is the cross itself, the most negative of images has been transformed into the most powerfully positive one. So you don't have to be stuck in the past or be stuck in the pit because Jesus can change your charcoal pit of denial into the charcoal pit of your restoration.

The second thing to remember is that before we can account for how much we love Jesus, we have to face our weaknesses. If you don't know yourself, no commitment you make has meaning. But remember Jesus will help us face ourselves and he will be with us and we do it so don't be worried about anything.

Thirdly, when you say you love Jesus, do you know what it actually means to you individually? Church people are quick to say that we love Jesus and we sing about our love for Jesus effortlessly. But for it to mean something we need to hear what Jesus' call on your life is. Each of us have our own unique calling. And we need to be clear about it

because without that we might be doing one thing when Jesus wants us to do something else. And if we are not doing what we are called to do Jesus is not going to feel loved by your actions.

So remember this friends. It is never too late for Jesus to come into your life and restore or renew you. But to be restored we need to face ourselves and have clarity on what Jesus Christ is calling us to do.

I pray that each of us will have our own charcoal pit moments with Jesus as he restores us and helps us to face ourselves and whispers his call into our ears. Then we too can say, Lord you know everything. You know I love you. And Jesus will say, yes I know. Let us pray.