

DO YOU LOVE ME?

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Central United Methodist Church

April 18, 2010

(John 21:1-19) After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. {2} Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. {3} Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. {4} Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. {5} Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." {6} He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. {7} That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. {8} But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. {9} When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. {10} Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." {11} So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. {12} Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. {13} Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. {14} This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. {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."

REVELATION

Flannery O'Conner finished her final book in 1964. She died soon afterwards, losing her battle with Lupus. In 1965, her short story collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, was published.

In one of the short stories entitled, ***“Revelation,”*** Mrs. Turpin is a mean spirited, self-righteous Christian woman who despises anyone who is different from herself. She hates blacks and uses an ugly name when referring to them. White trash and the physically impaired are referred to as ***“freaks”*** and the mentally challenged are called ***“lunatics.”***

One day while standing in front of the pigpen in her backyard, she has a vision—the ***“revelation.”*** From the ground, a brilliant, swinging, fiery bridge appears. The bridge runs from earth to heaven. O’Conner writes that on the bridge

... a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and battalions of black niggers in white robes and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs, and finally a whole tribe of people just like herself marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.¹

We live in a world where people who don’t think or act as we do are demonized. We are kin to Mrs. Turpin. We think God has set up a list of particularities that must be met in order to be acceptable in his sight. Like Mrs. Turpin, we forget that we are all God’s children. As she witnesses in her ***“Revelation,”*** God will ultimately strip of all bare and accept us into his loving arms. I cannot help but think of Jesus’ words, ***“... the last will be first and the first we be last”*** (my paraphrase).

¹Flannery O’Conner, *The Complete Stores* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1971), 42-54.

GUILT: IMAGINED AND REAL

We also live in a world, as Jesuit Bernard Bush notes, where . . . *“we punish ourselves mercilessly for real or imagined sins . . .”* We forget how much God really loves us and loves those whom we despise. Bush goes on to say,

It takes a profound conversion to accept the belief that God is tender and loves us just as we are, not in spite of our sins and faults, but with them. God does not condone or sanction evil in us. The key to this understanding is the way we feel about ourselves. We cannot even stand or accept love from another human being when we do not love ourselves, much less believe or accept that God could possibly love us.²

I would suggest this morning that the most important question Jesus ever asked was reserved for his friend Peter. Three times he asks, *“Do you love me.”* Three times Peter responds affirmatively as if to wipe away his three denials before Jesus’ death. It’s Jesus cathartic repetition of the question that allows Peter to come back to himself and assume leadership in the young Jesus movement.

This story is incredible to me because Jesus comes back to Peter and invites him to the table of fellowship through a meal on the beach. Jesus’ last act with his disciples was the last supper. His first act after resurrection is a meal. Peter and the disciples are still his friends in spite of their human fear and cowardice.

Like Peter, we might have to deal with our own burden of unhealthy guilt before we can be a servant and leader in the community of faith. We may need to come to the table of fellowship and admit our shortcoming and ask for forgiveness. Know this, God forgives and he loves not matter what. Peter discovered grace on the beach eating fish

²Bernard Bush, *“Coping with God”* (Whitinsville, MA: Affirmations Books, 1976), 28.

and bread with Jesus. We discover grace when we forgive ourselves, love ourselves and love others as Jesus commanded.

When the giant of the Christian faith and founder of our denomination, John Wesley, returned to England after judging himself a failure as a missionary in America, he went back to a ministry of visiting prisoners. During this time, Wesley sought spiritual counsel from the Moravian, Peter Bohlar. Peter urged Wesley to go further with the prisoners than just giving them a visit. He encouraged Wesley to share the story of the love and forgiveness of Christ. Even Though Wesley was uncomfortable offering the new life in Christ to someone who had lived all his life in rebellion against God, he followed Peter Bohlar's advice the next time he visited the prison. As he talked with a prisoner named Clifford, he was amazed at how eagerly he responded to the story of Jesus and his forgiveness.

Though his prisoner ministry and spiritual coaching Wesley came to realize that he was loved completely no matter how badly he failed in America. It's not what we do that causes God to love us, it's who we are and we are all God's children.

I love the words of John O'Grady. He writes,

The savior knows that we have failures, even when we have committed ourselves to him. The savior redeems us from all personal failure by telling his followers that in spite of our sin we have value in the eyes of God the Father. A new possibility exists. We can be more than we are at any one moment, we can always bring some sense of goodness to the fore and come closer to living the way that will bring us peace. Even in the midst of personal failure the one who had been saved knows that he or she is still precious in the eyes of God, of Jesus and of his holy community. The one who has been saved knows no sense of isolation. Jesus is the friend who will never fail, the faithful one

*who will never be lacking in fidelity, even when people are unfaithful to him.*³

TEND AND FEED MY SHEEP

Jesus was a master at human understanding. The mastery of his love, in my opinion, reached its zenith on the shores of Galilee. Only the risen Christ could bring Peter back from the depths of his hurt, guilt and self-hatred. Jesus knew that there was no treachery in Peter's denial. It was just a temporary loss of nerve. It was like a Marine in the midst of battle for the first time not wanting to die. Peter's denial was about self-preservation not betrayal. Biblical Scholar George Montague puts it this way,

*God, I don't even know how to be a fisher of men, now you want me to be a shepherd. I don't even know how to fish, Lord, without you, how am I going to shepherd these people? I don't know how. Jesus didn't say anything more, what he said was enough. Do you love me? Can you allow my love to touch you in your weakness, and set you free there, and empower you? So that when Peter went out from then on empowered by Jesus, the only power he had was Jesus' love for him and his love for the Lord. That's the only power that he had, Jesus wanted to strip him even of his power to fish, and any of his other self-confidences except that God is love and God's power has been given to me in my weakness. Peter told and retold the story of his own weakness and how the Lord touched him. When Peter preached, he preached from his weakness the power of God. And that is what converted the Roman world and what will convert us, and the people around us if they see that the power of God has touched us.*⁴

³John F. O'Grady, *Models of Jesus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 146-147.

⁴Brennan Manning, *A Glimpse of Jesus: The Stranger to Self-Hatred* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2003), 38-39. George Montague from a conference on healing, Notre Dame, IN, May 1981.

What Peter finally understood is what you and I need to understand: It is only when we gain a healthy perspective on life—on ourselves and on those around us—that we can sincerely respond to Jesus’ call. For Peter it was “*tend*” and “*feed my sheep.*” Most importantly, it was “*follow me.*” Being loved by Jesus and knowing it means you and I can

- Love our neighbor
- Turn the other cheek
- Forgive our brother and sister when they sin against us
- Reach out to those who are different our
- Help the sick, wounded and lonely
- Share our blessings

There is a legend about the king who decided to set aside a special day to honor his greatest subject. When the big day arrived, there was a large gathering in the palace courtyard. Four finalists were brought forward, and from these four, the king would select a winner.

The first person presented was a wealthy philanthropist. The king was told that this man was highly deserving of the honor because of his humanitarian efforts. He had given much of his wealth to the poor.

The second person was a celebrated physician. The king was told that this doctor was highly deserving of the honor because he had rendered faithful and dedicated service to the sick for many years.

The third person was a distinguished judge. The king was told that the judge was worthy because he was noted for his wisdom, his fairness, and his brilliant decisions.

The fourth person presented was an elderly woman. Everyone was quite surprised to see her there, because her manner was quite humble, as was her dress. She hardly looked the part of someone who would be honored

as the greatest subject in the kingdom. What chance could she possibly have, when compared to the other three, who had accomplished so much? Even so, there was something about her—the look of love in her face, the understanding in her eyes, her quiet confidence.

The King was intrigued, to say the least, and somewhat puzzled by her presence. He asked who she was. The answer came: ***“You see the philanthropist, the doctor, and the judge? This woman was their teacher!”***

The woman had no fortune or title, but she had unselfishly given her life to produce great people. She did it with patience and love. Jesus asks each of us, ***“Do you love me?”*** What is your response?