



“DO YOU LOVE ME?”

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John 21:15-23

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On the day that we commission the Romania ministry team it seems appropriate that I should share with you, from chapter 21 of the gospel of John, a story that had a big impact on my life two years ago when I traveled to Romania with a team from PBCC. Through my experience there and my interaction with this text, God changed me and my understanding of ministry.

The apostle Peter is my favorite character in the Bible. I can't decide whether it's because I have so much in common with him or that I have nothing in common with him at all. It is Peter's pragmatism and everydayness that draws me to him. In our story in John 21, Jesus confronts Peter with his denial of him, and then recommissions him to the ministry in very much the same way he called Peter to follow him in the first place. Here Jesus defines for Peter and for us what it means to follow him, and how he wants Peter's ministry and our ministries to unfold.

At the time of our last trip to Romania, in August of 1996, I had completed two of my three years of pastoral training at Regent College. Like Peter, I was headed for full-time vocational ministry. Our Lord used both this story and my experience in Romania to shape my life and understanding of ministry in ways I had never imagined. In fact, as I was getting ready to graduate last June, a friend of mine (who happens to be named Peter) told me he had noticed a definite change in me after I returned from Romania.

But I want to make one thing clear this morning, and that is that this story is applicable and pertinent to all of us. It is not directed merely to those considering ministry as a vocation. One of the hallmarks of PBC is that ministry is for all the saints. As we look at Jesus' commissioning of Peter into ministry in John 21, we dare not withdraw from the story, thinking, "This isn't for me. I'm not a minister." We all are called to ministry, whether it's to our children, spouses or colleagues. Our history here at PBC should convince us that each of us has a vital role to play in the body of Christ, and that role is our ministry.

The Setting of John 21

Before we move into the heart of this story we need to first know its setting.

Post-Denial: The events of our story take place following the most significant occurrence in Peter's life: his denial of Jesus on the night of Jesus' trial. It wasn't enough that Peter denied Christ, he did so on the same

night he boasted three times that he would die for Christ; and he denied any relationship with Jesus when confronted by a powerless servant girl.

Post-Resurrection: The events of our story take place after the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter and his disciples. The pain and loss of the cross had been replaced with the victory of resurrection for most of the disciples. Life for them during this period surely wasn't ordinary, but it wasn't despairing, either.

Peter's Identity Crisis: Peter is confused and hurt and at a loss for what to do next. What was going through his mind? Christ was alive, but he had denied him. Did Jesus still want to use him as an apostle after he had failed him so miserably?

In verse 3, we learn that Peter takes a number of disciples and returns to his occupation of fishing. He abandons Jesus' call to be a fisher of men, which came at this very same place, and returns to a life of fishing for mere fish. It seems that everything that Peter and Jesus have experienced together, all their joys and hardships, their moments of victory and defeat, have been counted as loss by Peter because of his denial. His actions suggest that the only option he had was to return to his former life. Thinking he had lost all that he had spent the last three years doing with Jesus, he goes back to fishing.

In verses 4-14 of John 21, Jesus recreates many of the significant events of their previous three years together. I like to call these *déjà vu* events, since they are so similar to what happened earlier that Peter could not help but recall what Jesus and he had experienced together:

The story takes place on the Sea of Galilee, where Peter first met Jesus; where he walked on the water with Jesus; where he saw Jesus cast out demons, heal the bleeding woman, and Jarius' daughter, and feed five thousand.

In vv. 4-6, Jesus provides a miraculous catch of fish, when they could catch none, just like at Peter's calling, in Luke 5.

In v. 7, Peter jumps into the sea to greet Jesus when he discovers who he was, just like when Peter walked on the sea, in Matt. 14.

Finally, in vv. 9-14, there was a meal together, made on burning coals, with fish and bread: the fish and bread—like the feeding of the five thousand; the smoldering fire—like the fire at the denial; the meal together—like the last supper together.

Jesus not only entered into Peter's world, he recreated it. It was essential that Peter recall his relationship with Jesus and what they had been through together, because Jesus was about to do something very difficult for Peter: He would make him relive his failure, his denial.

The Story

Let's read the story. John 21:15-17:

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." (NIV)

The first thing to notice about this story is that the same question and answer are asked and given three times. The significance of the conversation doesn't lie in the different uses of the Greek words for love, but, rather, the three-fold repetition of the question, "Do you love me?" By asking Peter three times, Jesus is alluding to Peter's three denials. Peter had assured him (Mark 14) that he would never leave him and that he was willing to die for him. It was Peter's confidence and arrogance that eventually led to his denial of Jesus. The denial is an aspect of this story, and Jesus' questions and references to it cannot be overlooked, but it is not the central aspect. The central aspect is, does Peter love Jesus? And on whose terms does he love him? He claimed to love him more than the rest of the disciples, which is why we have the phrase "more than these" (v. 15). In light of Peter's failure and denial, in light of their entire history together, all that matters to Jesus is that Peter loves him.

What a marvelous picture of God's goodness and grace! The only qualification that Jesus placed on Peter was love for him. Jesus didn't want to know if Peter was committed. He didn't want an assurance that Peter would not deny him again. He simply wanted to know if Peter loved him. The criterion for entering into ministry for Peter was nothing more than his love of Jesus. Peter did not have to have a gift of teaching. He didn't need to have sharpened his Greek and theology in a seminary, or exhibit a new-found faithfulness that allowed him to identify with Jesus through thick and thin. No. Jesus' only concern for Peter was whether he was filled with and dominated by a deep, sacrificial and selfless love that led him to service.

Jesus' questioning of Peter's love for him is not left without an associated command. Jesus instructs Peter three times to feed and care for his sheep. Having estab-

lished that Peter truly did love him, Jesus commissioned him to express that love by shepherding his sheep. Jesus was including Peter in the long, biblical tradition of shepherding, a tradition that included Moses, who encountered God at the burning bush in the desert at a time when he was shepherding sheep; and David, who developed the deep spirituality that we see in Psalms while shepherding his father's sheep as a youth; and God himself, whom David described in the twenty-third Psalm as "My shepherd"; and Jesus who called himself the Great Shepherd who was willing to lay down his life for his sheep (John 10). Peter was included in this biblical tradition, where the concern of the Shepherd is to care for, feed, nourish and protect his sheep.

Having established that Peter loved him, Jesus qualifies what that love looks like, in three ways. This is the first. The only qualification Jesus has for Peter's ministry is a love for him; but for Peter, the implication was that his love for Jesus was to manifest itself in his shepherding God's sheep.

We have seen the beginning of Peter's recommissioning here, but how does this apply to us? In 1 Peter 5:2, the apostle charged the church of Asia Minor to "be shepherds of God's flock that is among you." And in doing so, the biblical tradition of shepherding the sheep has also been passed on to us. We too are to be people marked by our love for Christ, and our love should be manifested in serving God's flock among us. Our love for Christ should manifest itself in a servant's heart and concern for the sheep of God who have been placed in our lives.

However, this isn't the end of our story. But it took me a while to figure out how what follows in verse 18 and beyond had to do with what preceded it. God used my wife, Tammy, to get me thinking. We were driving to our apartment in Vancouver on a glorious spring day. I remember gazing at the snow capped mountains across the water, lost in my own thoughts, when she asked me, out of the blue, "So, do you have a theology of suffering?" My first thought was, "Why? Am I going to need one soon?" She had attended a gathering of spouses, where Elizabeth Bell, the wife of a Regent professor, and a pastor's wife for twenty years, suggested that everyone going into ministry should have a theology of suffering. The question caught me completely off guard. But it gave me something to think over. Then I came to John 21:18-19, where Jesus continued his commissioning of Peter:

"I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

For Peter, the cost of following Jesus into ministry was high. Ultimately, it cost him his life. This shouldn't

surprise us. It was through the cross that Jesus' ministry came to its climax. Suffering is an essential and integral part of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

While in Romania two years ago, I got to experience the effects that suffering for Christ can have on our lives. But what shocked me more than the vitality and passion for Christ that suffering produced in our Romanian friends, as they endured under the heavy hand of communism and Ceaucescu, was their open acceptance of suffering.

I remember sitting around a table with four leaders who had been working closely together in the same ministry for several years. I was asking them about their experiences during the height of communism, when the Lord's Army was declared illegal. One of the leaders, Lili, mentioned that it had on one occasion cost her her job. Her boss had been forced by the Securitate to fire her. She said it so matter of factly. But what took me by surprise was that two of her colleagues had never known she had lost that job because of her faith. Granted, the event took place well before they worked together, but suffering because of their faith was a normal, unnoteworthy part of their experience. The result of their suffering, as anyone who has been there can tell you, is a wholehearted passion for and commitment to Christ.

Jesus promised Peter a life of suffering that would ultimately lead to his death. We are not promised the same thing, but we are not promised the "good life," either. Here we find the second characteristic of the love that Jesus asked Peter about in our story, Following Jesus into ministry requires a love that is willing to suffer for, and at the hands of, those whom we've been called to serve.

Finally, we come to the last section of our text. Peter has confessed his love for Jesus and has accepted his difficult charges that this love demands, of shepherding sheep and suffering as Jesus did for his sheep. And Peter's reaction is not very different than mine often is. Let's read the final piece of our story. John 21:20-22:

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") [Which is John]. When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

Having received a charge to shepherd and suffer, Peter is now concerned with what will become of his friend and colleague, John. Remember the old saying, "Misery loves company." I think that Peter in his pending misery was longing for the company of John.

The reality of Peter's actions really hit me two years ago on our trip to Romania. The two weeks I spent with my Romanian brothers and sisters in Christ changed my life forever. God worked in me through my transla-

tor, Ligia. After a few short days, I felt like I had known her for a long time. We had much in common. Both of us had been called to serve God; we were the same age; she longed to have some theological training. She was a special person whom God was using to change the lives of the Romanian and Moldovan college students to whom she was ministering. In just two weeks she had become a true and dear friend.

But all good things must come to an end. After our conferences were over and our team had left Romania, following an 18-hour train ride we stopped in Austria for three days of debriefing and recreation. I was struck by how similar Ligia's life and my life were, yet God had given me every material thing I had ever desired: financial and physical security, a loving wife, and a theological education. Ligia had been denied all of these: no spouse in a male dominated society, very little money, little physical security, and little hope of a theological education. As this reality hit me, my first response was to sob. I longed for her to experience the same blessings that I had. My second response was anger directed right at God. How could a God of mercy and compassion have created a world that was this unfair? For a day and a half I walked around one of the most beautiful places in the world, downright mad at God because of the abundance that he had blessed me with while my friend and sister struggled.

Not surprisingly, as part of our debriefing, someone (who shall remain nameless) made us each write a poem to capture our experiences. The following poem, "Together," is the poem that God gave to me that has helped me understand myself, Ligia, and John 21:20-22.

"Together"

*Fallen..
Broken..
Loved..
Redeemed..*

Together we stood as one in Christ

*Called..
To Serve..
To Love..
And to Redeem..*

Together bound by His call on our lives

*I looked into the mirror of the eyes of her soul
And saw myself staring back*

*Oh God of mercy and justice how can this be?
Why is it so easy for me
You've given me everything I need
A wife who loves*

*Comfort, security, luxury
Unbelievable abundance and ease*

*My Friend Struggles
Alone, without a loving touch
Risking life for her sheep
Longing for Greek and theology
Where is the justice oh God?*

*Maybe I'm the one who has been set in poverty?
In a land of wealth and prosperity
There is so little hunger for You
I require nothing but me
Are my blessings curses in disguise?*

*Has my friend received the true blessing?
A land which needs God every day
A car that only starts when one prays
A place where their love for God shines radiantly in
eyes and smiles*

*Oh God of Mercy what am I to do?
What people would you have me serve?
Where would you have me love?
Lord what would you have me do?*

*Their song is in my heart
Their new found joy radiates through my soul
Their eyes and smiles have been burned into my mind's
eye
Oh the blessings of Romania, how I long for them in
America*

*Fallen..
Broken..
Loved..
Redeemed..*

Together we stand as one in Christ

*Called..
To Serve..
To Love..
And to Redeem..*

My reaction was the same as Peter's: "It's not fair, God. What about Ligia?" Through this poem, God essentially told me: "If I want Ligia to serve me in Romania until I return, what is that to you?" Just because North America is an easier place to live in does not make it a better one. God called both Ligia and myself, both Peter and John, to serve him. Our love for Jesus demands that we serve God selflessly, not demanding justice, but trusting in God that he will work everything out according to his plan. We are to exhibit the kind of love that Jesus demonstrated in the garden, where he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." The third way that our love for Jesus is to be expressed in ministry is that we are to love him selflessly, trusting that his plan for us is good enough.

Conclusion

If we are going to take Jesus' recommissioning of Peter seriously, as men and women who have been called to minister to those God has given us, we need to ask ourselves how do we respond to Jesus' question, "Do you love me?"

Are we people who are dominated by a love for Jesus:

- Is our love for Jesus willing to serve by quietly shepherding God's sheep?
- Is our love for Jesus willing to suffer?
- Is our love for Jesus selfless, willing to trust in God's plan?

I want to end our time together by reading from 1 Samuel 16:8-11, a text that speaks of how God chose David, a man after God's own heart, to serve him as the king of Israel:

Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered, "but he is tending the sheep."

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