

Sermon for Sunday, April 26, 2026

John 21:15-25

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Bible is a book that records the relationship between God and God's people; sometimes through narrative, sometimes through poetry like the psalms and sometimes through letters that teach, like the apostle Paul's many letters to the churches he established.

Our Scripture lesson for today is the very last passage from the gospel of John—a gospel that we have been reading since Christmas. Our Scripture reading is also a story of Jesus (God) and the restoration of his relationship with Peter. Relationship, that's a key word in today's sermon.

On March 8th our Scripture reading centered around Peter's denial. Now it is common to think that when Peter denied (often shorthanded as Peter's denial of Jesus) he was denying his belief in Jesus as God's son. As this gospel story tells it, Peter denies being a follower of Jesus. He denies having a relationship with him. It's important to understand that nuance. There's a difference, a big difference, between denying that Jesus is God's son (the Messiah) and denying that you are a follower of Jesus. Embedded in Peter's denial is a walking away from the tasks of ministry and service that Jesus has been training him and the other disciples to do. When the moment of reckoning comes, Peter says "Nope, not me. I am not a follower. I do not have a relationship with Jesus." He does NOT say "I don't believe in him."

Two of the three denials of Peter occur as he is warming himself near a charcoal fire in a courtyard. In today's reading as Jesus greets the disciples who have been out fishing all night he does so near a charcoal fire over which he is cooking some fish and bread. John, the author of this gospel, inserts this little detail because he is a good author. Repeating this detail at this point in the story stirs something within attentive listeners/readers. It signals that something notable is going to occur and it will have to do with Peter.

What is that notable something? The restoration or affirmation of Peter. Whether the rest of the disciples knew about Peter's denials or not, Peter knew. We can imagine the shame he felt, especially after the fact. How many of us spend time second-guessing the

mis-steps or inappropriate words that we used and wish more than anything that we could take them back? It happens to all of us.

Let's look at this story of restoration in more detail discerning what Jesus is doing and then a little later turn to its meaning for us. Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him. This mimics the three denials that Peter spoke. Each time Peter replies with, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus replies with three slightly different statements. The first is "Feed my lambs." Jesus is instructing Peter to take care of the faithful young ones in the flock. These faithful young ones might be children but they might also be persons "young in faith." Feeding them might mean teaching them about Jesus and God's love. But feeding them might also mean caring for the physical needs of people. Teachers have long known that hungry children cannot focus on learning. Followers of Jesus must keep in mind that hunger can prevent the audience from hearing the good news of God's love for all people.

The second statement Jesus makes in response to Peter is "Tend my sheep." Sheep is a term suggesting an entire flock: young and old alike. In using this term Jesus is reminding Peter and any other listener/reader of the gospel that they have a responsibility to care for all of the members of the flock. Feeding them, teaching them, moving them to green pastures, providing them with water, protecting them...all of these are the responsibilities of a shepherd. Jesus is reminding Peter of his responsibilities.

It is important to remember also what Jesus says in John 10:16 "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." These words expand our understanding of the size of Jesus' flock. As an example, I lift up before you the ministry of Paul and Jay Mikaelson as they nurtured a flock of faithful people in Bolivia. Paul's dad saw an opportunity and Paul and Jay faithfully continued his work. In a way, their work is exactly what Jesus was referring to: the sheep that are in "other folds." And of course Jesus, as God's son saw the whole entire world and all of the peoples inhabiting that world and considered them all to be part of God's flock—even at a time when the world view of the disciples was relatively limited.

For the third and final time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Peter responds strongly by saying, John 21:17 "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." One might think that Jesus had pretty much covered all the bases with the first two responses to Peter, but threes happen all the time in the Bible. Since Peter denied that he was a follower

of Jesus three times, it's appropriate that Jesus should affirm Peter's call to ministry three times.

Since the Bible is a book that records the relationship between God and God's people what can we learn from this story about God and God's relationship, first to Peter and then to us?

- The short answer to that question is that even though Peter was guilty of denying that he was a follower of Jesus, he was restored to an active role in ministry. The same is true for us. Even when we are guilty of denying that we are followers of Jesus, we are forgiven. God in Jesus restores us and challenges us to enter into active roles in ministry.
- To be clear, this conversation between Jesus and Peter isn't just about being forgiven and reinstated (although this story includes these concepts). One of the most important things that Jesus is doing with Peter in this conversation is turning over the role of "good shepherd" to Peter. Jesus knows that he is going to ascend to the Father. Someone has to continue Jesus' work of shepherding and Peter is the one. From the gospel's point of view Peter is called to do more than model Jesus or ask "what would Jesus do?" Peter is called to be Jesus' presence here on earth. No, Peter is not God. Peter is not Jesus. But Peter is called to be the next good shepherd and tend the early flock of followers, to tell the stories of Jesus, demonstrate God's love for all people, and continue to spread this good news far and wide.
- But now what about us? There are lines from a confession that Lutherans used for many years that says, "**we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.**" There are times when we have failed to speak or act in a manner that exemplifies that we are followers of Jesus. We may not have publicly or vocally denied being a follower of Jesus but our lack of action is viewed by God in a similar way.
- Remember though that the Holy Spirit resides within us. It was placed in our hearts, souls, and minds at our baptism. That Holy Spirit is always calling us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.
- God relies on us, on disciples, to witness in and to the world God loves, with the entirety of our beings. Sometimes we

will succeed, sometimes we won't but as forgiven children of God we can rest in the assurance that God loves us in spite of our failures.

The story of God's relationship with humans is exemplified in the life story of Peter. He denied being a follower of Jesus. And yet, Jesus forgave him and called him back into the task of ministry. We too are forgiven and called on a daily basis back into the tasks of ministry. For this we can give thanks to God! Thankfully, God never gives up on us! Amen.