

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

APRIL 19, 2009



For more sermons go to www.wrconchurch.org

John 21:15-25 *"Peter, John & Jesus"*

Among Jesus' appearances to his disciples after his resurrection, none are more poignant than the ones recorded by John, the beloved Apostle, in his Gospel: Jesus' encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden near the empty tomb, his readiness to accept Thomas' skepticism and to show him his wounds, and his breakfast and quiet talk with Peter beside the Sea of Galilee. We presume some weeks have elapsed before the meeting in Galilee; and of course there are several reports that Jesus has already appeared to Peter in Jerusalem on Easter day.

1) *Peter is Reinstated and Recommissioned*

But now Jesus has something to settle with Peter. I suspect repentance and forgiveness for Peter's denials of Jesus were already dealt with before Galilee. But now, in Jesus' compassion and wisdom, Peter is to be restored to leadership. What the other Apostles thought of Peter we don't know; but Jesus has a plan that will require Peter to be reinstated before his friends as a leader.

So after the miraculous catch of fish, and the breakfast on the beach, during what might have been a quiet walk, or perhaps a more public conversation in the sight and sound of the other Apostles, Jesus questions Peter about his love for his Lord. Three times he asks; reflecting, we imagine, Peter's threefold denial that he even knew Jesus. How can you come back after such a disgrace? Jesus' test is about love.

But Jesus asks more than just "Peter, do you still love me?" It is "*Do you love me more than these?*" Now the words are ambiguous: do you love me more than you love *these other people?* Do you love me more than *these things* – like fishing? Or, most probably, do you love me more than these *other people love me?* It's a strange question! Why would Jesus set up a contest over who loved him best? The reason seems to be that Peter had himself claimed that he loved Jesus the best – or more exactly, "*even if everyone deserts you, I will not. I will lay down my life for you!*" Brave but foolish words spoken on the night of the Last Supper. Jesus, of course, knew Peter better than Peter knew himself: "*Will you lay down your life? I tell you that this night you will deny three times that you even know me.*"

So Jesus' question suggests that he wants to see if Peter has learned anything from his experience. Peter may have wept bitterly over his denials, he may have been forgiven, but has he learned? Does he still think that he loves Jesus more than anyone else does? It's as though Peter will not be restored to leadership until he shows that he has learned humility. And perhaps he has.

Peter's answers make no reference to other people; he *does not claim* that he loves Jesus more than others do! So Jesus drops the topic. Rather, Peter throws himself upon Jesus' deep knowledge of him, and says, "*Lord, you know I love you.*" Yet Jesus asks him twice more, until Peter is saddened by Jesus' persistence. "*Lord, you know all things – you know that I love you.*" Good answers; enough to show that Peter is now far less self-confident, and more ready to trust Jesus!

Peter is not just reinstated, he is now given a new commission. He had been called three years earlier at the side of Galilee to “catch men” – to be an evangelist. Now, beside Galilee again, he is re-commissioned to “feed the sheep” – to be a pastor, guide, comforter, and teacher. The work of the kingdom will now require both bringing people into the kingdom and nurturing them once they have entered. And the best qualifications for that task are not enthusiasm and boldness, but love and humility.

2) John is Loved

Now comes a strange incident. Jesus speaks of Peter’s death – that “in his old age” his hands will be stretched out and he “*will be led where he does not want to go.*” Historians tell us that Peter was crucified in Rome in the mid-60s AD during the Emperor Nero’s persecutions. It’s as though Jesus is telling Peter by the lake that his boast that he would “lay down his life for Jesus” will in fact come true, though not in the way Peter had imagined.

Then comes the strange question from Peter. Somewhere close by, he notices the Apostle John. Now John is known not as the one who claimed to love Jesus the best, but as the one whom Jesus loved best – “*the beloved disciple.*” Which would you rather be? At this point, we cannot begin to understand why Jesus would love John best – we know him only as one of the first four Apostles, like his brother James another fisherman, probably from a richer and better connected family than Andrew and Peter.

But James and John were nick-named “sons of thunder;” they wanted to call down fire on Samaritan villages that rejected Jesus; they and their mother had ambitions to sit at Jesus’ right and left hands in his kingdom! John had sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper. John had enough connections to get into the High Priest’s palace to witness Jesus’ trial, while Peter was out in the courtyard being scared by a servant girl! But after Peter had denied and fled, John went to Golgotha, and stood witness at Jesus’ crucifixion, stood

close enough for a dying Jesus to commend his mother Mary into John’s care. Why did Jesus love John? No reason that we can see.

But now by Galilee, Peter sees John and asks Jesus the strange question: “*What about him?*” What was that about? Friendship? Curiosity? Envy? Control? Whatever Peter intended, Jesus rebukes the question with a sharp reply: “*None of your business.*” Whatever Jesus plans for John is not something Peter needs concern himself with – Peter’s call is to follow Jesus, not worry about John! And the form of Jesus’ response carries the sense “*forget about him; you, keep on following me!*”

Of course we understand why John includes this little incident in the epilogue of his Gospel – because he of all the Apostles was apparently the only one who did not die a martyr’s death, but lived to a good old age and died in his own bed. So in the late 1st century, the rumor got around that John was perhaps immortal - that he would not die before the Lord came again – a rumor rooted in this comment of Jesus to Peter: “*what happens to John is none of your business – if I say he will live until I return, what is that to you?*” As John patiently explains, Jesus did not say John would not die, but only that it was not Peter’s or anyone else’s business to know what God had planned for John! So does misquoting Jesus create traditions and confusion that refuse to die!

3) None Of Our Business

Fascinating stories! And told with that immediacy and detail that an eye-witness brings – remember that John’s Gospel is the only one of the four canonical Gospels that claims to be written by an eye-witness: Mark and Luke we know were not there, and were reporting what others had told them; Matthew may have been there, but never mentions it.

What do John’s stories say to us? One crucial thing, which churches have wrestled with ever since, is the issue of restoring Christians who have fallen away or into public sin or disgrace. If they repent, can they be restored?

If so, to what responsibilities? Augustine famously argued in the 4th century that they had to be restored, and to leadership – so that, for example, the sacraments of the church were never invalidated by the sins of the priest! We owe the historic continuity of the church to that decision!

What today of people who fall into sin or public disgrace? Can we accept them back into the Church? Into leadership? Very difficult questions at times, as many churches have found! But Jesus' example of Peter shows the underlying preference for restoration and re-commissioning. How and when and to what degree that is done may be a matter of prudential judgment, but it seems clear that Jesus established a principle of restoration.

Jesus also established through Peter the principle that leaders in the church are to care for the people of God as well as be evangelists to unbelievers. That balance has often been missing, and today both commissions are often submerged by administration, fundraising, and church government; it's often been said that what used to be called the minister's "study" has become his "office," to nobody's benefit!

Love for Jesus, according to Jesus, is the prime qualification for leading his flock. Without love for Jesus, compassion for other people withers fast. Without love for Jesus, no "Christian work" stays tolerable for long. Without love for Jesus, "ministry" is just "hard work." But with love for Jesus, everything is done in his name and for his sake and the outcome is entrusted to him. You can have all the training and experience in the world, but if you don't love Jesus you should not get involved in church leadership – from the nursery to the bible study to the buildings to the treasury.

And then there is that persistent problem of "Lord, what about *him*?" Why do we care? Is it out of love or friendship? Is it about just "wanting to know"? Or is it about control? Is it about competition? About envy? Is it "why do you love him more than me?" "Why do

good things happen to him and bad things to me?" Why do we have more interest in other people's than in our own relationship with Jesus? Is it implied criticism? Lord, are they really deserving of your goodness and love? Should they really be getting more than I'm getting..? Why do they pay less tax than I do? Why are *those people* getting government bail-out funds and I'm not? What about me? It's not fair that those people get free 'whatever it is...' - they're taking something from me!

The simple word for all these things is jealousy – or envy. Christians are not supposed to envy! Christians are not supposed to criticize others for what they are "unfairly" getting! Remember Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard – some worked all day, some half the day, some came in at the "eleventh hour;" but they all got paid the same! When the full-day workers complained that it wasn't fair, the master said, "Friend, I have done you no wrong; I have paid you what we agreed on. Can I not be generous to others with my own money? What is it to you that I am generous?"

Here's the danger: *we think* we want the world to be fairer: *we think* God should treat us all fairly! "What about him, Lord?" What we don't see is that the kingdom of God and the way of Jesus are about grace, not fairness – that if God was fair, most of us would be in jail, or publicly disgraced, or dismissed, or divorced! *But by grace we are what we are. That is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus.* And all Jesus asks of us in return is that we love him.

What about him, Lord? What about *her*?
"None of your business; you, follow me!" Let us pray...

