

John 21:15-19

“The Restoration of Peter”

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

1. The highly stylized conversation between Peter and Jesus in this passage, which occurred sometime after our Lord’s Resurrection from the dead, has always perplexed me. One of the wonderful things about preaching is having opportunity to research a text and so share just a bit of what one learns with a congregation, or hearers, such as you are.
2. What strikes the casual hearer immediately about the passage is its three-fold repetition: Jesus appears to ask Peter three times, “Do you love me?,” to which Peter seems—again three times—to make the claim that he indeed “loves,” or at least “likes,” Jesus. So one asks, first of all, why the three-fold repetition? What purpose did it serve in the church originally, and what meaning may it have for us now, if any?
3. I think it’s quite clear from context that Jesus’ three-fold question, and Peter’s three-fold response, recalls Peter’s three-fold denial of Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest which figured greatly in the Passion narratives of all four gospels. You will recall Peter’s brash statement in John 13:37: “I shall lay down my life for you!” This corresponds to what Peter states in the three synoptic gospels: “Even though they all fall away, I shall never fall away!” (Matt 26:33; cf. similar statements in Mark 14:29 and Luke 22:33). But then, as so infamously happened in all four accounts, Peter denied that he even knew Jesus—and this not once, but three times. This public and deliberate denial of Jesus before those people warming themselves before the charcoal fire in the courtyard had disqualified Peter from being leader of the apostolic band; so the Risen Jesus’s three-fold question “do you love me?” put to Peter three times, and Peter’s response that he “liked” Jesus, symbolically—and even liturgically—is meant to reverse Peter’s earlier and treacherous denial. So that is the first issue.

4. But another problem emerges immediately if one looks at the passage in the original Greek. In the first question Jesus asks, “Do you love me?”—and the verb ἀγαπάω is used, which is the highest form of love, as in “God so loved the world” (John 3:16). However, in Peter’s response he says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I like you”—the verb φιλέω appears, a weaker form of love—perhaps liking, or esteem, is meant. So in the Greek Jesus asks Peter the first two times, “Do you love me?,” and Peter replies—the first two times—“Yes, indeed, Lord: Thou knowest that I like you!” Why does Jesus ask Peter if he *loves* Him, and then Peter’s response that he seemingly merely *likes* Jesus. What’s going on?
5. Well, after doing some research I believe this long-standing problem has been solved appropriately. The key, to put it briefly, is Peter’s growth in maturity as a Christian. Remember, before his fiery trial Peter had been accustomed to say, “Lord, I am prepared to go with Thee even to prison and to death!,” according to what Peter says in Luke 22:33. Of course Peter thought then that he could *love* Jesus in the ἀγαπάω manner, and way beyond that love and steadfastness of the other disciples. However, during the fiery ordeal Peter had been brought up short—so had come to realize, in fact, that not only did he not *love* Jesus, but he did not even *like* Him, and in fact did not even *know* him—and this three times. It was a crushing and humiliating defeat, and Peter went to the outer darkness to cry bitter tears. But, now that Jesus was risen—even as He said He would rise from the dead—Peter could say to Jesus that he did indeed *like* Jesus, though he would not be so bold/confident anymore to declare that he *loved* Jesus more than the rest. So Peter, in effect, had grown in his sanctified life from being so bold and cock-sure of himself, to becoming more honest toward himself, more aware of his limitations—and indeed, more aware of what horrible sins of denial he was himself capable.
6. Our takeaway from this, I think, is that many of us Christians are also cock-sure in our confidence that we are with the Lord—we are serving Him, of course, by studying to be pastors and deaconesses far

from home at Lutheran Theological Seminary, that we are learning Theology, that we are learning the works of mercy, that we are growing as Christians and will make a positive difference... if we can just escape from this place, get back home, and begin our respective ministries! This, I think, is what most of you want to do.

7. But, as often happens to such over-confident Christians, we are frequently brought up short—and often embarrassingly so—so that our apparent *love* for Jesus is seen by everyone, and also by ourselves, to be a complete sham, a fabrication. Being brought up short, dramatically so, in our own eyes, as well as in the eyes of others who come to know us, is part and parcel also of the contrition and repentance that we experience daily as Christians—indeed, as we grow in likeness to Christ, and repent of our fallen nature. Before we can be forgiven and restored, however, we have to see in clarity the depth of our sin, the horror of which each one of us is capable of inflicting on others—and denying even to know Jesus. When seen in this light we can understand Peter’s humility here—that it is enough for him only to *like* Jesus under the circumstances—and we say something quite similar in the corporate confession as “poor, miserable sinners.” Then experience forgiveness in the Word of Absolution we Christians are privileged to hear from the pastor at the Divine Service—and indeed, from one another. You shall hear it soon at the Service of Confession and Absolution which follows this sermon.
8. Well, perhaps it has struck you by now how significant the Resurrection of Jesus is in this exchange between Jesus and Peter that takes place this third week of Easter following *Misericordias Domini* Sunday. As St. Paul states elsewhere, “if Christ has not been raised from the dead... we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:19). But in Christ the dead *are* raised, Jesus has indeed *come back* from the dead. The Easter refrain is, “He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” And since Jesus *is* risen, and not dead, Peter’s repentance is not one of sorrow unto death, but one of joyful restoration and reinstatement: “feed My sheep,” Jesus instructs Peter, and this also three times. Indeed, after his denial and restoration to office Peter would feed Christ’s lambs for the rest of a lengthy ministry—some think 35 years before his eventual martyrdom in Rome.

9. John's gospel contains here a prediction not only of Peter's restoration as bishop and instructor in the church, but also of how Peter would end his life in glorious service to God and to the church: "when thou wast young you girded yourself and walked about where thou wished; but whenever you grow old you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where thou dost not wish." The detail "thou shall stretch out thy hands" is interpreted by most to be a not-so-cryptic reference to the post-Scriptural account that Peter would stretch out his arms in crucifixion: the tradition, recorded in Eusebius's *History* (3.1), was that Peter came to Rome where he was crucified upside down, "for so he desired to suffer" (Lenski, *John*, 1430). "Go where thou dost not wish," likewise is fairly unanimously interpreted to mean, "go where thou wilt die"; and finally the detail, "signifying by what death he would glorify God" is also apparently a technical description for "suffer a martyr's death." So not only was Peter forgiven directly by Jesus for his earlier and humiliating denial, but Peter went on gloriously to spend himself in service to the Gospel and even died faithfully and publically as a martyr for the Crucified and Risen One.

10. The takeaway for us, I think, is that the Risen Christ forgives each one of us for those times when we embarrassingly come up short and fail our Lord—but, in the restoration, is preparing us for how we shall serve our Lord Jesus and His church in service to Him for the rest of our lives, however this shall be. God alone knows the precise contours of that service and our own blessed death and end to our ministry, but He gently leads us along that path—day by day, and one step at a time. "Follow Me!," Jesus says at the end of today's lesson. So Peter did, and so we also do.... in Peace and Joy. AMEN.

"And now the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." AMEN.