

THE FIRST LESSON

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

THE SECOND LESSON

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 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. 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.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 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. 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. 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.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."

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." 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." 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. 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." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

SERMON

Text: Simon son of John, do you love me?

Have you ever taken the time to think about, even pray about, how odd this question is that Jesus asks Simon Peter? Think about it: Peter has left everything and followed Jesus, yet he still feels it is necessary to ask this same question of Peter three times, and Peter is none too pleased.

The events leading up to Jesus' repetitive question are instructive. As this passage opens Peter is not acting as if he has recently witnessed the most miraculous event in the history of the world, viz. Jesus's resurrection. You almost get the impression that Peter is simply sitting around, waiting for more to happen. When nothing does happen, he finally decides he just better get on with his life . . . it's time to get back to work. And we are not talking about the work of the Gospel; we are talking about going back to the life Peter lived before Jesus entered it. Peter decides it's time to go fishing. It's as if nothing happened, as if Jesus had never entered his life.

For nearly every one of us in the sanctuary this morning there has come that time when we decided, as did Peter, to follow Jesus. Be it through a conversion experience, or through the quiet certitude of claiming the faith in which we were raised; we are here in this church this morning as a matter of conscious choice. And just like Peter so many years ago, today—one week after celebrating Jesus' resurrection—we are coming off that Easter high. And, like Peter, . . . we have gone back to work. Nothing has really changed, has it? Like Peter with the empty nets, at times it feels as if all our work rewards us with is little or nothing. Jesus may have been raised from the dead, and I may have just celebrated that, but I have to ask myself way down deep in my soul—has that made any difference to me? Or is it just the same old same old? Christ has died. Christ is risen. We have gone back to work. The same old same old.

I have a very good friend who is a bit baffled by the fact that it is just the same old same old. This is a man who was Christian and who made the conscious decision to follow the Christian way. Jay was always on the top of the world. Everything always clicked for him and he often went to church simply to give thanks. He married a beautiful woman and they had two wonderful boys. You couldn't keep this guy down.

Then Jay crashed big time. He lost confidence in himself. He started waking up in the morning at three o'clock feeling nothing but terror, and he couldn't even figure out what he was scared of. Being a friend I started getting a lot of phone calls at around three in the morning. We struggled with this for quite a while. Then I talked to him about Jesus' suffering on the cross, asking him to relate to that, and then possibly to relate to Jesus' resurrection. "Jay," I said, "you gotta believe in that, it's your way out of this mess." And that's when he lost his temper with me. "I have believed that all my life, and what good has it done me?!" he screamed into the phone. "Where is this resurrected Christ when I need him? I have loved him, followed him, and all I end up with is this pitiful mess that I call a life!" After this conversation we hung up and started in again with the same old same old. Christ has died. Christ is risen. So what? It has changed nothing.

"Simon son of John, do you love me?"

In our first lesson this morning we heard of the apostle Paul's conversion experience. Paul, who as this story starts is known as Saul, is a person of faith. Like my friend Jay, like the disciple Simon Peter, Saul believed in God, followed God, loved God. This is an important point to people like you and me, people who go to church each week and try to understand and follow the way of God. Even though Saul was persecuting the church, he believed he was following the way of God. He cared passionately about right and wrong. Saul was a good person trying to do good things. Just like Simon Peter, just like my friend Jay, just like us.

"Simon son of John, do you love me?"

What is being drawn out of these stories of Saul and Simon Peter and my friend is the tremendous difficulty present in answering the question that Jesus poses to Peter. Jesus is not asking that question to someone who has yet to make up his mind about following God. Jesus is asking it of the person of God. And just as he asked of it Peter so long ago, Jesus is asking it of you and me now, "John, Mary, David, do you love me?" It's wise not to answer this question too quickly. Peter thought he knew the answer to it. Saul thought he knew the answer to it. My friend Jay thought he knew the answer to it. Do I know the answer to it?

As you know, in the New Testament we are reading a translation of the original Greek. It is not always possible to translate exactly what is written. Such is the problem with this Gospel story. We are missing information when we read it in English, because the Greek is simply not translatable. Just as the Inuit have different words for the many different kinds of snow, so the Greeks have different words for the many different kinds of love.

In the story this morning Jesus' question to Peter in the Greek reads, *agapas meh*, which we translate as, Do you love me? Is this accurate? Sort of. The Greek verb that is translated here is *agape*, the form of love that God has for us. This is a complete love, a total love. *Agape* is a love that gives without condition, loves without condition, and will die so that another might have life, and have it more abundantly.

Simon son of John, *agapas meh*? Do you love me as God loves, with sacrificial love?

Peter's response to this is very interesting. In English we read, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Is this accurate? Sort of. But the "love" in Peter's answer uses the Greek root word of *philia* to respond to Jesus. This form of love is not nearly as encompassing as *agape*. *Philia* is the kind of love you have for other people when you care for them and give to them; but it is not an all-encompassing love; it is not sacrificial. It is not the love with which God loves us.

"Simon son of John, *agapas meh*; do you love me as I and God love you?" "Yes, Lord, you know that *philo seh*, I love you, up to a point."

The passage makes a lot more sense now, doesn't it? It's not just Jesus asking the same old question and getting the same old answer over and over again. It's not just the same old same old. Because Peter here is consciously holding back. Even after making the decision to follow

Jesus, even after witnessing the risen Christ, Peter holds back, just as he does when he looks at the other disciples and says, “Well, Jesus is risen, the party’s over, let’s get back to work.”

We read this scripture not so we can hear Jesus ask Peter that question, but so we can hear Jesus ask us that question: agapas meh□; do you love me as I have loved you? Do you love others as I have loved them? Asking ourselves these questions is not as easy as it sounds as it throws a lot of light on the values we live by, the choices we make, and perhaps the difference between what we say we believe, and the way in which we actually live our lives. This is no small question Jesus is asking.

In the light of Jesus's question, we must wonder if we are not a bit like Peter who held back, or a bit like Saul who pursued a way that he ardently believed was the way of God, only to find he was going in the exact opposite direction. Maybe we don't want to hear Jesus ask us this question. Maybe we won't like our own answers.

Or maybe, like Saul, it will be a transforming experience of our lives. Saul thought he knew so much about religion, about right and wrong. And then, after his encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus, he ended up stumbling around blind, having to choose between an old truth, an old way of seeing, an old way of living, and the new—the resurrected.

What the passages this morning are telling us is that encounters with the resurrected Jesus are very disruptive; we can't go back to the same old same old once we have had them. Sometimes they will knock us right off our feet and then take us places we never intended to go.

Saul was so thoroughly changed by his encounter with the resurrected Christ that he changed his name to symbolize the person he had become. Peter was so thoroughly changed by his encounter with the resurrected Jesus that at the end of his life he did what he lacked the courage to do before Jesus was crucified: instead of denying him three times, he proclaimed Jesus even though it meant his own crucifixion. And my friend Jay about whom I spoke earlier in this sermon? Oh he met the resurrected Christ all right. He told me one night when he was out of the woods, “I met him in the tomb that my life had become—when my life seemed totally dead. And he led me by the hand so I could get out of that hell hole when I could see no way out.” I said, “Are you putting me on, man?” He replied, “Let's put it this way, I didn't find my own way out of that tomb. I was led out by the hand. Give it your own interpretation. I'm giving it mine.” My friend Jay is not the same person he was: he has changed; his priorities have shifted. And what happened to him happens to most of us during those major shifts in our lives: old certainties die and new ones, humbler ones rise from their tombs; old beliefs die and new ones, wiser ones, rise from their ashes; and old agonies die, and a quiet joy that had not been present before rises in their place.

Simon son of John, Fred, James, Ed, do you love me, agapas meh?

In your prayer time this week I ask you to enter that story of Peter and Jesus, imagining that you are Peter, hearing Jesus ask you that question. Yes, I am encouraging you to have an encounter with the risen Christ. After all I have just said you may not want to do that! And isn't

that odd, that we have a fear of the one whom we worship week after week? I cannot tell you how your prayers may turn out, how you may be changed.

I can tell you that to follow him is the way of life. I can tell you that to love him, with agape□, is to know a depth of love that passes all understanding, a peace that this world can neither give nor take away. I can tell you that, as you pray with the scripture, you will hear Jesus say, as he says to every disciple, 'Follow me,' and that those words are the path to life, no matter where that path leads. Amen and amen.

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THE PRAYERS

O Light, the brilliance of whose glory blinded Saul on the road to Damascus, denying him physical sight while the eyes of his soul and spirit were opened to your presence: Blind us to the things of the world that tempt us away from you and illumine for us the way that leads to you so that, even in the valley of the shadow of death we will find you.

Beloved God, Creator and Parent,
you sent your Son into the world to show us how to live with you, how to love you, where to find you.

Give us the courage and humility
to recognize ourselves as fragments of the Body of Christ,
called to live fully as we were created: in your image.

Grant us the discernment to recognize others
as fragments of the Body of Christ,
honoring what is divine within them,
cherishing their beauty and wisdom,
comforting them in their pain as we have been taught.

Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to comprehend.