

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

**John 21:15-17****A REAL JESUS FOR REAL SINNERS**

*So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs."*

*He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep."*

*He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep."*

In his book *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, CFW Walther, a Missouri Synod stalwart-of-old, cites the example of Martin Luther who was dealing with George Spalatin, a personal friend and respected advisor of ruler Fredrick the Wise. Spalatin felt very despondent because he had given wrong marriage advice. Spalatin would not be comforted, to think that he had failed himself and the Lord so badly. Martin Luther, in his special way, wrote to Spalatin leading him to see the forgiveness of Jesus—a forgiveness that Spalatin already knew well, but was not applying to himself. Luther said, It's as if you see and want only a painted Jesus and not a real Jesus. It's as if for all these years you have only seen yourself a painted sinner and not a real sinner for whom Christ died and rose again. See the real sinner that you are, and cling to Jesus the real Savior who has given Himself for you.

In our text for today, Peter is being led by Jesus to the same realization. Peter needed to see that the risen Jesus was his real Savior. Peter needed to see that he himself was one real sinner. This incident took place during the time after Jesus had risen from the grave before He returned to heaven. The disciples had gone back to fishing, not sure what to do without the Lord in their lead. They had used their nets all night, but to no avail. Jesus suddenly appeared on the shore, unrecognized by them. He told them to cast out the net on the other side of the boat. Suddenly the net was full of fish! The disciples recognized Jesus! At shore they ate with Jesus a breakfast which He already had waiting for them. After the meal the words of our text took place.

*So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." This was something Jesus needed to address with Peter. Peter had always been bold and quick to act. In the Garden of Gethsemane when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter boldly and quickly drew his sword to defend Jesus. Jesus had to tell him to put his sword away. Jesus healed the man whose ear Peter cut off. It was this bold Peter who earlier in that same evening had said to Jesus, "Though all men are offended, are caused to stumble, because of You tonight, I never will! I shall even die with you rather than deny You." Yet you know what happened, don't you? Peter ran away with the other disciples. And later when he regained his poise, he followed to the courtyard of the high priest where Jesus was on trial before the Jewish authorities. There, suddenly filled with fear for his own safety, Peter promptly denied he ever knew Jesus—three times! Jesus looked straight at Peter, and Peter went out and wept bitterly. He had failed.*

Jesus now wanted Peter to realize that He was a real Jesus and Savior for real sinners even proud Peter. He asked Peter, *Do you love Me more than these?* Jesus said, do you remember your boast and your self-confidence, though all men deny me, you never will? Do you remember that? How did that work? Do you love me with a self-sacrificing love—for that is indeed the word for "love" that Jesus used. All Peter could muster was *You know that I love You*. And Peter didn't even use the same word for love. He used a lesser word. The flavor would come out better in English, although not 100 per cent accurately, if we said, *Lord, You know that I like you*. Peter acknowledged that he was a far cry from the man he bragged himself to be and thought he was. He was very weak, and had to say humbly, *Lord I do like you*. I haven't been what You want or what I thought I was, but You are so special to me. Please take me, in spite of what I am. I love you—I like you—for loving me first.

Peter didn't actually say the words, "I'm sorry. Please forgive Me." But those were the thoughts of his heart. And Jesus knew Peter's heart. It's not the mechanical statement of the words that's crucial. Sometimes with children we operate that way. Dad or Mom won't let the pressure off until brother tells sister, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me," whether he actually feels that way or not. But parents can't see into hearts. They seek to train hearts by training tongues to apologize. Peter knew he had wronged Jesus. Jesus knew Peter longed for forgiveness.

With a heart of warmth and love Jesus said to Peter, “*Feed My lambs.*” He did not cast Peter away, but assured Peter of forgiveness by granting him the privilege to feed the little ones in His kingdom. With that phrase, do you perhaps think of feeding “bum lambs” with bottle and formula? Maybe Jesus had such a tender picture in mind. He was not talking about animals, but little ones in His Kingdom.

How have you done? Have you been the bigshot or the hotshot that you like to think you are in following the Lord—superior and more faithful than all others? I think not. As you humbly stand before Jesus, he knows your record. He knows your repentance. He knows your heart. He forgives. He gives you the privilege to feed the little ones in His Kingdom, to teach your own children in simplest of terms about their Savior, and to teach others who are so uninstructed in Bible Truth, the very basics, be it a discouraged friend, a despondent soul, a relative whose time is short, those not looking to argue but looking for peace—You can say with all love and comfort, “Jesus was punished for you, for your sins. In Him you are forgiven by God the Father. Trust Him.” It is your privilege!

But Jesus needed to prod deep into Peter’s heart which was too easily proud and self-secure. Jesus said, “*Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?*” Peter, forget about if you think your love for me is greater than all the rest, Do you just plain love Me? Jesus again used the word for self-sacrificing heartfelt love. Are you really willing to sacrifice yourself for Me, like you said in the Garden of Gethsemane? Peter needed to be brought forcefully down to earth and kept down on earth, lest he quickly become self-confident again, lest he become self-satisfied again, lest he become full of himself again. Sometimes Jesus has to smack us right in the face with our sins, to show us what failures we are before Him also.

Again Peter answered, “*Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.*” And again, you can’t tell it in English, but Peter’s answer really was saying, *Yes, Lord, You know that I like You.* He would not put himself up on a pedestal again. With Isaiah he was saying, “I am an unclean thing; all my righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). And for you? When you look at your record and your dealings and your difficulties with others, does the devil get you to think and to say, “Nope, not my fault. They started it. I’m clear.” Rather, “Lord, I have not done well at all. The best I can say is, I like you. Please forgive me.”

Jesus answered Peter, “*Tend My sheep.*” Yes, you are forgiven. I even trust you with shepherding the older ones. Parents, it remains your privilege to train your teenagers as the Lord wants. Don’t just cast off the job with, “It’s too much. I’m not appreciated.” They are Jesus’ sheep. He wants and allows you to tend them. Church members, please care for other church members, “not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhorting and encouraging one another, as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25-26)

But Jesus was not yet done. He needed to impress on Peter his total failure in being his own righteousness and his own savior. “*Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?*” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “*Do you love Me?*” It’s more than meets the eye. Peter isn’t just grieved because Jesus won’t “get off it” and has to ask for a third time. That’s part of Peter’s sorrow. But this time Jesus switches words and uses Peter’s word, “Peter, do you LIKE Me?” Peter, the way you have acted, do you even like Me? That’s digging right down to the root isn’t it?

How is your conduct? You do realize that every night when you go to bed, the Lord can say, “Larry, Elaine? Do you even like Me?” Every time you sin, every time you sin and are careless about it, you are saying, “No, Lord, I don’t even like you.” But Jesus comes to you. He wants you to see that on your own account, you are a flop, a sinner, and are lost. But His arms of love and forgiveness, given to you with His death and resurrection, await you. Cling to Him!

Peter said, “*Lord, You know all things; You know that I love—like—You.*” And isn’t the same with us? Knocked off any high stool we think we stand on, then our only security and foundation is in His amazing Shepherd’s love and rescue. In Jesus you are forgiven. Now, although it is imperfectly, “like” Him in return.

A statement such as, “Well, the Lord forgives me, but I can’t forgive myself” is totally out of line. Who do you think you are? You’re still trying to merit forgiveness! “If I make it up to my wife, or to my husband, or to my parents, or to my children, if I go out of my way to level the field, then I can forgive myself.” Forget it! You can’t, rectify the books before God. You are a real sinner, and you need a real Savior. You can’t just put a new coat of paint on yourself and think you’re good to go. Jesus got the beating and the dying for you. He lives. He is your Real Savior. Love Him in return.

In that forgiveness, be wary of loving sin, as Satan wants you to do, more than Jesus. When flirting with sin, like flirting with another woman or man, it’s all too easy to say, “This is harmless. I’m in control.” But when does the flirting somehow become much more serious, in deed or in heart? The same with your real Savior. You are a real sinner. He is your real Savior. Do not flirt with sin. “Like” Him, in fact love Him.

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach----