

Sermon for May 8, 2022—"All the Way"

Third Sunday after Easter, Year C—Texts: Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

In meaningful conversation, there's what's said, and then there's what's **actually** being said. The conversation beneath the conversation. The subtext, if you will.

When Jesus talks to Peter in our gospel reading this morning, the 21st chapter of John, what's actually being said is pretty profound. It'll change the arc of Peter's life, as if it hasn't already been changed enough. On the outside, there's this awkward exchange between Jesus and Peter. Why awkward? Well, think about it. This is the first time that they've really spoken since Peter's denial.

"This man also was with him." "Woman, I do not know him." "You also are one of them." "Man, I am not!" "Surely this man also was with him..." "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!" Well, cock-a-doodle-doo to you too. You've got to believe that it's eating Peter alive. It would've been bothering Peter even before talking to Jesus.

It might've been one thing if Jesus had stayed in the tomb. I mean, Peter would've had to live with himself for denying his friend and teacher at the moment when Jesus needed him the most. He'd have hated himself for it for the rest of his days. But then, Jesus rose from the dead, and Peter now had to actually look Jesus in the eyes again. Now he knew that he would need to deal with his demons, and with his failure, head-on.

Peter was probably going through this conversation over and over again in his head. Thinking over what he might say to Jesus. Imagining what Jesus might say to him. Maybe Peter was even considering initiating the conversation himself. That would've been interesting I'm sure! But then Jesus is standing there, in front of him, by a charcoal fire. You might recall that the last time Peter stood by a charcoal fire was when he'd denied Jesus. Now, here they are face to face. Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

Ouch. I say that for a couple of reasons.

The first is obvious: Jesus is asking Peter this in front of the others. The second is that Jesus appears to doubt Peter's love. It's likely Peter's worst nightmare, and probably why Peter responds to Jesus as he does. Now, the third reason is the way in which Jesus addresses Peter. He calls him: "Simon, son of John." In John's Gospel the only **other** time that Jesus refers to Peter that way is when they first meet way back in chapter one, when he first calls Peter. In effect, what we're seeing here is Peter being "re-called" by Jesus.

In any case, hearing what is essentially his full "legal" name, Peter's likely hearing it the way we would hear it when our parents were made at us! Growing up, if my mother called me "Jeffrey Louis Colarossi," I knew I was in big trouble. I'll bet most of you had the same experience! As for the rest of the disciples, well, they got quiet very quickly.

I'll bet a few of them leaned in a listen closer, so they could hear what was being said better. They all knew that Peter had this coming. Then again, most of them were nowhere to be seen on Good Friday. They scattered like cockroaches in fear for their lives right after Jesus was arrested. They were probably worried that Jesus would be calling them out next.

All Jesus does is ask the question again. “Simon son of John, do you love me?” So, twice he—Peter—hears, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Twice he replies, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” The third time, hurt the text tells us, Peter answers, “Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.” And Jesus keeps telling Peter that if he **does** indeed love him—as Peter keeps insisting he does—that he’s to feed his sheep, he’s to tend his lambs.

But that’s just the outward conversation, because what Jesus is really saying is this: If you love me, do something about it. Prove it. Show me. And, not like the last time. When we first met, I said, “come and see,” now I’m saying: “Go and do.” Feed. Tend. Don’t just say it. Do it. What’s interesting, though, is what Jesus **doesn’t** say. He doesn’t say is, “If you love me, I want you to feel all warm and fuzzy, all happy and tingly inside.” That’s not the kind of love that Jesus is talking about, because it’s at that point in the conversation that Jesus goes for broke. After essentially telling Peter, not just that he was going to die, but exactly how that would happen, Jesus then says to Peter: “Follow me.” Jesus is not pulling his punches here, we’re talking full disclosure.

Now, this isn’t the first time Jesus has told Peter to “follow me.” But this time it’s different. This time, Peter knows what’s at stake. This time, there’s no room for denial. There’s no time for his sinking doubts. This time, Peter is to follow Jesus all the way.

In love.

In ministering to others.

In spreading the Good News.

In life.

In death.

But then, of course, there’s still one more level to the conversation—and it’s crucial. John recorded this for us in his gospel because we’re also in on the conversation. Jesus’ question to Peter is directed squarely at us. Because if we love Jesus—and most of us would say we do—then feeling something in our hearts isn’t good enough. Thinking something in our minds isn’t enough either.

Westwood First Presbyterian Church, here’s the thing: Jesus is asking us, each of us: “Do you love me? How will we answer? Will we answer as Peter did: “Lord, you know everything, you know that we love you?” If we do, we need to feed his lambs. We need to tend his sheep. We need to do it. We need to live out that love. We need to show that love.

We need to follow Jesus, the Risen Christ, all the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.