

Feed My Sheep

Scripture Text: John 21:15-19

Lesson Synopsis: Students will explore the themes of forgiveness and reinstatement by looking at Jesus' reinstatement of Peter in the Gospel of John.

Digging In

Background

To understand the story of Jesus reinstating Peter, it is important to first refresh our memories in regard to several of Peter's previous appearances in John's gospel. Below are references along with summaries of the passages in question.

John 13:31-38

In this passage, Peter makes the grand statement, "I will lay down my life for you," after Jesus has told both Peter and the other disciples that he is going to a place that they cannot come. In his response, Peter displays great faith in his own commitment to Jesus. He will go so far as to die for his Lord, thereby begging the question, "Lord, why can't I follow you now?" One so committed could surely follow his Teacher to the ends of the earth! In response, Jesus predicts just the opposite in saying, "Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." In all of this, it is important to note that Peter holds himself over the other disciples. Jesus may say that no one can follow him now, and that may be a proper description of the others, but Peter refuses to believe that such a thing could be true of himself. With this lens applied to the passage, we hear echoes of Matthew's account of the same conversation. There, Peter says, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Matt 26:33).

John 18:10-11

In this passage, Jesus is on the verge of being arrested, and Peter's zeal for Jesus becomes apparent. Rather than abandoning Jesus to his fate, Peter draws his sword and cuts off the right ear of the high priest's servant, a fellow named Malchus. Jesus, however, restrains Peter from further aggression in saying, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

John 18:15-18

Here, Peter is being admitted to the high priest's courtyard as he and another disciple follow Jesus. Upon entry, a servant girl asks Peter, "Your aren't one of the man's disciples too, are you?" Peter answers this question in the negative, thereby offering his first denial of Jesus of the night. The scene ends with Peter warming himself by a fire with a few others.

John 18:25-27

At this point, Peter is still warming himself by the same fire, and his companions begin to suspect that he was indeed with Jesus. "You aren't one of his disciples too, are you?" they ask. Once again, Peter answers negatively. Then, one of the high priest's servants recognizes Peter from the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and challenges him by saying, "Didn't I see you with him in the garden?" Once again, Peter denies his association with Jesus. Upon this third denial, the rooster begins to crow just as Jesus predicted.

In these passages we have seen Peter move from confident to uncertain. He was sure that he would die for Jesus and even took a step in this direction by drawing a sword at the arrest. Violence, however, was not Jesus' plan, and we can imagine that things took a strange turn in Peter's mind. Rather than putting up a fight, Jesus simply gives himself up, and while Peter is willing to follow at a distance, he is no longer willing to identify himself with Jesus. Three times he denies the very Lord for whom he was ready to die just a few hours ago. Though John tells us nothing of Peter's reaction to these events, we can hear echoes from Luke's gospel, which tells us that Peter "went outside and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62).

Reinstatement

Fast-forwarding to Peter's reinstatement, we find him at another meal with Jesus, this time on a beach. By this point, Jesus has been resurrected and has met with his disciples several times. This is the first time, however, that we see Jesus interacting specifically with Peter, and a couple of elements of the passage bring to mind things that have gone before. As already mentioned, Jesus sits at a meal with his disciples. More than this, they are gathered around a fire. While these may seem like small details, we should remember that Peter's bold statement about dying for Jesus took place at a meal and that his denials took place around a fire. So Peter now sits with Jesus around a meal – their last meal included an unfounded boast – and a fire – the last mention of a fire was accompanied by denials. The atmosphere is ripe for a revisiting of Peter's actions, and this is just what Jesus does.

As Jesus addresses Peter, he begins with the question, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" with "these" referring to the other disciples. This question harkens back to John 13:31-38, where Peter held himself above the other disciples. Though they might not be able to follow Jesus, surely Peter could, for he would go so far as to lay down his life. In asking this question, Jesus revisits Peter's bold statement, gently challenging Peter's former pride. In response, Peter answers simply, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Importantly, Peter no longer holds himself above the other disciples. Rather than answering Jesus' question

of whether his love exceeds that of others, Peter simply says, “I love you,” with no qualifiers. Hearing this, Jesus says, “Take care of my sheep.”

While it may seem that the matter is settled – Jesus has addressed Peter’s pride, and Peter has responded with humility – Jesus continues his questioning of Peter. Whereas the question before was, “Do you love me more than these?” it now becomes simply, “Do you love me?” Peter has just affirmed his love for Jesus, but now Jesus continues to question that love. Indeed, he will ask the same question on more time! If the first question (“Do you love me more than these?”) reminds Peter of his prideful boast, its combination with two more questions of his love (“Do you love me?”) takes Peter back to the moment of his denials. Here it is important to note that I am employing an interpretation of the text that may be different from what many in class may have heard. As is well known to those who have heard this text preached, Jesus and Peter use different Greek words for love in these exchanges. As Burge explains, the exchange looks like this:

[15] Jesus: Do you love [<i>agapao</i>] me?	Peter: I love [<i>phileo</i>] you.
[16] Jesus: Do you love [<i>agapao</i>] me?	Peter: I love [<i>phileo</i>] you.
[17] Jesus: Do you love [<i>phileo</i>] me?	Peter: I love [<i>phileo</i>] you. ⁱ

As can be seen, the difference lies in the use of the terms *agapao* and *phileo*. Some commentators understand these verbs as expressing two different kinds of love. Agape love is the highest form of love, while phileo love looks to a warm affection. According to this view, Jesus asks Peter about the greatest form of love, and Peter, in light of his failure, is only willing to speak of a lesser love. Then, in grace, Jesus lowers the question to the love that Peter is able to express. While this argument is compelling in its show of Jesus accepting Peter as he is, recent scholarship has begun to push against this understanding. As O’Day explains, “These verbs [*agapao* and *phileo*] are used as synonyms throughout the Gospel, with no difference in meaning. For example, both verbs are used to speak of “the disciple whom Jesus loved” ... “God’s love of Jesus” ... “God’s love for the disciples” ... and the disciples’ love of Jesus ... There is no reason, therefore, to ascribe gradations of meaning to their usage here.”ⁱⁱ Looking at the text from this angle, the wording of the questions becomes less important than the number of questions. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times, so now Jesus calls Peter to affirm his love three times.

In one sense, it may seem mean-spirited for Jesus to require Peter to return to the place of his failures by asking these questions. As he addresses Peter, Jesus calls him “Simon son of John.” Since their introduction, Jesus has called Peter by his new name (Cephas, which translates to Peter) (John 1:42). Now, however, Jesus become formal in his address and then proceeds to remind Peter of his failure. We can even here how this approach pains Peter in his answer to the third question. To this point he has said simply, “Lord, you know that I love you.” In the third response, however, he becomes more desperate in saying, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Peter, it seems, feels the formality and the pain of the questions. Why does Jesus require Peter to go through this?

While it was certainly difficult for Peter to have this conversation with Jesus, it can also be understood as a moment of grace. After all, where has Peter's failure left him? Though the text is silent on this matter, we can imagine two possible responses. First, Peter may have felt that he was disqualified from service. If this were so, Peter would have viewed his failure as irreparable. Second, Peter may have felt that he had to earn his way back into Jesus' good graces. As Burge says, Peter may have been thinking something like, "Because I failed God, because I have failed myself, I have a lot to make up for." In the first response, Peter might simply leave Jesus' service or pursue service in guilt and despair. In the second, Peter would seek to earn Jesus' favor through a ministry that "knows nothing of the 'rejoicing heart' Jesus promised to his followers in John 16:22."ⁱⁱⁱ With these possibilities in mind, Jesus *must* have this conversation with Peter for Peter's own good. After all, what we see unfolding is not an exercise in guilt. No, Jesus does not leave Peter in his failure. Instead, he reinstates him to service. And this is not because Peter is somehow "good enough" or because he is desperate enough. Instead, it is purely a matter of grace.

In the moment of his failure, Peter offered an unfounded boast and then denied Jesus three times. In this moment of grace, Peter professes a humble love and affirms his love for Jesus three times. As Jesus leads Peter down the painful road of his failure, he offers Peter the opportunity to turn from each of his transgressions. In a sense, Jesus lets Peter know that his words of pride and denial will not be the last words in their relationship. Instead, Jesus, knowing full well the depth of Peter's failure, offers a new beginning that overwrites what has gone before. As Jesus returns with Peter to the fire of his failure, he founds their relationship on a new beginning in which the same Peter who denied can now profess humble love.

More than this, each time Peter affirms his love for Jesus, Jesus commands him to pursue ministry. With the wisdom and humility that come through failure, Peter is now called to "Feed my lambs," "Take care of my sheep," and "Feed my sheep." Each of these commands points to the same thing: ministry to the Church in the name of Jesus. In commanding Peter in this direction, Jesus lets him know that he has not been disqualified from ministry. Thus, in this painful moment of grace, Jesus reinstates Peter to both relationship to himself and ministry in his name.

As their conversation continues, Jesus takes another seemingly strange turn, though we will once again see that his words are fueled by grace. Having required Peter to affirm his love three times, Jesus now speaks of Peter's death by saying, "Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." As the text goes on to explain, "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God." Why talk of death now, especially the death of a martyr? Here we must remember that Peter boasted of dying for Jesus and then failed miserably. In speaking of his death, Jesus lets Peter know that his future ministry will not be controlled by his past failure. He is not doomed to make the same mistake again and again. Instead, the one who once denied Christ will one day affirm Christ even to the point of death. With this daunting and also encouraging prophecy expressed, Jesus issues the call of discipleship, "Follow me!" In all of this, Jesus has (1) founded his relationship with Peter on a new beginning, (2) reinstated

Peter to service, and (3) let Peter know that his service would be faithful. While this has been a hard and sometimes strange conversation, it has been an impartation of grace to one who had fallen. In these words, Jesus picks Peter back up and once again sets him on the path of discipleship.

Application

As we consider this passage, we can readily identify with Peter, for we all fall in various ways as we pursue our walks with God. During these moments of failure, we can be overcome with shame or with a drive to somehow earn our way back into God's favor. Both of these mindsets are detrimental to the Christian, for they both overlook grace. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, does not want us to become lost in despair. Nor does he wish for us to operate from an "earning" mindset. Thus, it is important for us to hear Jesus interacting with Peter in this passage, for he brings grace to the fore. Just as Jesus offers Peter a new beginning, so does he do the same for us, and this is not because of anything we have done. It is because Jesus' love is far stronger than any failing of his followers. As we hear Jesus speak with Peter, we can hear him speak to us as well. And hope can begin to rise as we trust in the love of Jesus that continues to overcome our failures.

Importantly, grace is not always easy. Jesus led Peter through a painful conversation in order to reinstate him. In this, we see the importance of confession. Jesus does not leave Peter's failure unaddressed. Instead he tackles it straight on. In similar fashion, we cannot leave our failures unaddressed, for they are serious matters to the God who calls us to holiness. Because this is so, we cannot take grace for granted, nor can we act as if our actions do not matter. Instead, we must see our failures for the offenses that they are. We must not stay here, though. In 1 John 1:8-9, we hear these words, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Confession is always teamed with grace and accompanied by forgiveness. With all of this in mind, we might say that the story of Peter's reinstatement calls us to own up to what we have done while at the same time trusting in the God of new beginnings who forgives and sets us back on the path of discipleship.

In the end, Peter's reinstatement is a passage about love and hope, and it beckons us to walk in the glory of both of these realities. If we find ourselves feeling disqualified because of our failures, we find a love that overcomes our sin. If we find ourselves seeking to earn God's favor, we find that it is already there. Because we believe in a love that overcomes all of our failures, we walk in hope, for we therefore believe that nothing, not even our sin, can separate us from the love of Christ. If this is true, it is for us to accept the extended hand of Jesus as he seeks to help us stand and once again walk in the light of grace.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following ice-breaker, “Tell us about a time when things didn’t turn out as you expected.” Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week’s readings in the gospel of John that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let students know that today’s lesson will come from John 21:15-19 and invite them to turn in their Bibles to that passage.

Identifying With Peter

- **Scripture Reading:** John 13:31-38
 - **Question:** How do you think Jesus’ disciples felt when he said, “My children, I will be with you a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.” (13:33)
 - **Question:** What is Peter’s response to this statement? Do you think that Peter really thought that he would be able to lay down his life?
 - **Question:** What do you think Peter thought when Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him three times?
- **Scripture Reading:** John 18:1-14
 - **Question:** How do you think Peter felt when Jesus told him to put away his sword?
- **Scripture Reading:** John 18:15-18
 - **Question:** Why do you think that Peter denies Jesus now after just having tried to defend him in the garden?
- **Scripture Reading:** John 18:25-27
 - **Question:** How do you think Peter felt when he heard the rooster crow?

The Reinstatement

- **Scripture Reading:** John 21:15-17
 - **Question:** At this point, Peter has seen Jesus with the rest of the disciples twice. What do you think was going through Peter’s mind at these times?
 - **Scripture Reading:** John 1:40-42
 - **Question:** What name does Jesus give “Simon son of John”?
 - **Question:** What does Jesus call Peter in John 21? (v. 15)
 - **Question:** What do you think Peter thought when Jesus addressed him in this way?

- **Question:** What is Jesus' first question to Peter? (v. 15) Why do you think Jesus asks this question?
 - See "Reinstatement" section above for more on this.
- **Question:** What do we learn from Peter's reply?
- **Question:** What are Jesus' next questions to Peter? (vv. 16, 17) Why do you think it is significant for Jesus to pose this question three times?
- **Question:** How do you think Peter felt when Jesus kept asking this question over and over?
- **Question:** In asking these questions, Jesus requires Peter to revisit both his boast and his denials. Why do you think Jesus requires Peter to revisit his failures?
 - For more on this, see "Reinstatement" section above.
- **Scripture Reading:** John 21:18-19
 - **Question:** Why do you think Jesus starts talking to Peter about how he will die?
 - For more on this, see "Reinstatement" section above.
- **Explain:** Drawing from the "Reinstatement" section above, recap why this hard conversation is actually a very gracious conversation.

Application

- **Question:** What do we learn from this story about Peter?
- **Question:** What should we do when we have failed in our walks of faith?

ⁱ Gary M. Burge, *John* (Zondervan, 2009), 587.

ⁱⁱ Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 860.

ⁱⁱⁱ Burge, *John*, 595.