

Matt Henry  
John 21:15-19  
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“Three Little Words”

Grace and peace...

We’re beginning tonight a series on the first disciples. Each week in Lent will give us a chance to consider the character of each disciple. And yet we’ll marvel at how the Lord shaped these ordinary people for greatness. My hope is that by looking at the lives of the disciples, it will feed into the culture of discipleship here at Friendship Celebration, and we’ll begin to see that we, as ordinary people ourselves, are also called to follow Jesus, make mistakes and actually become better for it.

So here we are on this Valentines/Ash Wednesday, many of you married couples having had your romantic soup supper. That’s hot! I chose Peter for today because he’s the most prominent disciple, but he’s also the only disciple that we know of who was married. If opposites attract, Simon Peter must have married a quiet, self-controlled, behind the scenes kind of lady. She must have been the one to smooth things over because her husband was always making waves. What a hand she was dealt, right? They say marriage is like a deck of cards being dealt—at the beginning of marriage, all you need are two hearts and

a diamond—and later on in marriage, all you want in your hand is a club and a spade!

Peter is proof that marriage and ministry can go together. I'm glad they do. My wife has blessed my ministry in many ways.

There is so much to say about Simon Peter. He is always mentioned first when the twelve are listed. He has a naturally dominant personality, boisterous, often being the spokesperson for the group. He is the closest to Jesus. Of the Twelve, no one speaks as often as Peter. No one is spoken to as often as Peter. He asks more questions than all other eleven disciples combined. As a result, no disciple is so frequently rebuked by Jesus as Peter. This fisherman was called by Jesus, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." He was inquisitive, took initiative and was deeply involved. Once when the crowd on the shore was too large, it was Peter's boat Jesus stepped into. On another occasion, Peter had the courage to climb out of the boat and becomes the only disciple that walked on water, albeit briefly.

Peter confessed Christ, only to rebuke the Lord and his plans, and then Jesus called him Satan. Talk about conversational whiplash! Peter was there on the mountain top for the Transfiguration. At times, he objected to Christ's ideas, only to go overboard in the other direction. "You shall never wash my feet!"

“Unless, I wash your feet, you have no part with me,” says Jesus. “Then my hands and my head as well!” Peter cut off Malchus’ ear in the Garden of Gethsemane, surrounded by many soldiers. He famously denied Jesus three times in the temple courtyard even after vowing his allegiance that he was willing to be imprisoned and even die for Jesus.

Something in our heart should hurt when we see genuine human effort falls so short and wane so quickly. He was genuine! He really meant it! We can relate to good intentions and subsequent failure. This is Peter, with all his strengths and weaknesses. And it’s on the rock of this confession of Jesus as the Christ, that the church is built to prevail over the gates of Hades.

So with all of that, I wondered what aspect to focus on for us tonight...and I felt compelled to go to the end of John’s gospel where Jesus restores Peter. Just as the denial of Jesus was public, so is the restoration. I appreciate how Jesus restores Peter in a way that the other six disciples who are present at this breakfast can also witness.

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Well, these what? Do you love me more than the other disciples? That might sound conceited to you. But it was Peter’s boast that he would never forsake Jesus. He was the leader of the

disciples. And if Peter is going to serve in the future, he has to be restored not only to Jesus but to the other disciples as their leader. They fell away too. They need to see demonstrated for them what to do with their own failure. Answer: spend time with Jesus over a meal that He prepares. What Jesus does is to provide the context of spectacular, miraculous success by giving them the miraculous catch of fish right before this. They have breakfast and that success is a gracious context for them to discuss their failure. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but the Lord's Supper is the most important meal of our lives. The resurrection is the miraculous context and backdrop of which we eat with Jesus. We put our failures in this context of grace. We eat, we drink, we hear the words Jesus speaks to us: my body broken for you, my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. In the eating and drinking, we're publicly restored.

We know we're forgiven, but we need to publicly hear we're forgiven. How many times? As many times as are needed. For Peter, the magic number is three, just as He denied knowing Christ three times. Now Peter speaks three declarations of not only knowing Jesus, but loving Him!

But after Jesus asks a third time, Peter is grieved. "Lord you know everything, you know that I love you." In our relationships, we say, "I love you"

but hopefully, we also show it so that the person we love never has to ask, “Do you love me?” They know it. But still we say it.

Do you remember the first time you said “I love you” to your significant other? It’s a moment, isn’t it? I remember telling Sally when we were dating in college. And do you know what she said back to me, “I’m not there yet.” I think I’ve won her over since...

When it comes to our relationship with God, we say we love Him by showing we love Him. “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” “Feed my lambs.” Jesus is commissioning him into pastoral ministry—the fishermen is becoming a shepherd. Later Peter will write in his epistle, “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). Sounds like it took!

On Sunday mornings, we’ve been talking about the three components of discipling: head, heart, hands. Where is Jesus working here by asking if Peter loves Him? Head, heart or hands? In the heart, right? This is the third post-resurrection appearance. I think the first two appearances were getting it through their “head” that Jesus was alive. That was obviously key. But here, Jesus focuses on the heart—removing Peter’s guilt that resided there. That guilt is in the way because it harbors failure and resentment. Jesus has to clean that

out. So once love in Peter's heart is re-established, Jesus gives him something to do—that's hands. "Feed my lambs." Peter is reinstated for service with these three little words.

Peter will be crucified and die a death that glorifies God, but not before living a life that glorifies God. Peter goes on to live and serve for three decades before Jesus' words would be fulfilled. And in that time, in his apostolic ministry, Peter does amazing things as God empowered him. People were healed by Peter's shadow falling on them. Peter raised Dorcas from the dead. He confronted Ananias and Sapphira in their deception and presided over their impromptu graveside services. He was imprisoned. He preached the gospel to the Gentiles. When Peter showed hypocrisy in Antioch, Paul called him out on it. Along the way, Simon had become Peter.

But before he is the Rock, he is still the same person. That's why, after breakfast, Jesus calls him "Simon, son of John." That's language Jesus had only used at the beginning when Jesus called him. "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter) (John 1:42). It's like Jesus rebuilds and restores Peter from the most basic and fundamental level. That's how deep and transformative this restoration goes. It's that back to the

beginning feeling we have in John 21 where the end is an invitation to start all over. And how outstanding are those words repeated, "Follow me."

We get to make the same move with every confession and absolution, with every beginning of the Lenten journey. Jesus says, follow me to the cross but also beyond it. The lesson: in Christ, we are restored. We are recommissioned. We'll have successes and failures. **Following Jesus is not about not making mistakes but it does involve learning from them.** It is about Christ restoring us. It's about knowing you are forgiven. It's about having your heart cleaned out and returned to its originally designed purpose: loving Jesus.

In Jesus' name, Amen.