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John 21:15-19

Freedom to Follow

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John 21:15-19 The Message

After breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Master, you know I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” He then asked a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Master, you know I love you.” Jesus said, “Shepherd my sheep.”

Then he said it a third time: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was upset that he asked for the third time, “Do you love me?” so he answered, “Master, you know everything there is to know. You’ve got to know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep. I’m telling you the very truth now: When you were young you dressed yourself and went wherever you wished, but when you get old you’ll have to stretch out your hands while someone else dresses you and takes you where you don’t want to go.” He said this to hint at the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. And then he commanded, “Follow me.”

Do you love me? That question is asked three times of Peter who before had denied Jesus three times. Jesus says if you love me then take up the the work I have taught you to do, teach the things I have been doing, take care of the people I have called you to serve—feed my sheep. And then, this: “When you were young you dressed yourself and went wherever you wished, but when you get old you’ll have to stretch out your hands while someone else dresses you and takes you where you don’t want to go … Follow me.” Follow me somewhere you may not wish to go.

Right before this interaction with Peter and Jesus, Peter and the other disciples had been fishing and they had caught nothing. A man on the beach calls out to them to cast the nets on the right side of the boat and with nothing to lose they do what he says. They are overrun with fish and they realize that it was Jesus on the shore. They obeyed Jesus before they knew that it was Jesus. We obey God, we follow God and walk in God’s ways, we trust God, and AFTER we have started following then we discover God is there with us.

Anyone wonder what it is that God wants you to do with your life? Some of us here might be hesitant to follow God and to trust God to enter our lives because we don’t have all the answers we want about where following God might lead us. Many of us would like to be more sure that the thing we’re doing right now is the right thing. But God seems to be less concerned with exactly where we are or what we are doing and more concerned with how we are doing it.

You are where God wants you to be. And you are doing what God wants you to be doing. Obedience comes before recognition. Follow me, says Jesus and I will show you the way.

Jesus is giving Peter a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. Jesus is

reinstating Peter to the community of believers by allowing him to confess faith the same number of times he denied faith earlier. Jesus is drawing Peter back into a community to which he belongs and accepts him for whom he is.

Jesus lets Peter know that Peter has a purpose. Jesus says feed my sheep, be a leader, look out for these others, devote yourself to this community. Peter is reinstated into the community of the faithful and given a sense of belonging, and then he is given good work to do and given a purpose. Belonging and purpose. You are accepted for who you are by God’s grace alone. Through the gift of baptism, we are invited to be a part of a group where we belong. And we have a promise that God will use us wherever we are to take care of God’s people and God’s world.[[1]](#footnote-2)

You are invited today to this community of faith because you belong here. And you have a lifetime of work worth doing with a sense of purpose. Now you might be saying to yourself, “I am not good enough. All of us have something that is hard for us to face up to about ourselves. Jesus comes to us, forgives us, breaks the bars of whatever has imprisoned us, and sends us forth to be who God created us to be. Jesus says, “If you love me, love your neighbor. If you are grateful for my grace, serve your brothers and sisters. If you are indebted to me for my unconditional love, reach out to others.”

One of the most memorable movie scenes I have ever watched is in the film called The Mission. The setting is the eighteenth century in South America. The protagonist, Rodrigo Mendoza, makes his living kidnapping the indigenous people and selling them to the nearby plantations as slaves. He is shown to have a human side, caring deeply both for his brother and fiancée. However, when he discovers that his fiancée has fallen in love with his brother, he becomes so enraged that he kills his brother in a duel. Mendoza is acquitted since the duel was legal, but he sinks into extreme guilt and depression and withdraws from society. Father Gabriel, a Jesuit priest who has temporarily returned from his missionary work, learns about Mendoza. The priest visits Mendoza and challenges him to have the courage to undertake a suitable penance. Mendoza begs the priest not to make his penance too light.

Father Gabriel takes all of Mendoza’s armor and weapons, ties them in a large net, and attaches the net to Mendoza’s waist, so that wherever Mendoza walks he must drag that weight behind him. Mendoza then accompanies the Jesuits on their journey back to their mission, dragging the large heavy bundle all the way through the forest and mud. As the party starts to scale steep waterfalls, Mendoza struggles but refuses help and proceeds to climb until he collapses. At that point, one of the priests cuts away the bundle, releasing Mendoza of his penance. But Mendoza goes back down, gets the bundle, reties it to his waist, and resumes the grueling journey.

The people who live at the top of the waterfalls are those he had recently hunted to sell into slavery. The tribe is alarmed that Mendoza is accompanying the priests. A member of the tribe approaches him with a knife, appearing prepared to slit Mendoza’s throat. Instead, he cuts the ropes to which Mendoza’s burden is tied and pushes the armor and weapons over a cliff. Symbolically relieved of his violent past and forgiven by the tribe, Mendoza breaks down into weeping and eventual laughter.

How many of us have been carrying around a huge weight for a long time? God is saying to us to let it go. Hear the words of Jesus saying today, “I forgive you. Give me your life.” God’s grace frees us to become whole. God says yes to us, forgiving us with our weaknesses and limitations. God says yes to us, receiving the gifts we offer. God says yes to us, setting forth direction for our lives, sending us out, relying on us to show love to others, empowering us to respond in ways we didn’t think possible.

“Do you love me?” Yes, Jesus, and I have work to do for you. May we leave our hesitations and claim our calling today to be followers of the Risen Christ. What is your work? What are you called to do in Christ's name? Here in this place we can connect with God and with one another and our journey of faith can be encouraged and enabled. We can connect with our calling and heed the words of Jesus who said, "Follow me." We are not alone, thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2016/04/easter-3-c-two-things-everyone-needs/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)