

**August 9, 2009**  
**Three, Two, One**  
**John 21:1-17**

Jesus is alive! We believe that! He is present in our world and in our lives! We believe that! But our lives are still a struggle. We have problems. There is still so much evil in the world. How do we live as people of the Kingdom in these days?

We live in the in-between time, in-between Jesus' resurrection and our resurrection. It is a time when the Kingdom of God has come ... but is not fully visible in all its glory. In these days, Jesus says, "*The Kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17:21). It is a kingdom of the heart - a kingdom of those who love God and are blessed with the Holy Spirit - a kingdom in the world but not of it. As we live in this in-between time, consider Jesus' words to Peter in John 21.

*Three Questions*

Scholars love to analyze why there are three similar, but slightly different, questions and answers in John 21:15-18. There may be significance to the small changes in the words used (lambs (v.15) - sheep (v.16-17); love [Jesus uses *agapé* - self-sacrificing love - in 15 and 16] - love [Jesus uses *phileo* - brotherly love - in 17; John uses *phileo* in each response]). However we have to remember that Jesus probably spoke to Peter in Aramaic not Greek, and Aramaic only has one word for "love." What may be much more significant is the value of Jesus' repetition.

Repetition is one of the key ways we learn things. Remember back in elementary school when you had to learn your "times tables"? - you repeated them again and again! Now you know - in your sleep - that  $9 \times 1 = 9$ ,  $9 \times 2 = 18$ ,  $9 \times 3 = 27$ , etc., etc. I'm not a person who memorizes things easily, but there are some Scripture passages (John 3:16, Psalm 23) that are grilled into my mind because they have been repeated so often. And when I am tired, disillusioned, tempted to doubt or give up hope, those Scripture passages are there, indelibly stamped in my consciousness.

We use repetition all the time to learn things! It can be enjoyable! For instance, we love to sing familiar songs! The more we sing them, the more they become part of our lives. So that in those times when we're tired or blue, the words of the songs come to mind: "*I serve a risen Saviour ...*" Can you finish the song? "*I lift my eyes up ...*" Can you finish the song? (like the TV show, *Don't Forget the Lyrics*).

At Christmas and Easter we repeat the well-known stories again and again, year after year. Why? Because we love them! And the Bible story becomes part of our story, as we understand how the Scripture relates to our lives, today.

## *Second Chance*

Jesus' three-fold repetition is parallel with Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus (John 18:17, 25, 27); each question and answer cancel out one denial. When Peter met the risen Jesus he undoubtedly had a mixture of emotions: joy that Jesus was risen, guilt that he had abandoned Jesus, and embarrassment and awkwardness at having to speak with Jesus again.

Jesus singles out Peter - the same Peter who had promised to stay with him and who had deserted him - for an intimate conversation. In the course of their talk it is clear that Jesus still loves Peter and has a powerful purpose for Peter's life. Here is good news about the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, no cowardice or betrayal is too great to be forgiven. No sin is too horrible, no evil too despicable, no failure too huge, no shortcoming too big that the blood of Jesus shed on the cross, the body of Jesus broken on Good Friday, cannot forgive it!

Peter had once asked Jesus: *"Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?"* "No!" Jesus replied, *"seventy times seven"* (Matthew 18:21-22). (How are your 70-times-tables?  $70 \times 7 = 490$ ! But the specifics of the math are not Jesus' point! We don't stop forgiving at the 491<sup>st</sup> offence! His point is that we forgive, and forgive, and keep on forgiving!). *If* that's the kind of forgiveness God asks us, imperfect as we are, to extend to others, *then* we can be certain that the forgiveness God, in His perfect grace, extends to us is even more infinite and unfathomable! Jesus practices what He preaches here.

Like Peter, all of us can probably think of at least one time we blew it! *"If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth... If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts"* (1 John 1:8, 10). That is the truth isn't it! But the good news is this: *"If we confess our sins to God, he is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from every wrong"* (1 John 1:9). Repetition time: can you finish this song? *"Amazing grace ..."* That's what Peter need to hear. Amazing grace! Complete forgiveness! And that's the good news he heard!

When I first began to read the tiny King James Bible my grandparents had given me, I began reading at Genesis 1:1 (a verse a day at first, then a chapter a day). One of the first things that struck me was the gap between the holiness of God and the "unholiness" in me. I knew I needed to be forgiven. When I began to pray, I prayed for forgiveness. I had never been to church; no-one had ever told me I need to do that. It just seemed obvious! I immediately sensed God's grace and forgiveness. I sensed that I had been cleansed. I had been made clean. And it was liberating. It was like a weight being lifted on my back. It was as if I could stand up straight and hold my head up, unashamed, for the first time.

That's the grace of God Peter discovered. And that's the grace of God we need to discover. It is free for the asking. John simply says, *"Confess your sins to him ... he will forgive you."* It's that easy. Maybe it seems too easy! We want to work for it! The truth is you could never work hard enough or long enough to pay the necessary price. Jesus paid the price on Good Friday, when he died on the cross, for you. *"It is finished!"* He exclaimed.

## *Single Purpose*

Jesus' blessing of a second chance by forgiving Peter and Jesus' repetition - three times - of "Do you love me?" were not just intended to make Peter feel better. Jesus gave Peter a purpose - a mission - in life: "Feed/take care of my lambs/sheep." That was the important message Jesus wanted to communicate. That was the purpose of the repetition.

Pause for a moment. What is wrong with this picture? What is Peter's occupation? Something is seriously skewed. What was Peter doing when Jesus found him three years earlier? "As Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers - Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew - throwing a net into the water, for they were \_\_\_\_?" (Matthew 4:19). Fishermen! What were Peter and the others doing in John 21? Fishing! When Jesus had originally called them, what had He said? "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" (Matthew 4:20). But what is Jesus talking about now? SHEEP! How did fish and fishing become sheep and shepherding?

The disciples have been fishing (their old way of life) - and have caught nothing. Yes, Jesus provides them with a catch. But the implication is that their fishing days are over. The old way of life they knew was empty. Simply working for a living at the old grind wasn't going to be enough. They couldn't go back to it and have a meaningful life.

When Jesus confronts Peter with his failure and sin, and offers him in return restoration and forgiveness, Jesus is inviting Peter to a new life. A different life. A different calling

Jesus asks all of us that question: "Do you love me?"

We can choose to avoid the question or to not answer it at all - and go on with our fishing. Lots of people simply punch in and out each day on the timeclock of life with no greater purpose than making a living - just getting by. The same tedium day after day. And it isn't very fulfilling. It is empty. It isn't particularly meaningful.

What are the "familiar nets" you love to stay with? What are the routines you do day after day that really don't amount to much - but they are so comfortable and so familiar ...

But if we are willing to really say, "Lord, you know that I love you" we may find Jesus challenging us to leave the comfort zone of our nets behind and begin something new - to get out of our comfortable, familiar boat, and do something completely different!

It may mean taking the time to reboot your spiritual life: spend time in prayer and bible reading every day. It may mean taking time to jump start your physical health: start exercising and eating better, caring for the temple of God He gave you. It may mean renovating your relationships: making quality time for your spouse, kids, parents, or friends. It may mean taking a new attitude to your job, lifestyle, recreation: seeing it not just as a way to earn a living or get by, but as an opportunity for mission and witness.

For Peter the call was to *"feeding/take care of my lambs/sheep."* This is a recurring theme for all of us as God's people. What did Jesus say was the greatest command (after loving God): *Love your neighbour as yourself* (remarkably similar in theme to "Take care of my sheep"). What does Matthew record as Jesus' last words to his disciples? *Go and make disciples of all the nations ...* (remarkably similar in theme to "Feed my sheep"). We are not created for ourselves. Our purpose is not to *"eat, drink, and be merry."* It is not get wealthy. We are *"God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works"* (Ephesians 2:10), we are to *"work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless"* (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg says we are called to be "exocentric" beings - with a focus on others (as opposed to "egocentric" beings - ingrown on ourselves). We are to be fundamentally concerned about what is outside ourselves rather than concerned about ourselves. Our purpose is to bless others, serve others, care for others, share the good news with others. Our purpose is to look beyond ourselves and see something far greater - a new world order, a new kingdom, that is characterized by love ... love for God and love - actively lived out - for one another.

The paradox of human experience is in Jesus' words, *"Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it"* (Matthew 10:39). Those who really enjoy life are those who give their lives away! Think of those you know who are most generous with their time and treasures ... and think of those who are least generous - who are more content? Sometimes, it goes against every fibre of our hearts and minds (blame Adam and Eve!), but we find our greatest satisfaction in giving ourselves away!

Practically, how do we do that? Find opportunities to help others. Volunteer in a hospital, in your community, at an inner-city mission, at church! Be alert to friends, neighbours, or relatives who need a hand (getting to doctor's appointment, babysitting, cutting the grass). Become aware of mission needs in Lethbridge and around the world, and give - generously (it may be hard, at first, but you will find it is a blessing!). Be honest - you do have God-given abilities, talents, and gifts ... use them (talk to me, I can help!).

C.S. Lewis writes, *"In the poor man who knocks at my door, in my ailing mother, in the young man who seeks my advice, the Lord Himself is present: therefore let us wash His feet."* When we begin to see everyone as just as special as we are, we discover the joy of taking care of Jesus' sheep, of feeding his lambs. We discover the secret to living in the Kingdom of God in the in-between times!

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