

Haydenville Congregational Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian

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John 21:1-19

“Do You Love Me?”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I do not know much about baseball.

Not much at all.

But I do know this story about Fred Snodgrass—I read about him in an essay by Rev. James Harnish. In 1912 Fred Snodgrass made one mistake, and the world never let him forget it. Apparently, Fred Snodgrass was playing center field for the New York Giants in the 1912 World Series against the Red Sox. It was the tenth inning, the teams were tied, and a fly ball fell into Fred Snodgrass’ mitt.

And he dropped the ball.

The Red Sox won the series and that mistake defined Fred Snodgrass’ entire life.

In fact, 62 years later, when Snodgrass died, his *New York Times* obituary read:

“Fred Snodgrass, 86, Dead; Ball Player Muffed 1912 Fly.”

Sixty-two years after Fred Snodgrass literally dropped the ball, the *New York Times* thought his mistake on the baseball field summarized his entire life.

Stunning.

It is a good thing we are people of faith and we believe in redemption. Otherwise each one of us could think of the biggest mistake we made in our life, or even a small goof and we would be defined by that forever.

If we were all labeled and defined by our mistakes then Peter, Jesus’ beloved disciple, might have had this headline for his *New York Times* obituary:

“Simon Peter, Fisherman: Denied his Lord in 33A.D.”

You remember it well: Peter stood by a fire outside the courtroom where Jesus was on trial when a servant girl identified him as one of Jesus’ followers and Peter denied knowing Jesus. Blatantly. Directly. Denied knowing Jesus. Then Peter denied Jesus a second time and then a third time before the cock crowed in the morning. Peter then went out somewhere alone and wept over the biggest mistake of his life.

If we were remembered by our biggest mistake, Peter would be remembered for having denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus told him he would. And if denying Jesus was the end of the story for Peter, he (like Fred Snodgrass) would have been marked forever. His label would have been “the betrayer, the deny-er.” That could have been Peter’s identity, his legacy for all time. But Peter and Jesus have the post-resurrection experience described in today’s reading from the Gospel of John. And that sweet exchange changes Peter’s story and Peter’s life forever.

Remember the setting and the interaction. After Jesus’ death, Simon Peter went back to his former occupation: “I am going fishing,” he says to the other disciples and they respond, “We will go with you.” The disciples go out into the Sea of Tiberias at night and they catch nothing. The next morning, Jesus appears on the beach but the disciples do not recognize him. Jesus tells the disciples to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. They do and their nets are filled with fish—a catch so big they can barely haul it in! The disciples come ashore, eat breakfast with Jesus and recognize him as the risen Christ.

Then, according to the story in John, “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter says to Jesus, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus says to him, “Feed my lambs.”

Then Jesus asks Peter a second time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus responds, “Tend my sheep.”

Then a third time, Jesus asks Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” But now Peter is hurt because he has told Jesus twice already that he loves him and Jesus is asking him again. This time Peter says, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” And Jesus replies, “Feed my sheep.”

In this story in John it is clear that Peter is hurt that Jesus keeps asking: do you love me? Peter has told him clearly twice already but Jesus asks a third time. During this exchange, Peter does not seem to remember or realize that he denied Jesus three times. **Jesus may be asking Peter three times if Peter loves him to forgive Peter for the three times Peter denied him. Jesus may be redeeming Peter for each one of Peter’s three betrayals.**

In the Hebrew Scriptures redemption is often used as a marketplace term. For example a person can reclaim or redeem a field which had been lost to creditors perhaps by a bankrupt relative. The field could be “redeemed” or bought back for the one who lost it. This is made clear in the Book of Leviticus. Leviticus 25:23-25 In a similar manner, Jesus may be redeeming Peter from his mistake—redeeming Peter from the effects of Peter’s betrayal by having Peter tell him three times that he loves him. The threefold back and forth encounter may be Jesus’ way of both forgiving Peter and removing Peter’s sin. Jesus is redeeming Peter, and today Peter is not remembered as the one who denied Jesus when Jesus was facing death, Peter is remembered as the rock upon which Jesus built the church. Mt 16:18

The “do you love me” exchange between Jesus and Peter has implications about forgiveness and redemption. But something else, more subtle, is going on in this passage, and that holds an important lesson for us.

When we read this encounter between Jesus and Peter in English translations of the Bible it appears that Jesus is asking Peter the exact same question three times: do you love me? But in the original Greek, Jesus is not asking the same question three times in succession.

In Greek, the question Jesus asks Peter the first time is “agapas me?”

Jesus is referring to agape love...he is asking Peter: do you love me with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength? Jesus is speaking about agape love.

But when Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” Peter is actually saying (in Greek) “philo se.” and that word...philo....denotes friendship. Peter’s response is: “I love you like a friend.”

Jesus asks one question, Peter answers another. Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him with an all-encompassing agape love... Peter answers that he loves him with a much more circumscribed friendship love.

The verb Jesus uses, agapan, conveys a profoundly deep attachment, a love for another because the other is so awe-inspiring and remarkable. Agapan is an undying, breathtaking love that one feels with one’s whole personhood.

By contrast, the verb Peter uses, “philein,” denotes emotional warmth and affection based on a bond of friendship.

The two words carry very different meanings.

Jesus asks, “Agapas me?”

Peter replies, “Philo se.”

Peter certainly is giving a response to Jesus' questions, but his answers do not carry the same intensity or devotion as Jesus' questions. Jesus is asking, do you love me with your whole being? Peter responds with an expression of a more muted love.

But then, if you study the original Greek wording, Jesus does something surprising. The third and final time Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him, Jesus CHANGES THE QUESTION.

The third time Jesus does not use the word for agape love, he uses the word for friendship. He uses Peter's word, Jesus asks about friendship.

The third time, Jesus says (in the original Greek) "phileis me?" Jesus alters the question the last time he asks it so that the question conforms to the love that Peter can express, so that Jesus' question is now in harmony with Peter's answer.

In this exchange in the Book of John, Jesus forgives Peter of his hurtful mistake, he removes Peter's sin, he redeems Peter, AND he changes his question to Peter the third time so that he can meet Peter on Peter's terms.

And this interaction changes Peter's life forever.

Following Jesus' death, Peter had returned to his life as a fisherman. But after this exchange with Jesus, Peter goes on to be a faithful servant of the risen Christ—he goes on to evangelize about Jesus' life and resurrection, he preaches, teaches and builds the early Church, he heals people in Jesus' name, he is a living witness to the redeeming grace and power of Jesus. We read about Peter's brave actions and eloquent sermons in the Book of Acts.

Peter is not branded as a failure; he is lifted from his past mistakes, forgiven, redeemed, and loved. Peter is not remembered as the one who denied Jesus; Peter is remembered as the rock upon which the church was built following Jesus' death.

Jesus was able to meet Peter where Peter was and to use him in the service of God. And notice how simply and elegantly Jesus launches Peter's future career as a spokesperson for the early church, a preacher and healer. Jesus gives Peter a simple instruction about what to do now, how to use his life, how to be of service to God.

Each time Jesus asks Peter: do you love me and Peter answers, Jesus then gives him an instruction, a way to live: care for my people. Jesus says it three times: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

Jesus is guiding Peter so that Peter's life will be useful, so that Peter will continue Jesus' work, so that the redeemed Peter will act in the service of God. Peter is not reduced to being "the deny-er, the betrayer, the failure" for all time! Peter is a child of God to be used in the service of God. If you love me, and you say you do love me, then care for my people. Jesus is very specific. After each one of the three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, Jesus tells Peter HOW to show that love.

Jesus meets Peter where Peter is and gives him the blueprint for the rest of Peter's life. **I think Jesus knew that if Peter cared for God's people, if Peter behaved like Jesus, if Peter continued Jesus' work in the world, Peter's love for God would grow over time into the fullness of agape love.**

Feed my sheep, which is care for my people, is not an idle instruction or a forgettable lesson. Jesus is saying: be like me, model your life on my life, tend to my people as I have tended to them. AND in the process your faith will develop and deepen, your commitment will grow and mature, your love for God will become in time all-consuming agape love.

If Jesus asked me today: "Andrea do you love me?"
I would probably say, "I love you so much and I want to love you more. How can I show you my love, how can I love you more?"
Jesus might say, the answer is simple: care for my people.
Do my work, continue my witness, live as I have lived, you will be doing God's work. And in the process your attachment to me will grow into an intense and fervent love.

Our love for God today may not be the agape love God wants and deserves— Peter's was not either when Jesus asked him directly.
But through Peter, Jesus has shown us how to demonstrate our love for him and by so doing our love will deepen and grow.
Care for my people. That is the legacy Jesus left with Peter.
And the legacy Jesus has left for us.
Care for my people.

Jesus' encounter with Peter at daybreak by the Sea of Tiberias holds a clear message from Jesus to us....Jesus is telling us:
I will meet you where you are. I will forgive you, I will redeem you, and I will always love you. Now care for my people. And as you do, your love for me will grow until it consumes you with grace and glory. Amen.