

The Commissioning of Peter

This Gospel passage is often seen by many commentators as a type of forgiveness for Peter, the three times that Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves Him paralleling the three times that Peter denied knowing Jesus on Good Friday. It seems to me that if this is the case, then does not this negate the meaning of the cross where Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins? I actually think that this is more of a commissioning of Peter of what he is supposed to do. We really cannot say that this is a call narrative since we have already heard in Mark's Gospel account where Jesus tells them that He will make them fishers of men. Notice that Jesus does not use the fishing motif when He tells Peter what to do rather it changes to the shepherd motif of feeding and tending the sheep and the lambs. The questions that Jesus poses to Peter can be frustrating. Peter may be confused as to exactly whom or what Jesus refers to in His questions. We can hear this question of "Do you love me more than these?" in different ways. Some of these ways are:

- Does Peter love Jesus more than the other disciples love Jesus? This sounds like Jesus wants Peter to give a ranking of his love, but Jesus never was about ranking people in some sort of hierarchy.
- Does Peter love Jesus more than Peter loves the other disciples? In other words, is Peter's relationship with Jesus more important than other relationships with the other guys?
- Does Peter love Jesus more than the fishing gear (& what they represent)? Or another way, does Peter love Jesus more than worldly goods and his own pursuits?

I think that while all 3 could have possibilities (and with John's Gospel, all could be possible), the more probable one would be asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than the fishing gear. This would be supported by Peter's decision to go fishing.

We don't know exactly when this event occurred, but it was probably sometime between the Resurrection and the Ascension. Perhaps Peter and the others were not sure of how to accomplish what Jesus had commissioned them to do, maybe they had doubts as to whether they could actually do it or not. Whatever the reason, Peter wasn't sure what to do, so he did what he knew - went fishing. Jesus is placing before Peter a choice: to continue in Peter's denial from the Passion of not knowing Jesus and do what he wants to do; or to go forward, being led by the Holy Spirit and others to places where he either doesn't want to go or didn't think of going. Jesus is asking Peter to choose between the safe & known or take up a new vocation of being a shepherd, taking care of the sheep of the Good Shepherd. Here, Peter's commission is changing from being a student of Jesus and a fisher of people to being a shepherd of the flock.

What this means for us is that as a follower of Jesus, as a member of Jesus's flock, as a sheep of Jesus, Jesus will make sure that there will always be someone who will take care of us, who will feed us what we need, take care of us when we need it, just like any shepherd would. In turn, as part of the priesthood of all believers, Jesus might use us to feed, care and tend others who need help.

It also means that as we follow in Peter's example of loving Jesus more than worldly goods & ways, we may be called to do things and go places where we wouldn't imagine ourselves to do or be. Personally, I would never have imagined myself when I was a boy growing up in suburban Western New York that I would ever be a pastor serving in rural Minnesota; but being willing to follow where the Holy Spirit was leading me, with the help and encouragement of my wife, I am here

doing what I am supposed to be doing. The key to finding what God wants us to do, I have found, is to be willing to submit our own will and desires to Jesus. In the words of today's Gospel reading, we need to be willing to cast our nets on the other side of the boat when Jesus directs us to, trusting that Jesus would not lead us to failure.

The other interesting thing about this text is the Greek words for love that are used when Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love Me?" In English we only have the one word, but in Greek there are 5 words of love, each denoting a different kind of love. In this text, Jesus uses 'agape' the first two times and 'phileo' the last time while all three times Peter uses 'phileo.' Agape love is a self-giving love, a selfless love where one puts other ahead of themselves. God's love humanity would be an agape type of love. Phileo love is a brotherly love. That is where the city of Philadelphia gets its nickname from - "the city of brotherly love." It is a love where people care about one another. Another kind of love is eros love which is romantic love. It would seem that agape love is a 'higher' kind of love in that one person gives of themselves without requiring anything in return. If that is the case, then why would Jesus 'go down a level' when asking Peter if Peter loved Him? I don't think that this is the case, of having a lesser kind of love, but more of a relational love. It is 'easy' to give yourself totally to someone else, to put aside all of your own desires to make the other party happy. What is more difficult, however, is to have a kind of relationship that is a two-way street, where both parties give-and-take in the relationship and both benefit from it. This would go along with the idea of the differences between belief and trust that I mentioned last week; where belief is more one-dimensional and intellectual while trust is more emotional and requires action and responses from both parties. We can think of phileo love as the type of love that is seen in everyday life, in the give and take

between people who truly care for each other. Jesus is then seen to be telling Peter to walk with other believers as they go through life, shepherding them to the safe places, the places of green pastures, to the still waters and through those valleys of the shadow of death.

In this text, we see that Jesus commissions Peter changing his calling from being a 'fisher of men' to being a shepherd of the people. The church has been changing over the last few decades and the last couple of years have highlighted that change. The ways of doing and being church are changing. I'm not sure what the 'new' church will look like, other than the need for the proclamation of the Gospel must be at the center of the church, but by following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can make the church what God wants it to be.

YouTube links:

Gospel and sermon: <https://youtu.be/YAOiTRPRkTw>

Service: <https://youtu.be/hobTr-Fsado>