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John 21:15-19
The Maturity of Surrender
M. Craig Barnes

The Gospel according to John begins dramatically by tracing the ministry of the Son of God all the way back to the time before creation. But it ends quietly at a small campfire.

The risen Christ looks at Peter and he asks, "Do you love me?" In the end, that is the only question a disciple has to answer - Do you love Jesus? Too quickly Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus simply says, "Feed my lambs." Maybe they just stared into the fire a bit before Jesus asked a second time, "Do you love me?" Again Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And again Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

A third time Jesus asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" The text tells us that now Peter was hurt. Perhaps he was hurt because Peter remembered the last time he sat by a campfire and answered three questions. Only then he did not claim that he loved Jesus. Instead, he denied that he even knew his Savior. But Peter is not the only disciple whose actions have denied Jesus. Maybe we are also hurt by Jesus' question. After all we have done, and left undone, how can we say that we love him?

Jesus will not leave it at that, however. The question "Do you love him?" will not go away. The whole Gospel of John has led up to it. The incarnation, the cross and resurrection have all been about the forgiveness of sin. So it really isn't about what you have done and left undone. It is about what Jesus has done for you. And at the end of it all is this persevering question - Do you love him?

Like Peter, we can try to answer too quickly, "Yes I love you. I told you that a long time ago." We can attempt to excuse ourselves by saying that we are not the kind of Christian who goes around talking about our love for Jesus. (After all, that is why we became Presbyterians.) We can even say, "Look, isn't it enough to just feed your sheep - to give to the church, to care for the poor, to do good to our neighbor?" No, it is not enough. Because sheep can get ugly and bite. And if you are feeding them for any reason other than loving Jesus, you will not feed the sheep for long.

So Jesus just keeps asking the question until we really hear it. Do you love him? Every time you get fed up with being the Mom or the Dad, every time you grow weary of carrying Jesus' ethics into the workplace, and every time you are exhausted by your calling or your failures - the question returns. Notice that the question is not "Do you enjoy the sheep?" And the question is not "Are you without sin?" The question is "Do you love Jesus?"

Perhaps we best echo Peter's third reply to this question. "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." The love is as flawed as I am, the belief is mixed with unbelief and doubt,

and the moments of doing right are marred with moments of selfishness. Lord, you know everything about me, but you know that I really do love you, even though it is not always apparent.

Now that we have really heard the question, we are ready to really hear the mission: Feed my sheep. Jesus goes on to explain what this mission will do to us. "When you were young, you girded yourself and went where you wanted to go. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go."

Now this does not sound real hopeful. We have aspirations, dreams, goals, personal mission statements, and plans to get where we want to go in life. Ever since we were kids we were taught to set our goals high and strive to attain them. Is Jesus saying that is wrong? No, he is just saying that it is youthful thinking. Eventually, you get to a place where you realize that life is not about making your dreams come true. It is about learning how to receive the unfolding of Christ's dreams, even if they lead you to a place you'd rather not go.

The first time I heard a sermon on this text, it was preached by Henri Nouwen at my graduation from seminary twenty-four years ago. I will never forget that great day when my friends and I marched into the great Princeton University Chapel wearing our brand new pulpit robes for the first time. They were right out of the box. Most of us had just received our first calls to a parish. We were trained, examined by the seminary and presbytery, and about to receive the degree that would permit us to be pastors. So there we sat in the pews of the chapel, uniformed, and ready for service. Then Nouwen went to the pulpit and began to ask us Jesus' questions: Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? We were all thinking, "Yes, Yes, Yes! That's why we are here. That's why we have knocked ourselves out to get here. We want to feed Jesus' sheep because we love him."

Then the preacher continued: "If you say yes, it will mean meetings, meetings, and meetings, because the world loves meetings. It means parishioners who only want one thing of you - not to rock the boat.... It means being subjected to endless déjà vu experiences. But it also means anxious hearts waiting to hear a word of comfort, trembling hands eager to be touched, and broken spirits with expectations to be healed. Feed my sheep, feed my lambs. They are hungry, hungry for God, hungry for love, hungry for life.... Your life is not going to be easy, and it should not be easy. It ought to lead you to places you would rather not go."

I have lost count of how many pulpit robes I have gone through since I heard that sermon, each of them tattered by the nibbling of sheep and stained by my own failures. But every Sunday when I place the robe on my shoulders I again hear Jesus' question: Do you love me? I dare to say yes, and I give thanks that the ministry has led me to places I did not intend on going because - and this is the important part - it's so much better than what I intended. I love my life, my work, and I dearly love this congregation. I belong to you, but I would never have dreamed that. That is my story. But you have one that is not really very different.

For all of us, the joy in serving Christ is found on the day that we surrender. It is found on the day that we surrender our plans, our resolve to go where we will, and our expectations of what life will be like and with whom it will be lived. Joy is found on the day that you surrender to the dreams of Jesus.

An old couple pull a tattered shoe box down from the shelf in the closet. It is filled with photographs from their past. As they sit down on the sofa, they go through them one by one, getting glimpses of the life they have lived. They come to their wedding pictures. He's wearing his uniform from the war. They silently smile as they remember how young they were, and how certain they were of their plans for life. He was going to work in the mill. She was going to make lots of babies. But the mill didn't last, and the babies never came. As they continue to pass the pictures back and forth, they remember the bar-b-ques with the lifelong friends they made when they had to move to the suburbs. They remember the camping trips in the old Rambler with their adopted children. They remember the small business they started together, and all of the long hours of work, and all of the loyal customers, and all of the kindness they offered along the way. It was as if, with every customer who came into their shop, and with every child who came into their home, Jesus was asking, "Do you love me?" What they don't really remember was the day they surrendered to the goodness of this life. It wasn't a life they had wanted to live, and it took them to places they did not wish to go. But now they are so grateful.

A woman drives up the long road that leads to the nursing home where her mother is waiting for her. She finds a parking space and pauses a moment before getting out of the car. She remembers the many arguments that have plagued their relationship over the years, the harsh words that can never be forgotten though they have both tried, the long years when they barely even spoke to each other. She knows that this visit could easily end up in the ditch, like so many before it. So she bows her head against the steering wheel and prays. What she doesn't realize is that her mother is also praying because she too is nervous about this visit. Neither of them can hear this, but so is the Holy Spirit praying, praying that they will both surrender to this relationship before it is too late. It isn't the relationship they wanted. It's the relationship they have. It's their only chance to be a mother and daughter. It's the opportunity they are given to say yes to loving Jesus.

According to the Gospel of John, in the end we realize that loving Jesus means giving up. You have to give up your old struggle, your expectations, your resolve to be Jesus. Give it up, and just tenderly take care of the sheep he has given you. Amen.