

## Theme: Unfinished Business

### Text: John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed *Himself*: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. 3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We are going with you also." They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing. 4 But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Then Jesus said to them, "Children, have you any food?" They answered Him, "No." 6 And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find *some*." So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. 7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on *his* outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish. 9 Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have just caught." 11 Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come *and* eat breakfast." Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, "Who are You?" -- knowing that it was the Lord. 13 Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. 14 This *is* now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. 15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Feed My lambs." 16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, *son* of Jonah, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Feed My sheep. 18 "Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry *you* where you do not wish." 19 This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me."

One of the toughest things about a big holiday or church festival, such as Easter, is that there always seems like something of a "letdown" afterwards. Did you know that back in medieval times (and in some churches still today) they actually called the Sunday after Easter "Low Sunday"?—no, not because of the "low" church attendance that usually follows the "high" attendance on Easter Sunday! Actually, it refers to the contrast between the elaborate ceremony of the Easter service and the return to the normal Sunday liturgy (*The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*, p. 292).

However, the term "Low Sunday" could very well also apply to the mood drop we often experience following a very exciting or highly anticipated event, such as Easter. Maybe you felt a similar way last Sunday? A bit "low" compared to the joyous celebration and packed house of our Easter worship service.

Well, just imagine the ups and downs the disciples experienced during the time before and after the very first Easter. Palm Sunday: emotional high. Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper: very somber and introspective. The arrest of Jesus in the Garden later that evening: frightening and confusing. The Crucifixion on Good Friday: a terrifying nightmare. The time after Jesus' death and burial: an emotional crash. And finally the Resurrection: the most incredible emotional and spiritual "high" imaginable!

Then, however, the followers of Jesus are told to go to Galilee, where they will see Him (both the angel and Jesus Himself told the women this on the morning of His resurrection **cf. Matthew 28:7, 10**). So they did, and all at once, this “emotional roller coaster” that they were on grinds to a halt. They go to Galilee, but for a time, *nothing* happens. And that’s where our text for this morning starts.

The disciples hadn’t been given any word or new instructions from Jesus so you can imagine that some anxiousness, some impatience, and perhaps even some boredom has begun to set in. Peter, who was usually the first to speak and first to act, finally says, **“I am going fishing” (John 21:3a)**. Now we could speculate that of all the disciples, Peter was probably the one who, despite Jesus’ resurrection, felt the worst. After all, remember he was the only one of the eleven who, on the night of Jesus’ arrest, had been given the opportunity—actually *three* opportunities—to declare his allegiance to Jesus and back up the promise he and the disciples had made that very evening, **“Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” (Matthew 26:35)**. Instead, all three times Peter denied, eventually with oaths and curses, that he even *knew* Jesus! You can imagine that the guilt and shame of all that still hung in the air between Peter and his risen Lord and Savior.

After Jesus provides Peter and the disciples with a miraculous catch of fish and they arrive back on the shore Jesus takes the time to take care of some of this **“Unfinished Business”** that still hangs in the air between Peter and Himself. In His conversation Jesus asks Peter about his love for Him. **“Do you love me?”** Jesus asks Peter three times and in the original Greek we find that Jesus did so in three subtly distinct ways, using different Greek words for “love” in His questions to Peter. Each time Peter says, “Yes.” Jesus’ responses to Peter were Jesus’ way of telling Peter that He wanted Him to continue to be a shepherd to His flock: **“Feed My lambs” (v. 15)**, **“Tend My sheep” (v. 16)**, **“Feed my sheep” (v. 17)**. Sometimes this section is called Jesus’ “reinstatement” of Peter. After predicting that Peter will die a death that glorifies Him Jesus ends His conversation with Peter with the words **“Follow me!” (John 21:19)**. That is exactly what Peter did for the rest of his life, even to his own crucifixion, according to tradition.

How many of us find ourselves in a position similar to Peter’s? How many times in our lives do we have **“Unfinished Business”** hanging in the air between us and someone else because of some damage we’ve done to a relationship? Perhaps we have betrayed a friend’s confidence by not keeping a secret they entrusted to us. Maybe we gossiped about a coworker or classmate, lied to our spouse, let down one of our family members, lost our temper or got in a fight with one of our friends, or maybe, like Peter, we’ve simply failed to live up to our profession of faith in Christ.

Because of these things, maybe it seems that we simply *can’t* move forward. Our failure, our shame, our disappointment and disgust with ourselves is an obstacle. And to us that obstacle seems to be insurmountable. Have you carried around a burden like that before? I would guess that we all will at one point or another in our lives.

Ernest Hemingway once told of an incident that showed the popularity of the name Paco in Spain, but actually illustrates this point perfectly. He claimed that a newspaper ad appeared that read, “Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon Wednesday. All is forgiven. Love, Papa.” When Wednesday came, the police had to send a squad of officers to that hotel to handle the 800 people named Paco who showed up! (illustration from Scott Hoeszee in *The Lectionary Commentary*, p. 600).

The burden of **“Unfinished Business”** with someone else is a difficult burden to bear. At times we may feel like we’d do anything just to restore that relationship and remove that burden from our heart and life. Sometimes the restoration of a broken relationship is as simple as approaching the person we have

wronged and apologizing for failing them. If they are willing to accept our apology the relationship can be mended. But sometimes, tragically, the damage is too great, the hurt is too deep, or the betrayal is too frequent, and the trust takes a long time to be re-established—or tragically, in some cases, cannot be re-established. No matter how genuine our repentance, the relationship is finished. Or perhaps the person we have injured is simply no longer around leaving us with no opportunity to write the wrong. Are we then stuck there with our **“Unfinished Business”**? Are we permanently stuck there unable to move forward? This encounter between Jesus and Peter shows us something important about these types of situations.

Notice from our text that it’s likely Peter must have been so ashamed that he could not bring himself to raise the issue of his failure and betrayal of Jesus. Most likely, he felt he was in no position to ask for forgiveness. He failed Jesus in His darkest hour; what could he possibly say to Him to make things right again?

Jesus, however, knowing all things (**John 21:17**), knew that this **“Unfinished Business”** had to be taken care of if Peter was to be fully restored and made whole again. So Jesus was the one who initiated the conversation that led to the restoration of their relationship.

But how did Jesus do it? What did He choose to say to Peter in His conversation? He could have said, “Get down on your knees and confess, and then maybe we can see eye to eye again.” Jesus could have at least asked, “Are you sorry for what you did, Peter?” But notice, Jesus didn’t do either of those things. He met with Peter and asked him once more to declare his love. In fact, He gives Peter a chance to replace each denial with a declaration of love. Notice, the actual words, “I forgive you,” are never spoken (or at least they are not recorded for us in the Scriptures), but surely forgiveness and restoration are what Peter experienced that morning on the beach.

Now, this might at first seem to go against what we usually hear about confession of our sins and repentance. We know that it is important for us to admit—to confess—our sins and to turn to Jesus for full forgiveness. But for whose benefit is God’s directive given that we should confess, repent, and seek forgiveness for our sins? It’s for our benefit! Remember Jesus knows our hearts, our thoughts, our attitudes. He knows whether we believe in Him as our rescuer, our forgiver, our Savior from our sins. He knows whether or not we are truly sorry for the many times we’ve sinned against Him. Above all, the Lord also knows that all of our sins—that’s right ALL of them—have already been paid for (past, present, and even future sins!) at the cross of Calvary! That’s what the words **“It is finished!” (John 19:30)** meant when Jesus cried out from the cross.

Now, I’m by no means suggesting that confession—especially confessing our sins to God or another Christian *verbally*—is somehow unimportant. It is important! In our fractured human relationships, the words of apology by the offender are often the necessary *first* step to restoration. But in life and in our relationship with Christ not every act of repentance is verbalized (spoken).

Think of some very famous examples from the Bible:

- † When the woman who was caught in adultery was dragged before Jesus, He dismisses her accusers and then turns to the woman, but does not ask, “Are you sorry?” Instead He says, **“Has no one condemned you?”** When she says, **“No one, Sir,”** Jesus replied, **“Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8:10-11).**

- ✝ When Jesus was eating in the house of a Pharisee named Simon a woman, a prostitute, comes in and weeps all over Jesus' feet. Without asking her to confess her wrongdoings, Jesus simply says to her, **"Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you. Go in peace" (Luke 7:48, 50).**
- ✝ And then there's perhaps the most famous story of restoration and forgiveness in the entire Bible: The Prodigal (Lost) Son. When the wasteful son in his miserable, desperate condition finally decides to return home he actually has a repentance speech all rehearsed and prepared to tell his father (**cf. Luke 15:18-19**). But when he gets close to his home his father runs to him, embraces him and doesn't even allow him to get his whole repentance speech out (**cf. Luke 15:20-24**). The relationship was restored without the words even being spoken!

In each case, including the case of Peter in our text for this morning, Jesus' focus is on moving forward. He is not saying, "Well, let's just pretend those things didn't happen," but by offering forgiveness before it's even asked for He helps us take care of our **"Unfinished Business"** so that the "New Business" of "New Life" in Him can take place! After all, God didn't wait for us to ask for forgiveness before He sent Jesus to the cross to earn that forgiveness for us!

Think of how this "forward focused" forgiveness played out in the lives of the examples we just looked at from the Bible:

- ✝ For the woman caught in adultery, the focus was on the future: **"Go and sin no more" (John 8:11).**
- ✝ For the prodigal son the focus was on becoming part of the family again: **"This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:24)**—in other words, become part of God's family again!
- ✝ For Peter, the focus was on what his work would be: **"Tend my sheep" and "Follow me" (John 21:16, 19)**—in other words, do the work God gives you to do.

That's what it is for us too! If we have **"Unfinished Business"** because of damage we've done to others and to our relationships with them, by all means, we need to do what we can to clean up the damage, and a spoken apology is a good start. *But* it's the actions that follow that are even more important than our words!

And if we, like Peter, have **"Unfinished Business"** with Jesus, we can always seek restoration with a confession to Him. He's always ready to listen, to forgive and restore us. But as this story of Peter in our text shows us, Jesus doesn't even wait for that! He reads what's in our hearts; He knows our sin, our shame, and our sorrow for all that we've done. He has forgiven us! The cross proves it! No one and no thing can take that away—ever! He then points us to the future and tells us: **"Go and sin no more."** "Be a part of the family of God." "Do the work God has given you to do," and **"Follow Me!"** Amen.