

May 5, 2019
Emmanuel, Chatham, VA
3rd Easter (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Do you think that people can amend their lives and change from a long held negative behavior pattern? I think that most of us would say yes, that people can change from their destructive and ego centered ways to lives that are both based in a relationship with God and focused upon the service of God's people. As Christians, that is the foundation of so much that we believe. But have you ever thought about how that happens?

We have just heard the story of what I consider to be the greatest spiritual turn-around in the New Testament of the Bible, the story of the Apostle Peter. Not too long before Peter was with the resurrected Jesus on the shore of Lake Galilee, he had been at the scene of Jesus crucifixion. Overwhelmed by fear and self-preservation, three times Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Three times! In our story, some days later, he has flipped. Not only has Peter given up his denials of Jesus, he even takes it to the next step of three times saying that he loves Jesus.

Can a person who three times failed Jesus as Jesus was dying on a cross turn away from fear and overwhelming needs for self-preservation to profess his love for and willingness to follow the one whom so miserably he had failed? From time to time these significant life turn-around events can be troubling to watch. Though in our Christian faith we will say that we believe that God can enact such changes in the lives of persons, also there is a side of us that is skeptical about people like Peter who make such drastic changes of attitude and action. Often I've heard people say about such life changes that it is simply too good to be true. Well, is it? Can people make such radical changes? Can people turn away from their own self-serving needs and live the sacrificial life to which God calls us?

John, a good friend of mine, was a career Navy diver and now runs a commercial diving school near Seattle, Washington. Once John described to me how the Navy diver school works to help students to rewire their brains to turn away from their fears and personal need compulsions so that they can accomplish the mission.

John told me that this rewiring takes place in the Mental Toughness Program that candidates to be Navy divers have to get through. The diver candidates are placed underwater in a deep pool for 20 minutes with a breathing tank while their trainers perform a series of attacks on their air supply. The diver candidates are expected to stay calm, untangle the obstacles that interfere with their breathing apparatus, and remain underwater for the full time.

Beforehand, the diver candidates are taught how the brain works, and how the brain's center for emotions, including fear, processes input. The candidates are taught that to control their fear they need to allow another part of the brain to override the fear

response. In the world of neuroscience this is called neuroplasticity: the ability of the brain to learn and change; to rewire.

Peter went through such an event as Jesus taught him to get focused upon the mission in front of him and make the service of God's people his priority. Three times Peter, the one who denied that he even knew Jesus, was asked the awkward and pointed question. "Peter, do you love me."

Jesus' question to Peter is more than an academic tutorial. When Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" undoubtably Peter would have been running in his head the tapes of his three-time denial of Jesus. What at first may appear to be an exercise in Peter's humiliation ends up being the missional challenge to Peter.

The relationship Peter had with Jesus was fraught with Peter's impetuosity, unmet expectations and downright failure. This is the same Peter who some days before had denied even knowing Jesus as he was walking toward and being put upon a cross to die. In our story today Peter does a real about face, a 180 degree pivot affirming that he loves Jesus whom he had denied.

Remember Thomas from last Sunday – Thomas who would not believe that Jesus had arisen from the dead unless he could see the risen Jesus, and put his hands in the hole in his side and his hands? Thomas was the original "Show Me" guy, long before the state of Missouri adopted "show me" as their motto.

Today you might go so far as to say that Jesus has taken up the mantle of Thomas and essentially is saying to the apostle Peter, if you really love me as you have said three times you will be **SHOWING ME THAT LOVE THROUGH ACTS** that consist of feeding and tending my sheep – my people!

Peter is the embodiment of what it means to turn from his wicked ways, have his brain rewired, and to live in relationship to Jesus. Peter's profession of his love for Jesus immediately results in Jesus' instructions of what comes next: follow me as we tend and feed the sheep. Love and service are inextricably intertwined with one another. This service is the basis of what Jesus called the two greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."¹

Recently my wife and I were in Ireland. We couldn't help but notice that once we got outside of all the urban and residential centers that the green countryside was marked with sheep. It is easy to see that sheep, perhaps not the most intelligent of all God's four-legged creatures, require lots of care and feeding. The job of doing that is the work of a shepherd. Jesus is telling Peter that his mission is to be the shepherd who cares for and gives his life for the sheep

¹ Matthew 22:37-39, NRSV.

During Jesus' day, and even today in parts of that world, at night the shepherd would herd the sheep into the safety of a sheep pen. Though a "sheep pen" might conjure up for us a picture of a green field encompassed by a tidy white fence, sheep grazing upon the grass, and being cared for by a shepherd who stands upright holding his staff while affectionately smiling at the animals, the reality is something else entirely. As often as not, then and now, the sheep would be herded into a hewn out rock to keep them safe from animals and humans that might bring them harm. For the night the shepherd would lay across the gate or opening of the rock. If you are going to get to the sheep, quite literally, a predatory animal or a human would have to go through the shepherd. In Israel and Jordan those sheep pens are still being used today. They are anything but tidy and pastoral. The truth is that they are dirty and smelly enclosures. The tending and feeding of these sheep is hard work.

When Jesus told Peter to follow him as he tends and feeds the sheep, this is the image of shepherding Peter would have had in his mind. Peter, a good Jewish man, would have known the words of the Psalm of David that would have been repeated in the temple: "We are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving."²

Confirmands, "Do you love me?" is the primary question about whether you are willing and able to follow Christ. In the Gospel of Luke there is a story of three persons who said that they wanted to be followers of Jesus, but each of the three had what they thought was a good excuse to postpone being Jesus' follower. Jesus' response to the three was: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."³ In other words, when the time comes to follow me, there is no looking back; no turning around.

Confirmands, this is our story. We are people of the story – as we are people are called to put our hands on the plow of life and not look back; people whom Jesus is calling to follow him. As Jesus' followers we are called to tend and feed his sheep. Just like with the work of the shepherd who literally tends and feeds sheep, this can be messy work. People are at times all too much like sheep. They are unpredictable. At times they will be very receptive to your overtures of care and concern. At other times they may just tell you to leave them alone, even when their human needs are incredibly great and when you have what it required to help them.

Confirmands, in just a few moments we will stand around the baptismal font and renew our baptismal vows. Among other things I'll be asking you, "Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?" God willing you will respond, "I do, and with God's grace I will follow him as my Savior and Lord."⁴ If you are like most of us, this will not be the last time for you to renew your commitment to Jesus. Being a Christ-follower is much more of a process than it is a destination. We will profess our love for our Lord, and

² Psalm 100:3b-4a, NSRV.

³ Luke 9:62, NSRV.

⁴ Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 402.

then sooner or later we will fail. Thanks be to God that we follow a loving God for whom there are second chances.

Like Peter, Jesus today is asking us to follow him. As we prepare to renew our baptismal vows, I invite you to pause with me for a time to quietly think about what it means for you to love and follow Jesus Christ.