# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

**“Peter”**

**John 21:15-17**

**May 16, 2021**

I lived the first fifteen years of my life in Europe. My parents were American missionaries with an organization called The Navigators, and they ministered to college students in several countries during those years. When I was thirteen we moved from Denmark to Norway where I joined a local soccer team. One day after practice, one of my teammates asked me, “What does your dad do?” “He works for the Navigators. It’s an American shipping company,” I replied. Even as I spoke the lie I knew I was doing it because I was worried about what my teammate would think about me if I told him my parents were missionaries. I didn’t want to be made fun of or seen as being different from the others on the team, so I lied.

For several weeks I felt a deep sense of guilt. I was sure my parents could tell that I had done something wrong, for I was still at that age where children believe their parents know everything about them. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore and I told my dad what I had done. His response made me feel even worse. “Yes, I know,” he said. “The boy you spoke with mentioned it to his father, who happens to know me through the college.”

My dad and I talked. I asked him why he hadn’t said anything to me about it. He told me that he was waiting to see what I would do. I realized that he had treated me no different during those weeks that he had known, continuing to be as kind toward me as he had always been. No confrontation, no probing questions, no “silent treatment.” Just a dad loving his son.

That experience with my dad came to mind as I thought about the relationship between Jesus and his disciple Peter. Peter was a man who was determined to support Jesus at all costs. “I am ready to die for you,” he said to Jesus on the night that Judas would betray Jesus. “Die for me?” Jesus replied. “No, before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will have denied three times that you even know me.” I don’t doubt that Peter meant it when he pledged his life to Jesus. His intention was strong, but even having been forewarned by Jesus, he was unable to follow through on his commitment. We will get to our primary text shortly, but first I want to read Luke:22:54-62

So they arrested [Jesus] and led him to the high priest’s home. And Peter followed at a distance. The guards lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat around it, and Peter joined them there. A servant girl noticed him in the firelight and began staring at him. Finally she said, “This man was one of Jesus’ followers!” But Peter denied it. “Woman,” he said, “I don’t even know him!” After a while someone else looked at him and said, “You must be one of them!” “No, man, I’m not!” Peter retorted. About an hour later someone else insisted, “This must be one of them, because he is a Galilean, too.” But Peter said, “Man, I don’t know what you are talking about.” And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. At that moment the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Suddenly, the Lord’s words flashed through Peter’s mind: “Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me.” And Peter left the courtyard, weeping bitterly.

It is now several days later, and Peter is about to have another encounter around a charcoal fire, this time with Jesus. Peter and some of his fellow disciples have been fishing all night but have caught nothing. As they are returning to the shore a distant voice calls across the water and asks if they have caught any fish. “No,” they reply. Then the man says, “Throw your net on the right-hand side of the boat.” They do so and are unable to pull the net in because there are so many fish in it. It is at this point that they realize it is Jesus on the shore. Peter immediately jumps into the water and swims the one hundred yards or so to Jesus. Having made a fire and begun to cook some fish and bake some bread, Jesus invites them to join him for breakfast. We pick up the story in John 21:15-17

After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.” “Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him. Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.” “Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said. A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep.”

I wonder what was going through Peter’s mind as he sat by the charcoal fire having breakfast with Jesus. I’m sure he was thinking of another charcoal fire, around which he had denied Jesus three times. How could he have done such a thing? He loved Jesus, didn’t he? Or, did he? If he really loved Jesus, would he have failed him like this? I think Peter was struggling with what all of us struggle with at times. Our spirit is willing – we want to love Jesus – but our flesh is weak – we do things that bring our love for Jesus into question. Just as I denied my father to my friend, so I still find myself denying Jesus by acting in ways that are disloyal to him. The question is this: does Peter really love Jesus? For Peter to continue in his relationship with Jesus, and for Jesus to be able to use Peter as a leader among his followers, that question needs to be addressed.

Three times Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” The question is not whether Jesus loves Peter, for surely he does. Nothing that Peter has done or will ever do can change that reality. But, for Peter to be emotionally reconnected with Jesus, for Peter to be able to accept not only forgiveness for his denial but to move beyond the shame he feels, he needs for his own heart to be convinced that he really loves Jesus. Peter responds not simply by saying that he loves Jesus. He says that Jesus knows that he loves him, and it is precisely Peter’s confidence in Jesus’ awareness of his love that allows him to be led by Jesus to the place of emotional healing for his denial.

In this exchange, Peter experiences the hurt and the healing of forgiveness. Face to face with Jesus, Peter knows that he has failed Jesus, but just as certainly he knows that Jesus has forgiven him and loves him still. And by the end of the conversation, Peter knows that his love for Jesus has not been destroyed by his disobedience.

We are all like Peter, trying our best, wanting to love Jesus, getting it wrong, needing God’s forgiveness, needing in our brokenness to trust him and allow him to heal us. Be assured that he still loves you, and be assured that you still love him.