

Do You Trust Me To Forgive?

A sermon on John 21:15-25 by Rev. Heather Thomsen Tang

There's a famous story in Thomsen family lore dating back to when my sister and I were little, and had done something mischievous. The details of whatever trouble we stirred up have faded into the sunset of memory. But as the story goes, our mom got upset at something we had done, and sent us to our rooms on time out, while mom also went to her room to lay down, tired from corralling her mischievous daughters. In the meanwhile, Karissa and I snuck into the kitchen and decided to make it up to her by baking her a treat. Using our most creative culinary skills, we concocted a delectable dessert: saltine crackers with microwave-melted marshmallows, topped with red grapes. I mean, who wouldn't be lining up at their nearest bakery for that sumptuous snack, right?! Feeling very proud of our snack, we rushed into her bedroom to deliver it to her, jumping on the bed, and shouting, "we're sorry, mommy!" Our mom couldn't help but smile, and hugged us and thanked us for our thoughtfulness. My seven-year-old self was pretty sure it was the gooey grapes that won her over.

Admittedly, it was years later, after my taste buds became more refined, that I realized my mom's forgiveness likely came in spite of the saltine-marshmallow-grape concoction. Instead it was rooted in her unconditional love for her daughters. I never doubted her forgiveness. I never doubted that regardless of whether I messed up, stirred up trouble, whether I exercised culinary creativity to make it up to her, regardless of what I did or didn't do, I would always be her beloved daughter.

For some children, trust – especially toward their parents - comes easily. And that's a beautiful, precious thing. Yet for others, trust doesn't come as naturally. Some of us have not had the luxury of growing up in an environment where we can consistently trust our parents to provide emotional, spiritual or physical nurture and care. Maybe you identify with the experience of parents who were hard to trust. Maybe you haven't felt emotionally, spiritually or physically cared for. And beyond trust issues with our earthly parents, there's also the complex issue of trusting our Heavenly Parent. For many, trusting God to love and care for us can be harder still. After all, we can't see or experience God in tangible ways like a physical parent. Sometimes it's hard to believe God is even real. So how can we trust His forgiveness and his care? This is the question we will grapple with today. Do you trust Jesus' redemption?

This same question points us back to the Scripture reading we just heard. Grab your Bibles and turn to John 21. Skim through the previous verses that describe the setting of this scene: Jesus is on a beach, cooking over a charcoal fire. Why this seemingly insignificant detail about the charcoal fire? Like in any good story or movie, the small details clue the reader in that something significant is about to happen.

The last time we encountered a charcoal fire in John's gospel was in chapter 18, when Peter was warming himself in the high priest's courtyard. This was the scene of Peter's denial of Jesus. Here in chapter 21, the reader wonders if Peter notices the charcoal fire on the beach. Is Peter connecting the dots? Perhaps his temperature rises as he watches the flames flickering against the freshly caught fish. Is his mind racing with the events only weeks before when his worst nightmare came true, and he denied the Lord he had sworn to follow even unto death? In intentionally locating Jesus next to a charcoal fire, the narrator is cluing the reader in to something that Jesus is going to do here. Jesus seems to be intentionally taking Peter back to his darkest moment. We imagine Peter's shame curling in the air like smoke. The scene is set.

And yet, as the camera zooms in from the sweeping beach scene to capture the unfolding drama between Jesus and Peter, their dialogue is different than we might expect. Rather than saying anything directly about Peter's denial, Jesus merely says, *Simon son of John, do you love me?* And then two more times Jesus asks the same question. Why the three-fold repetition? Because Jesus is recapitulating Peter's denial in the high priest courtyard. Three times Peter's ragged voice echoed against the darkness, *I do not know this man!* And for each of those cries of betrayal, Jesus says to Peter: *do you love me?*

In echoing the scene of what may be Peter's gravest sin, Jesus is setting Peter up to receive forgiveness in a visceral way. Embedded in the three-fold question, *do you love me?* is deep forgiveness, deep redemption, deep love. In surrounding Peter with details that evoke his sin, the implied question Jesus seems to be asking is, *do you trust my forgiveness will extend to the most broken places in you? Do you believe that you are forgivable? Do you trust that my forgiveness covers you, even at your worst?*

Maybe you have your own figurative charcoal fire – a moment or a season of betrayal or turning away from the Lord. Have you ever encountered the Lord next to that charcoal fire? Have you experienced the deep forgiveness of Jesus extended to you? Have you been offered grace in the midst of your darkest memory? Do you believe that Jesus' forgiveness extends to you, even at your worst? Take a moment and let Peter's words be a prayer from your own heart to God: *Lord, you know that I love you. You know that I love you.* Now take another moment - perhaps extend your hands palms up in a posture of receiving, and pause in silence to receive God's redemption. Ask the Spirit to enable you to trust God's forgiveness deeply and completely.

The scene doesn't end here. Jesus takes it deeper. After each of Peter's responses, "Lord, you know I love you," Jesus gives Peter a command: *care for my sheep, tend my flock, feed my sheep.* Under the surface, it seems that Jesus is addressing another implied question rising from Peter's brokenness: *can I ever be fully healed or restored? Will I ever be trusted again?*

Think of it this way. Consider a situation in which another person has broken your trust. Or has totally messed up, especially in a way that harms another person or puts another at risk. Would you ever fully trust that person again? Would you be willing to allow that person to continue in her role, knowing that she did something wrong? In this interaction, Jesus' answer is a surprising and resounding, yes! Jesus' forgiveness of Peter is so complete, His redemption so full, that He entrusts Peter with the huge task of shepherding Jesus' beloved sheep. And in commanding Peter to care for the people Jesus loves, Jesus demonstrates that his forgiveness is powerful enough to restore Peter to the leadership responsibilities for which Jesus has been preparing him. Jesus' redemption is more powerful than Peter's brokenness and the damage that it caused. Grace prevails. And grace is strong enough to accomplish restoration. Why else would Jesus entrust Peter with such weighty responsibility?

Astute readers of John will recognize the imagery of the shepherd and the sheep. In chapter 10, Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his flock. Here in chapter 21, Jesus shares that mantle of "shepherd" with the freshly-forgiven Peter. Jesus clearly trusts Peter with this task, failures and all. The redemption offered here to someone who has totally blown it is almost unbelievable. It's radical, even reckless. Do you trust that Jesus' radical forgiveness is strong enough to accomplish restoration in your life? That Jesus can restore you to a place of wholeness, in which you can operate fully in your own life and within your community? And, perhaps a harder question, are you willing to extend radical forgiveness to others?

It's interesting that Jesus links the command to serve Him with the question about loving Him. Jesus seems to be saying, *you can't live in the ways I'm calling you to live until you have first embraced your own desperate need for forgiveness. You can't be an ambassador for me unless you trust the power of my redemption.* If we are serving people without encountering Jesus at our own charcoal fires, the source of our work is coming from somewhere other than Jesus. Before serving the Lord, you first need to encounter the Lord.

Encountering the Lord in this way can be vulnerable. It means receiving mercy we may not deserve. It means embracing a second chance we may not have earned. And extending forgiveness to another can be equally hard, especially when that forgiveness seems unwarranted, undeserved, or that the other person hasn't demonstrated contrition and repentance. Forgiveness is a hard thing. The story about the saltines, grapes and marshmallows is just a silly example of forgiveness – it wasn't hard for my mom to forgive us, or for us to receive it. But in real life, forgiveness is hard. Let that settle into your own heart, your own mind, the dark corners in your own life where forgiveness really, truly, is a wrestling match you're not sure you can win. Will you trust, today, that Jesus' forgiveness extends even to you? Will you trust, today, that Jesus' forgiveness is sufficient, powerful enough, to bring about restoration and healing in your life? Will you follow Jesus' example of extending that same powerful forgiveness to another?

Trusting Jesus' forgiveness is hard for another reason: it demands a change in lifestyle, a change in orientation in how you lead your life. A life marked by Jesus' redemption is a life fully submitted to the Lord's leading.

We see this in the final section of Jesus' exchange with Peter, when Jesus clearly lays out what following his commands will mean for Peter's life. We can summarize Jesus' words to Peter in vv.18-19 like this: *no longer will you be able to lead the life you desire, do what you want to do and go where you want to go. Following me means that you need to be led by me rather than leading your own life. This might take you to places you'd rather not go. Are you willing? If you are, then come on and follow.*

Trusting in the forgiveness Jesus' offers means that Peter no longer dictates the contours of his own life. A redeemed life, a life marked by a second chance from Jesus, is a life that is *led* by God's Spirit. It's a life that follows the call of the Lord to places, people, circumstances and vocations that are undesirable or unwanted.

I'm thinking of some friends who felt the Spirit tugging on them to move into a neighborhood in town that seemed undesirable. Crime rates are higher. Schools are poorly rated. Houses don't look as nice. Resources in the neighborhood are fewer. And yet my friends bought a house in this neighborhood because they sensed the leading of the Lord to put their money where their mouths were: if they say they value diversity, they figured they'd better back that up by living in a diverse neighborhood. If they say they value being engaged with and neighborly toward people who are different from them, they figured they'd better back that up by actually being proximate and open to people who are different from them. If they say that working toward improving the local school system is a value, they'd better back that up by actually sending their kids to a school that isn't only focused on high achievement and the best academic opportunities for the most privileged students. My friends moved into this neighborhood precisely because they know that they do not dictate the contours of their lives. They believe they have followed the leading of the Spirit in embracing a neighborhood that has seemingly-undesirable aspects, because that's what a life fully submitted to God's call looks like for them.

Jesus says to Peter, *When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted.* If you were in Peter's shoes, what might Jesus say specifically to you? Maybe to some of us, Jesus' words would sound like this: *You chose your college or your career based on your or your family's own best interests. You're climbing*

the institutional ladder to achieve success and financial security. You live in the house you live in because it makes your life comfortable. You belong to that particular golf club because status matters there. You make decisions based on what you want and what's best for you or your family. But if you truly want your life to be transformed by my forgiveness, then you need to be obedient to what I'm calling you to do. No longer can you make choices based only on what you want. Instead, you need to be open to being led to places, to positions, to jobs, to environments that seem uncomfortable, even undesirable, if that's where I'm calling you to go.

Trusting Jesus' forgiveness means trusting him enough to follow him into the scary unknown, even into the undesirable. Saying "yes!" to Jesus' question, *do you love me?* led Peter into forgiveness. But it also led him where he didn't want to go: to death. The shape of the cross is always the shape of a life marked by Jesus' redemption. Does your life reflect the shape of the cross?

After these heavy words from Jesus about being led to places Peter wouldn't want to go, the passage concludes with Peter turning abruptly, and seeing the Beloved Disciple nearby. And Peter says to Jesus, *but what about that guy?! What's going to happen to him?* This just tickles me, because isn't this something we all do? How we love to compare! Here Peter has experienced Jesus' love and forgiveness, and has been entrusted with an extraordinary task that is unique to him! He's been given a summons to follow Jesus in radical discipleship. And Peter's response is to wonder about someone else!

But Jesus brings Peter back in and says, *Don't worry about the other guy. Don't compare yourself, your life, your sin, or your call to him. Instead, focus on what I'm calling YOU to do.* Jesus' summons to discipleship has a solitary focus: *you either embrace my forgiveness and what I'm calling you to do, or you go your own way.* In other words, we follow Jesus, or we don't.

This sort of hard line, black and white, can be hard for us to swallow. We love gray areas, we love middle ground. But there are only two answers to Jesus question: either you love Jesus, or you don't. And therefore, you either follow Jesus, or you don't. Jesus doesn't give much middle ground here. But in diverting the conversation toward the Beloved Disciple, Peter seems to be wondering, *can't there be a third way? I'm not sure I like the calling you've given me. Can I find out what this other guy has in store, and maybe I can get on board with that instead?* But Jesus says, *nope. You go where I want you to go. This isn't Choose Your Own Adventure. It's Follow My Adventure For You.*

Here, maybe for the first time ever, brash, impetuous Peter provides a positive example for followers of Jesus. We know from other parts of Scripture that Peter DID embrace Jesus' final summons to discipleship, even though it later put him in very difficult situations, and from church history we know that it led to his martyrdom. Here, maybe for the first time, Peter trusts Jesus enough to truly see His authority and His power. And so he trusts in Jesus' forgiveness. He receives the redemption that leads to his restoration, his ability to enact his calling. And he's willing to follow Jesus wherever He leads.

Trusting Jesus' redemption is indeed hard. Trusting His forgiveness requires vulnerability. And trusting Him enough to follow him on the downward path that leads to self sacrifice and the cross feels scariest of all, especially being led to places we don't want to go. But Jesus proves himself trustworthy. The question implied of Peter in this passage is the same one posed to you and me today: will you trust Him? Will you trust him to forgive? Will you trust him to restore? And will you trust him to lead you?