

THREE TIMES DO YOU LOVE ME

Can you think of a time when you were really relying on someone and they let you down? Remember the disappointment when you discovered they had failed you? Do you remember the impact this had on your relationship with them? That failure left a wound. A wound in you. A wound in the relationship. A wound in the other person. Not the same kind of wound but a wound nonetheless.

Remember at the Last Supper when Peter says to Jesus that he is willing to lay down his life for him, even die for him? And Jesus' response: "Ah Peter, before the rooster crows tomorrow you will deny me three times." Pretend you are Peter for a moment. Experience what he is experiencing. If I were Peter, I would probably have blushed with shame. Hearing that from Jesus. He was the One I loved. More than I loved myself. He was the One who brought the best out in me. He was the One who was always ready to forgive me and get me back on the right path when I lost my way. Or when I over-reacted to something. Or when I was too hot-headed or did not think through what I was saying. Jesus was always there for me.

And then. In his time of greatest need, I, Peter, let him down. I was not there for him. I got afraid. I lost my confidence. I grew tentative. In the end, I ran away when he was handed over. And then I acted like I did not know him when I was in the High Priest's Courtyard. I even denied I was one of his disciples. Then I watched him flogged. I saw him struggle to carry that cross. I did not help him. I hid in the crowd. Then they nailed him to the wood of the cross and hoisted him high for all to jeer at and mock. I hated it. I hated myself. No one had done this to me. I did it to myself. And to Him. Here was my one chance to really be the man I wanted to be and all I did was fail.

And now, I am here, back at the Sea of Galilee where I used to be a fisherman. This is where I first met him. This is where I experienced the miraculous catch of fish. But where is Jesus now? Yes, he appeared to us those Sunday nights but then what? Nothing. I guess I have nothing left except to go back to fishing. And that is what I did. But then there is this explosion of fish. I know it's Him. I have to get to Him. I jumped into the water and swim to shore. Now that I am here though, it's just Jesus and me. Very awkward. No words are being spoken. He is cooking some fish. The others arrive. More fish for the pan. And now when everyone has some food He asks me the most unlikely question: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" How can he ask me that? In front of everyone. He knows. They know. I know. There are no secrets now. But. He really doesn't seem angry. Or even resentful. Or even hurt. He seems—almost peaceful. Placid.

It is not enough that he asks me once. He asks me three times. He knows what I did. And what I did not do. I tell him I love him. I do love him. But. I am not really sure of my love. Not confident in my love. I have such deep shame. Too deep for even his forgiveness. Except. Except it isn't too deep for his forgiveness. It is not too deep for his love to reach. For his love to heal. This wound I inflicted on myself, he wants me to open it to Him, to His Love. Jesus wants me to let Him forgive me. It's one more instance of Him asking me if he can wash my feet—again.

Doesn't Jesus know I am too far gone for Him to forgive me? Let alone for me to forgive myself? But. He keeps asking me the same question. "Do you love me?" He even uses my name. Simon. There really is no one like him in all the world. He comes to me. He puts out food for a meal. He eats with me. He forgives me. And. Even more. He entrusts me—once again—with the task of feeding his people. He wants me to catch people for him. Me? After how I acted?

Yes. After how I acted. And you too. After how you have acted. You too after your denials. Jesus lifted me out of my humiliation. He removed my shame. He placed a healing hand upon my self-inflicted wound. And, amazingly, he renewed his faith in me to lead those who believe in Him. He did not choose the Beloved Disciple to be the leader. He chose sinful me to be the leader. If I can be made new after all I did, then anyone can be made new after whatever they did.

And so, Peter the impetuous one becomes Peter the sign of hope. Peter the forgiven one. Peter, the leader of the community. And what has done this? His love for me. And my love for him. Despite my sins. And Jesus continues to come to us. In Eucharist. He continues to place a simple meal before us. He continues to ask all of us: Do you love me? Then feed my sheep. Go tell the story of my love. Jesus comes to you. Jesus believes in you. Jesus forgives you. Jesus reconstitutes you as one of his disciples. Jesus heals you. And Jesus sends you out, continuing to believe in you. And he always will.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.