

## **November 23rd: “Do You Love Me?”**

Welcome, my friends, to our series on Jesus and his complicated questions and answers. As we know, Jesus was forty times more likely to ask a question than give a direct answer, so in these ten weeks, we’ve been taking a closer look at ten conversations that Jesus had with the people of his time. This series is intended to challenge us and form us to be more like Jesus, so it is my hope this morning that this meditation will give us some wisdom about how to live out these ancient truths in our own modern era.

We’re now in the final week of this series, so if you’ve missed previous sermons, be sure to check out our website—all our sermon manuscripts are posted so that you can go back and catch up, or reread a message that resonated deeply with you. These are resources for you to continue to use as we shift gears and prepare for the season of Advent.

Before we wrap up this topic, I invite you to take a deep breath, and pray with me.

*Loving God, we are here because we long to feel your care and compassion for us. We long to be reminded how deeply you know us and love us, despite our mistakes and failures. We long to be reassured that there is nothing we could do that would separate us from you, even if we are prone to wandering away. In this time of silence of reflection, we listen for your soft, gentle voice, and we wait for your presence to come and dwell with us. Fill our hearts with your generous forgiveness, and welcome us back into the warmth of your eternal embrace. Prepare us for a new week of being your faithful disciples, we pray. Amen.*

Back when I was in seminary, a good friend of mine invited me out to coffee—she said she had something she wanted to talk to me about. We sat in the Starbucks across from campus, sipping our festive lattes, and catching up briefly before she cleared her throat and began to share more about why she wanted to sit down and chat.

A few weeks before, I had said something that had hurt her feelings, but I hadn't known—I had just continued with my classes, coursework, and jobs as if nothing was wrong. But something was wrong. I had done something hurtful, unintentionally of course, but hurtful all the same. My intent might not have been to harm my friend, but that had been the impact of my words. As she explained how my thoughtless comments had wounded her, I could see how she had spent several days formulating her own thoughts in preparation for this conversation. She had worked through her own feelings, carefully articulated her emotions, and laid out in a clear way how this event had broken trust between us.

I've thought about this conversation every once in a while over the past decade, and as time has gone on, I've been more and more impressed by her courage and compassion. She didn't have to invite me to coffee, she didn't have to gently hold me accountable, she didn't have to do any of that. But that was her character, and it still is. She wasn't confronting me to be mean or to hurt me back—she came to me with vulnerability because she wanted us to fix this situation, she wanted me to own my part in our relational breakdown so that we could continue to be good friends who supported and encouraged each other. She shared her heart with me so that we could repair what had been broken. She valued our friendship enough to mend it.

As I prepared for this week's text and thought more about how God might speak to us through this passage, I reflected that my friend perhaps embodies a dying art—a lost practice of reconciliation.

In our current culture, it's so easy to cut people off or to dismiss even long term relationships. We've seen this play out in online discourse, or in statistics about the growing estrangement in families, or in our own personal friendships. All it takes is one difficult conversation, or one misunderstanding, or one resentment left to fester for us to remove ourselves from a particular connection. It's just become so natural to us for relationships to end.

If you're thinking of a situation in your own life right now where you've been like my friend, and tried to fix a relationship, or you've attempted to hold someone close to you accountable but it hasn't worked—I know that can be really painful. Trying to repair something but not being able to is emotionally and spiritually hard, and I do want to acknowledge that. Relationships require mutuality, a willingness to give and take, and if mutual respect isn't present, it could make sense that the relationship has run its course. But if you find yourself in a situation where there is tension in a friendship, or you're holding onto hurt without letting the other person know, you might be wondering what to do next. You might be asking, is this friendship worth saving? If it is, what could I do to repair it? How could I invite the other person into an opportunity for reconciliation?

The good news is that we don't have to figure this out by ourselves, we actually have an example of this type of reconciliation in scripture. So let's see how Jesus might help us to do this—let's see how he might lead the way.

But first, let's remind ourselves where we are in this biblical story.

Just prior to Jesus' public humiliation and death, which Pastor Heather brilliantly described last week, there are some scenes related to the activities of Peter—one of Jesus' best friends and closest disciples. Through the gospels, Peter is known to be one of the most engaged and thoughtful disciples, quick to jump into conversations with Jesus, and eager to impress him with his knowledge and actions. But in these hours before Jesus' crucifixion, he makes some mistakes—mistakes made out of fear and self preservation.

Back in John chapter 18, we hear that Peter is confronted three separate times by people who question him about his relationship with Jesus. After Judas betrayed Jesus and identified him to the Roman soldiers, Peter followed the crowd to the courtyard of the high priest who oversaw the arrest. As Peter and another disciple enter the courtyard, a servant girl asks, "You aren't one of this man's disciples too, are you?" And Peter responds, "I am not." Just a few verses later, the crowd is standing around a fire warming themselves, and again they

ask, “You aren’t one of his disciples too, are you?” And again, Peter replies, “I am not.” A third time, Peter is questioned—another servant asks, “Didn’t I see you with him in the garden?” But for a third time, Peter denies knowing or being with Jesus.

These denials, although done in private, and likely away from Jesus’ eyes and ears, are nonetheless extremely damaging. Our biblical author intentionally pairs these three moments with the scene of Judas’ betrayal, hinting to the audience that these actions are equally hurtful and emotionally devastating. Peter may not have turned Jesus over to the guards, but he betrays him in a different way, in a way that fractures the trust that had been built up between these two friends. As the audience, we’re supposed to feel the intense hurt and brokenness that occurs between Peter and Jesus—we’re supposed to understand that Peter carries a certain amount of guilt about his role in Jesus’ pain and suffering.

We hear in Matthew’s Gospel that Judas’ actions of betrayal result in his tragic death, but we don’t get the same insight into Peter’s mind or actions until the passage that we read today. Up until now, we don’t get to see or hear or watch how Peter struggles with the reality of his own mistake—that’s all happening internally. But can you imagine how he must have felt?

Thankfully, we know that Jesus’ story doesn’t end at the moment of his death. We’re here today, worshipping together and a part of the global body we call the Church, because Jesus came back and was resurrected in bodily form. And Christians believe in the power of this resurrection—because it proves once and for all that Jesus was who he said he was, and is able to do what he promised. And what does this triumphant, powerful Messiah do first when he’s resurrected? He goes out in search of his friends.

In John 20, we first hear that Jesus appears to disciples when they are gathered together on the first day of the week—they are locked away in a room for fear of the Jewish leaders, but Jesus comes to them through closed doors to be with them. Mary had seen the risen Jesus at the empty tomb, but this is the

first time that Jesus' male disciples are witnessing the miracle of his resurrection. In this intimate moment, Jesus says to his friends, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

I find it curious that Jesus' first words to his friends are words about forgiveness—it's like he knew that there were all these complicated feelings swirling around. It's like he understood that forgiveness would be needed in these early days of this new movement, as all these fragile humans figured out how to communicate God's message of salvation to a broken world. Into the mess and anxiety of this moment, Jesus imparts real power: he gives the disciples the authority to forgive sins in his name, he tells them that whenever they act in forgiveness, it will be carried out through divine presence. He tells the new leaders that forgiveness is at the core of their mission, it is absolutely crucial to their ministry.

But I think Jesus also knows that there is one person in the room who needs to hear more about forgiveness—there's one disciple who might struggle to forgive because he was still wrestling with his own need for mercy. And so in chapter 21, we witness a private encounter between Peter and Jesus. Peter and two other disciples had gone out to fish near the Sea of Galilee when Jesus came to them on the shore. Verse 7 says this, "Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water."

As they gather around a fire to eat together, Jesus directly engages with Peter. In the NIV translation of the Bible, this section is framed as "Jesus Reinstates Peter," which I think is a lovely way to think about this conversation. Jesus comes to Peter, one of his closest friends, and opens the door to mending their broken trust. In a gentle, intentional mirror of Peter's three denials, Jesus repeatedly asks, "Do you love me?" He gives Peter a chance to verbally negate his previous betrayals, but without any hints of shame or distrust. Instead, we get a beautiful, intimate moment of reconciliation—three times Peter says, "Yes,

Lord, you know that I love you.” After Peter had said no, no, no, Peter says yes, yes, yes. Yes to accountability. Yes, as an apology. Yes for a better, stronger, healed friendship.

Here’s the good news that Jesus offers Peter, and the good news that Jesus also extends to us: no matter how badly we’ve messed up, no matter how big the mistake, no matter how deep the betrayal, repair is still possible. No matter how much time has passed, or how deeply we’ve been wounded by each other, healing is still possible. Brokenness—either our own, or the relational fractures of our world do not have to be permanent, we can choose a different path if we engage each other with honesty, humility, and vulnerability.

Just like Jesus triumphed over death and sin, mercy triumphs over all forms of guilt, regret, and estrangement. Forgiveness is powerful enough to bring people back together when we share a mutual goal of reconciliation. Mercy wins every time, because love wins every time.

So how can we be like Jesus this week? How can we follow his example and mend a relationship in our life that is not the way we would like it to be? What does that look like?

Well, let’s focus on three specific pointers that I think we can take from this passage.

Number one, choose the right moment. Trying to have a difficult conversation while your spouse is trying to get out the door in the morning or when your friend is busy with a stressful task is not ideal. Find a calmer moment when both people can slow down and be fully present. Set aside time to chat over a meal or a cup of tea, and be intentional about putting away distractions like devices. You want to be able to look into each other’s eyes and connect, rather than working through your to-do list. This could be as simple as saying, “can we sit down and chat for a few minutes this weekend, I have something I’ve been meaning to say.” Or “could we make plans for next week, I have

something on my mind.” And give yourself some space to prepare and articulate your feelings—that can help the conversation remain clear.

Number two, ask a question, just like Jesus. You don’t have to ask, “Do you love me?” but you might say, “I really value this relationship, do you?” Or “I love our friendship, do you feel the same way?” This establishes a common ground before you get into the details of what you want to talk about. I get that this can feel uncomfortable, because you’re sharing your heart without any guarantee for the answer you’re hoping for, but reconciliation often requires that at least one person be brave enough to have the hard conversations, to have the courage to say the thing that needs to be said. It will be almost impossible to move forward if the wounds remain hidden, or the resentments remain unspoken, so take the chance and open up.

And number three, focus on repair. It might feel good temporarily to play the blame game and say something harsh, but the goal shouldn’t be to even the playing field, the goal should be to mend what is broken. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be honest about the harm or hurt that has been done, but it does require that you actually offer forgiveness to the other person. If the relationship is truly meaningful and worth saving, then say that. Tell your family member, “I’m bringing this up to you because I really want us to be close again.” Or say to your coworker, “I’m sharing this because I hope we can fix this.”

What if you’re on the other side of this conversation, like Peter? How should you respond? First, acknowledge that your loved one is being brave by bringing this up and trying to reconcile. Second, don’t jump to being defensive or dismissive, listen and hear if there are ways that you can apologize. And third, remember that actions speak louder than words. Saying yes to healing is a great step, but working towards that healing together is what rebuilds trust.

My friends, Jesus reminds us that our relationships are the most important thing in our lives—they matter more than our jobs, our bank accounts, and our egos. Being able to reconcile with each other is not only essential to our

ministry as disciples, it shows the whole world that brokenness doesn't have the final say. We have been given the divine power to forgive and heal, and our communities desperately need to see that not only is this forgiveness and healing possible, but that we are leading the way.

May it be so this week. Amen.