



# First United Church of Oak Park

## What's Love Got to Do with It?

John 21:1-19

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As a child I noticed that adults talked about the weather all the time and I thought it was the most boring topic ever. And it's perhaps surprising to no one that now as an adult, I talk about the weather a lot. Especially living here in the Midwest. Let's be honest, spring is taking its time to arrive. Yes, flowers are blooming, but they do so dodging spurts of ice and cold. Having grown up in South Africa, I of course didn't know winters can last this long. I have lived now in the Chicago area for more than 10 years, and yet I'm still surprised by our false springs. One big difference between life in the Southern Hemisphere and life up north is that Easter in South Africa happens in their fall. I remember the first year when the new life of the resurrection coincided with the new life all around me in the beauty of spring, I concluded that the Southern Hemisphere is missing out. The long winters here in the Midwest, the short days and bitter cold, stirs up a yearning in me for spring and new life that is poetic in its theological significance.

With our Scripture reading today, we find ourselves in the world of the disciples living in the reality of a resurrected Jesus. Just the previous chapter, Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb and raced to tell Peter and the other disciples. The Gospel of John highlights how the disciples didn't understand the larger context of Jesus' life and purpose. We find them not only misunderstanding his message but also not recognizing him. Mary thinks he is the gardener. He appears to the disciples, all of a sudden behind locked doors, and needs to show the wounds of his hands and feet to convince them of his identity.

In today's text, after a fruitless night of fishing, Jesus again appears to the disciples, and they initially don't recognize him. But he challenges them to give fishing another chance, and as they haul in a huge catch, a disciple recognizes Jesus and tells Peter, "It is the Lord." Peter rushed towards Jesus, only stopping in his haste to make himself decent before the encounter.

The scene that follows is so remarkable in what it tells us about being in relationship. Jesus models a way to deal with regret that feels counter to what our society values.

Remember that just a few chapters earlier, after Jesus was arrested, Peter was warming himself at a charcoal fire, amidst a group of people in the courtyard of the high priest. The situation is tense: Jesus' followers were at risk for being persecuted also. Peter, counter to what he promised Jesus he would do, which was to follow him even if it means death, denies him three times. "No, I'm not one of his followers, no, I was not seen with him, no, I don't know him." Peter must have been devastated in how he failed to live up to his own standards and desires; how he failed to be faithful in a desperate time. Perhaps that is why he grasped at the opportunity to make things right, jumped into the sea to get to Jesus to hear if he would get a second chance.

But what does he find when he gets back to that shore? Jesus made a fire, similar to the one he warmed himself next to when he betrayed Jesus. And soon after, Jesus asks his question, three times, again reminding him of his threefold denial.

In his book, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, John Bradshaw speaks of the difficulty our culture has in handling emotions well. He says, "We like folks to be happy and fine. We learn rituals of acting happy and fine at an early age. I can remember many times telling people 'I'm fine' when I felt like the world was caving in on me. ... True expression of any emotions that are not 'positive' are met with disdain."<sup>1</sup>

Bradshaw's words resonate with my own experience. In the complexity of human relationships, we tend to block over what is painful, we avoid messiness or what might feel awkward. We would rather act like everything is okay, distract through business or constant entertainment, rather than sitting in the uncertainty of regret or shame. Yet, in its healthy form, according to Bradshaw, shame lets us know that to be human is to be limited. This helps ground us in humility, which is essential for healthy human relationships. Our healthy shame may point us in the direction of some larger meaning.<sup>1</sup>

I believe Jesus knew this when he invited Peter into this therapeutic space where the mistakes of his past and his portrayal are so vivid. "Peter, do you love me more than these things?" At first glance it seems cruel, and I think that's how our society has conditioned us to view such an invitation.

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<sup>1</sup> Bradshaw, John. *Healing the Shame That Binds You*. Deerfield Beach, Fla: Health Communications, 1988.

We don't want to sit with these difficult emotions. And perhaps it's more than that. Perhaps we've adopted a definition of restoration without an accounting of the past. Jesus invites Peter into a space where he may remember his failings, and yet, through a renewed opportunity to love, bring it in communion with God's divine love where there can be healing and a first step of walking a new path together, one deeply mindful of the path we come from.

Jesus follows his question to Peter, with a command to tend to the flock. Do you love me? If so, feed my lambs. For me, there is again wisdom in this command. Our ability to sit with our wounds and to restore them in relationship are exactly what will become the gift we can share with others.

We have a support group at Rush Hospital's Cancer Center where I work as a chaplain. It's called a meaning-centered group, since so much of what cancer takes from folks is their sure footing, an answer to that "why" question. Sometimes it's the sources of meaning we share in the group that helps people cope. But more often the power of the group is having a place to bring all those hard emotions, all those words they can't say elsewhere, all those hurts from people in their lives whose flippant comments may sting. All those things can be brought to a group of fellow cancer patients who get it.

Recently as we ended a cohort, a member reflected on what she appreciated about the eight weekly sessions. She was realizing how admitting her emotions actually helped lessen their intensity. She started to try and share difficult feelings with her children, rather than protect them from them, as she did in the past. This emboldened her, and by tolerating these hard emotions and sharing them with loved ones, she was able to engage with a family member about hurts in their past. She realized that she was starting to model something different to her own children, in a sense breaking a generational pattern.

Her example speaks to Jesus' command to Peter and how authentic relationships and dealing with our wounds become the gift we bring to others. Someone who has built up a tolerance for deeply painful emotions becomes the soothing balm of their community. We all can probably think of someone who has shown such capacity for holding our pain, who won't shy away or offer easy fixes. Jesus is offering Peter and therefore all of us the gift that keeps giving, love in its fullest form, radiant in its healing, rich in second chances without being blind to our collective pasts.

This love is clearly not without its complexities. Parker Palmer reflects on our Midwest weather and says, and I quote:

*I'll wax romantic about the splendors of spring in a moment, but first there's a hard truth to be told. Before spring becomes beautiful, it's plug-ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I've walked through early spring fields that will suck the boots off your feet, a world so wet and woeful you yearn for the return of snow and ice.*

*Of course, there's a miracle inside that muddy mess: those fields are a seedbed for rebirth. I love the fact that the word humus, the decayed organic matter that feeds the roots of plants, comes from the same word-root that gives rise to humility. It's an etymology in which I find forgiveness, blessing, and grace. It reminds me that the humiliating events of life — events that leave "mud on my face" or "make my name mud" — can create the fertile soil that nourishes new growth.<sup>2</sup>*

May we follow in Jesus' example as we receive and give each other second chances. Love has the capacity for new life in all its abundance, but first we should have patience when it's messy, remind ourselves that this too shall pass, and allow love to linger in our midst.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Palmer, Parker. *Spring Is Mud and Miracle*. Published March 29, 2016. Accessed April 29, 2022, from <https://onbeing.org/blog/spring-is-mud-and-miracle/>