

Sermon: Do you really love me?

John 21:15-19

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In my home and office I have heaps of books on management and leadership. Even books on how to create the right image for being successful, including tips about how to dress, how to speak, how to eat during power breakfasts

And all of this is important. I travelled from London this night, and in Heathrow airport looked at the heaps of books on management and leadership. They sell like hotcakes, even though they are overpriced, for who does not want to be successful in life?

When Jesus installed his friend, Peter, to be in charge of the church, to care for his sheep, he did not speak of all this. The power-suit of Peter were his sandals, the image he projected was one of serving and of suffering, and his power breakfast was on the beach, some bread and fish.

Do you love me?

After Jesus had risen from the dead he appeared to his disciples for 40 days. One day he waited for them on the shore of the Lake of Galilee, after the disciples had been fishing in the night.

Jesus was waiting on the shore at a fire of burning coals, where he had fish and bread. The risen Lord stood ready with food for his friends. Peter was the first to arrive at Jesus, as he enthusiastically jumped out of the boat to swim and run to Jesus.

But Jesus was not ready to be just nice with Peter – the last time Peter had been standing at a fire of coals was just days before, when he betrayed Jesus three times. ‘I do not know him!’

Jesus leads Peter to some serious introspection.

‘Peter, do you truly love me more than these?’ Before the arrest of Jesus, Peter had assured Jesus, ‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will!’ Jesus, even if all these men here who follow you, betray you, I will not!

We know what happened. Three times Peter denied that he knew Jesus. He even called curses on himself and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know the man!’

When Jesus asked Peter whether he loved him more than the other disciples, he must immediately have realized what Jesus was talking about. Humbly he responded: ‘Lord, you know I love you.’ Peter had stopped making comparisons.

Jesus tested him, and Peter passed the test. He only worried about his own heart, his own relationship with the Lord now.

But Jesus is not ready with Peter, he asks him again, ‘Do you love me?’ Peter gives the same answer.

When Jesus asks the same question a third time, Peter was truly upset. He was hurt. Maybe because by asking three times, Jesus reminded him so vividly of betraying Jesus three times. And maybe because he realised that our love for our Lord is so feeble. He has learned his lesson. Peter does not answer by saying, ‘Yes Lord I love you’, but by saying, ‘Lord you know my heart. You decide whether I love you!’

Instead of boasting in his affection for Jesus, he says that Jesus knows it. Peter realizes he cannot even trust his own heart.

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him this question three times. The pain was I guess partly the shame of his betrayal. But the pain was caused much more by the context – the context that Jesus continued to love him. The one who betrayed Jesus three times, now confessed three times that he loved his Lord, and three times Jesus reiterates that Peter is called to lead the flock of sheep.

Peter restored

Jesus kindly reinstates confidence in Peter. He is to lead the flock of Jesus Christ. That was the expectation before Peter betrayed him, and this expectation has not changed.

Follow me... This was Jesus’ request from day one for Peter. And after Peter stumbled so badly, this request from Jesus has not changed. He is gracious and forgiving for all people, if they return to him.

John Chrysostom, in his homilies on the Gospel of John (88.1), paraphrases Jesus’ words:

“If you love me, preside over your brothers and now show them the warmth of your love that you have always shown and in which you rejoiced. And the life you said you would lay down for me, now give for my sheep.”

So Jesus uses the betrayal, the fall of Peter, as a building block in his character for being a better servant of Jesus and of his church. Peter was reminded of his fall in order to be a better shepherd.

We do not have to agree to the idea that Peter became the first pope in Rome and that therefore the popes who came after him should have monarchical rule over all Christians. But it is clear that Peter played the preponderant role in the

church of the New Testament, beside the apostle John and the latecomer, Paul.

And no more betrayals... Peter eventually died as a martyr in Rome under emperor Nero. According to tradition he was crucified upside down.

And his life was driven by the love for Jesus Christ – and for the flock of Christ. In his first letter, Peter reminds his readers of this, 1 Pet 2:21-25:

Christ [...] suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Peter himself strayed, he betrayed his Lord, but he also experienced that our great sins do not need to separate us forever from our Lord who is so forgiving.

And like Peter, we can all, always, return to the Shepherd and the Overseer of our souls. Peter was even appointed by the Great Shepherd to play a special role in caring for his sheep.

Preconditions for leadership

And we can learn valuable lessons from this. Not only that we can always come back to our Lord. But also certain preconditions for true Christian leadership. And we are all, in a sense, called to that.

Every sheep of the flock of Christ also has responsibilities for caring for others. Whether it is in church, in school, in our homes, at work, we have responsibilities for the wellbeing of other people.

And for all of us, in whatever role of leadership we stand, the first question should always be: 'Do we love our Lord.' That is the first and the last question. In the church nowadays we ask people to be great theologians, good speakers, fine leaders and managers. And pastors who lack those abilities certainly have a problem.

But Jesus' precondition is love for him. Without this basis, nothing else will help. He does not ask of us to love him more than anyone else loves him. He does not even demand perfect love – as He knows we are, like Peter, imperfect people.

But he does expect our imperfect love, and our humility to admit that we fail by all measures. It was exactly this broken love and humility that qualified Peter to lead the flock of Christ. It was not his perfection, it was his recognition of his

imperfection, that enabled him to love the people God made him responsible for.

Pastors, and anyone in position of responsibility, have to imitate the great pastor, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for the flock. That is requested of leaders in church. Care for people should always be our main goal.

Feed my lambs, Jesus says. That means, given the small one's the spiritual food they need for growing. Tend my sheep. Bring them in the right circumstances so that they can eat the spiritual food they need.

And remember, each time Jesus underlines that the sheep are his. In whatever leadership role you are, you have to lead people in accordance with what our Lord would do. How would he feed his sheep? What would he teach the church? Pastors carry a heavy burden to feed the flock with the right food! Because the sheep belong to the Good Shepherd.

So what is, in the end, Christian leadership? It is relating to other people as Jesus Christ would relate to them. We do not feel better, we do not feel higher, we do not feel more spiritual. We are simply – we all – servants of Jesus Christ to give other people what they need. And we do this with love and a humble attitude.

We all exist for the glory of God through serving each other.

Conclusion

God asks us to be like Peter – to love Jesus without comparing to others. What does it matter what other people do or not do. Our responsibility is to love and obey our Lord. And this love and obedience seeks what is best for others, it does not elevate ourselves over other.

Love can never exist without humility. Who are we to measure the quality of the life of other people. We are here to care for them, to add to their joy and wellbeing, not to be critical of people. Who are we to do so....

We are all placed in roles of leadership. Yes, use all management books you can find. They have often helped me. But the very basic foundation of true leadership we find in the Gospel of our Lord.

So how will we practice this spiritual attitude of love for our Lord and care and humility in regard to those we have responsibility for?