

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Belonging and Purpose

John 21:15-23

About two years ago, the satirical publication called *The Onion* posted a piece of social commentary with the interesting title, "Lonely Nation Gathers Outside Window of Happy Family Eating Dinner Together."¹ In the article, our entire nation, 315 million lonely Americans, stands outside the dining room window of Edward and Karen Langhorne, watching the couple and their children enjoy an evening meal together. Tonight, it's meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and corn, and maybe even some pecan pie for dessert. The food is tasty, the conversation satisfying, and the relationships warm. But the audience, the whole United States population, is mighty lonesome as it digests this scene of bonding and belonging.

In a contemporary environment where sitting down at the dinner table is often replaced by consuming drive-thru fast food on the way to the next stop, it can be much harder to use meals as a way of cultivating a sense of belonging. We sometimes develop a stronger bond with the characters on our favorite dinner time television show, or with the faces on our phone screen, than with the people who are actually sitting there eating with us. And yet, many of you can still testify to the ways that shared meals, at some point in your experience, have helped form and strengthen your connections with others, whether at the kitchen table, the school cafeteria, the office break room, or the church fellowship hall. Looking back on my own journey, I realize how so many of the fondest memories I have of family relationships and church relationships were moments and events in which we ate together.

From a Christian standpoint, eating together is one of the ways we remember that we belong to God and to each other. The story of our Lord, and his followers, is filled with episodes of bread breaking and fellowship making. In the ministry of Jesus, and the life of the early church, being together at the table was a way of embodying and expressing the reality of God's kingdom and the divine hospitality that welcomed all into communion with God. So we shouldn't be surprised that in today's Scripture passage from John, we pick up the story just after Jesus and his disciples have finished eating.

In this case, it's not meatloaf and mashed potatoes at the dining room table, but bread and fish on the lake shore. And as we peer in on Jesus and his disciples, there are still lingering questions about the long term peace and stability of this spiritual family that Jesus has assembled. True, Jesus has been raised from the dead, and has appeared to his followers. So things are definitely better than they were leading up to his crucifixion. But the fact that Jesus is alive might also be troubling for his disciples, especially Peter. After all, Peter must now deal face to face with the very one he denied and abandoned.

So Jesus has unfinished business with Peter. How will Jesus handle him? Will he exact some kind of retribution from Peter? Will he give Peter a tongue lashing and then banish him from the community of disciples? Will Jesus subject Peter to a humiliating interrogation in front of the others?

It turns out that Jesus does have a question for Peter. Not a question driven by revenge or retaliation. Rather, a question about devotion. "Simon son of John," says Jesus. Now Peter may be thinking, "Uh oh, he's calling me by my former name, as if I may not be, or at least not yet be, a disciple. That's not good." But then the rest of Jesus' question resolves that tension. "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "These" probably refers to the other disciples. Maybe Jesus has in mind Peter's conduct earlier at the farewell meal, when Peter boasted that if necessary he would lay down his life for Jesus. According to the other Gospels, Peter had announced that though all the others might fall away, he would not.

So there's something about Jesus' question that requires Peter to confront his past, without getting trapped in it. You see, instead of laying down his life for Jesus, Peter had, through his denial, preserved his life for himself. Jesus knows this. And yet, Jesus doesn't let the reality of Peter's failure close the door on forgiveness. Instead, Jesus opens the door of restoration. He uses the breaking of bread to break open a new and different future for Peter, and for the other disciples.

This is a story about reconciliation. Reconciliation that begins with Jesus himself seeking out those who have failed him, especially the disciple whose failure stands out the most. No one seems to have overpromised and underperformed more than Peter did. And yet, he becomes the key figure in Jesus' process of building a community of followers, for the present and the future. One of the big reasons we remember Peter is that by the love and mercy of Jesus, Peter got one of the biggest do overs in the history of the church. In fact, Peter's do over becomes part of the foundation of the church.

And when I say do over, the accent is on the do part. Notice that each of the three times Peter professes his love for Jesus, Jesus gives Peter something to do. In three slightly different ways, Peter is told to shepherd the community of disciples. So far, Peter has been eager to voice his love for Jesus. But love is as love does. So going forward, the authenticity and depth of Peter's love for Jesus will only be confirmed by whether he puts it into practice, primarily by caring for the flock that belongs to Jesus. That's what Jesus has done. He has loved his sheep. Now Peter is being called to do the same thing.

What will that love look like? It will look like Jesus. That's why Jesus tells Peter that he himself will eventually be led to crucifixion, which, according to tradition, is how Peter died. Peter's own experience testifies that there is no such thing as love for Jesus without laying down one's life for Jesus. It was true then, and it's just as true now.

For most of us, this will not mean being killed for our love for Jesus. But for some Christ followers, it will. The self-proclaimed Islamic State, also known as ISIS, recently orchestrated and filmed the killing of approximately 28 Ethiopian Christians who refused to deny their faith. In February, the same group executed 21 mostly Egyptian Christians, spreading horror and fueling fears about possible future massacres. Remember that these are innocent followers of Jesus who were killed purely for refusing to renounce their faith. Their deaths are a living testimony to the way of Christ, and to the question he still asks: "Do you love me?"

The question is coupled with a command: "Follow me." That's the invitation that started it all, for Peter and the other disciples, and for us. Follow me. It's an invitation to go with Jesus, to be with Jesus, to belong to Jesus. That's part of the good news that Jesus brings to Peter and to the others in today's Scripture passage. Though Jesus doesn't use those precise words, he's essentially telling them that in spite of their fear, their failure, their

disobedience, their guilt, their abandonment, their denial, they still belong to him. He's still claims them as his own.

That's still who we are as the church. We're people who belong to Christ, and to each other. In fact, we still use the language of belonging to describe our relationship to the congregation. At some point, you've probably asked or answered the question, "What church do you belong to?" Of course, belonging means more than just being on the church's membership roll. It means feeling closely connected to Christ and to the people in the congregation. It means that you've put down some spiritual roots, that you've invested yourself, that you've given yourself, that you've formed a bond of fellowship with others. It means that your identity and your purpose are bound up with your involvement in the congregation. You're not just present in the pew. You having a growing, deepening sense that you belong.

This sense of belonging isn't our own doing. It comes from being sought and found by Jesus, who comes to us in our disobedience and failure, and claims us, and reconciles us to himself and to one another. This belonging doesn't come cheap. Jesus laid down his life in order to make us his own and to take us into this community of disciples.

And like Peter, were not only forgiven and blessed with a sense of belonging. We're also given a sense of purpose. If you love Jesus, be assured that he'll give you things to do. Things that will help build and shape the community of his followers. Things that will contribute to his ongoing mission in the world. Things that require you to lay down your life and give yourself away for the sake of the gospel and for the glory of God.

Preacher David Lose reflects on some happiness research that was done a few years ago, revealing some of the factors that contribute to human flourishing and to a greater sense of fulfillment and satisfaction in life. Lose summarizes the findings this way:

While the research covers a lot of ground and is certainly nuanced at points, much of the data seem to overlap at a deceptively simple conclusion: whatever else may be helpful—health, wealth, and what not—two things are absolutely essential to feel happy: 1) a sense of belonging to a community and 2) the belief that what you do matters. Those are the two key predictors of fulfillment and productivity: belonging and purpose.²

Every Sunday, we come together to reaffirm these very things—belonging and purpose—and to remember what Christ has done for us so that we can have and experience these two precious gifts. Over and over again, through this weekly gathering of reconciled sinners, we, like Peter, learn the value of repetition. Remember that there on the lake shore, Jesus broke bread again, and went over the same question (Do you love me?), and the same command (Feed my sheep), three times, in order to help Peter see how past sins were forgiven and future possibilities were created. So here again today, Jesus breaks the bread with us, so that we can know who we are, to whom we belong, and what we're supposed to be doing.

¹ "Lonely Nation Gathers Outside Window of Happy Family Eating Dinner Together." *The Onion* website. September 20, 2013. Accessed April 29, 2015 <<http://www.theonion.com/articles/lonely-nation-gathers-outside-window-of-happy-fami,33938/>>.

² David Lose, "Peter and the Pursuit of Happiness." Working Preacher website. April 12, 2010. Accessed April 29, 2015 <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1537>>.