

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Love Without Limits

John 21:15-25

Go back with me about a month. It was Easter Sunday. Here in this place of worship, we gathered to rejoice in the resurrection. We sang, prayed, and preached, and then dismissed in joy and safety. But on the same day, in churches thousands of miles away, fellow believers who had also gathered in joy left in terror, or never got to leave at all. On the island nation of Sri Lanka, suicide bombers targeted three churches and three luxury hotels. More than 250 people were killed.

Among the dead were children attending a congregation called Zion Church. In Sunday school that morning, the teacher had talked to the children about the importance of repentance and receiving Jesus as Lord. According to one Christian leader, "Because a recent vehicle accident had claimed the lives of six Zion Church members, he [the Sunday school teacher] had referred to that event and challenged the children, asking them if they would be willing to even die for Jesus. All the children had responded by putting their hands up and signaled their fresh dedication to Jesus by lighting a symbolic candle. For so many of those children it would be their final act of worship."¹

When Peter answers Jesus three times, "Yes, I love you," he's signaling his fresh dedication to the risen Lord. Peter isn't just paying lip service to his love for Jesus. He's essentially pledging his life. He's promising that his love for Jesus will have no limits. True, past experience might cast some doubt on whether Peter will keep his promise. Peter often misunderstood what Jesus was saying or doing, and made commitments that he was unable to keep. A prime example appears earlier in John's Gospel when Peter fails to comprehend what Jesus is doing by washing his disciples' feet. At the end of the whole scene, Peter even promises to lay down his life for Jesus. But Jesus predicts just the opposite. He says that Peter will deny him and desert him. The impending reality of the cross will expose Peter's inability to live up to his professed commitment.

In today's text, we're on the other side of the cross. Golgotha is in the past, but only chronologically. The reality of what God accomplished in the death of Jesus, and what it means for his followers, are still unfolding. Yes, the Jesus who appears to Peter and the other disciples is the Risen One. But he remains the Crucified One as well. The glory of the resurrection doesn't obliterate the horror and shame of the crucifixion. On the contrary, from the earliest days of the Christian testimony in this world, the cross was still there. It became the central symbol of the church, the focal image in Christian work, worship, and witness. That's because the events of Easter don't wipe out the events of Good Friday. They go together. Being an authentic disciple of Jesus requires both cross and resurrection, death and life.

We shouldn't be surprised, then, that when the risen Jesus engages Peter in some one-on-one conversation about their relationship, and the way forward, Jesus is still talking about death, especially Peter's death. Jesus does that by means of a short parable that points to Peter's own martyrdom. Jesus contrasts the freedom of Peter's youth with the captivity that will characterize his old age and death. "Peter, remember how, when you were much younger, you could just bounce out of bed, hop in the shower, put on some clothes, and

launch into the day, without needing a couple of cups of coffee or extra time to limber up, like you do now in your middle age? At that stage of life, you were stronger and more resilient. You could go wherever you wanted to go and do whatever you wanted to do, without a second thought or the need for anybody's help. But Peter, the days are coming when time will take its toll and your body will feel like more of a burden than a blessing. You'll spend a lot of your time confined to bed. And when, with the help of others, you're able to get up, you'll also need their assistance just to get dressed, and to have a meal. You won't be able to go very far around the house. And when you do, you'll need either your walker, or someone walking beside you, holding your arm."

Why does Jesus tell Peter this brief parable? We don't have to spend a lot of time theorizing or speculating. John, the writer of this Gospel, breaks into the narrative for a moment to answer this question. He says, "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God" (v. 19). According to church tradition, Peter died as a martyr for his faith, crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same manner as Jesus Christ. Though there's not complete agreement on that, we do know that the writer's commentary here in verse 19 is identical to his commentary on the manner of Jesus' death earlier in the narrative. Shortly after the story of his triumphal entry, Jesus predicts his death, saying, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (12:32). Then John adds, "He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die." A few chapters later, when Jesus is being questioned by Pilate, John makes a similar comment about the manner of Jesus' death (18:32).

I take you on that excursion into some of the details of John's narrative because it's important to see the link between Jesus' death and Peter's death. In fact, John makes this link more explicit by speaking of the kind of death "by which Peter would glorify God" (v. 19a). John uses the language of "glorify" frequently to describe Jesus' death, and to show that God is "glorified" in it. So Jesus glorified God in his death, and now Peter is being called to share in that work. Thus, right after telling Peter the parable contrasting his youth and his old age, Jesus says to him, "Follow me!" (v. 19b). That's the kind of summons to faith that we often associate with the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as he called his first disciples. But here it is at the conclusion of John's narrative. This means that Jesus' ultimate response to all of Peter's misunderstanding and failure is reconciliation and a new beginning. Previously, Peter had been unable to do what he claimed, namely, to lay down his life for Jesus. But now, things will be different. Bound by love to the risen Lord, Peter will be able to lay down his own life in love.

Jesus' love for us is defined by and inseparable from the cross. So Peter's love for Jesus and for fellow believers was to be defined by and inseparable from his own cross, his own dying. Jesus' command, "Follow me" means "Follow me into death." "Follow me into the laying down of life, in love." Now that doesn't mean trying to do, in your own power, what Jesus did, as if he's just a divine role model that you strive to measure up to. Jesus has already given his life in love, so that you could be reconciled to God and to others. And now he calls you to share in that gift, to have your life joined to his life by faith. And to have your death joined to his death. Jesus' call is always a call to take up your own cross.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian whose writings continue to be influential, especially regarding Christianity's role in a secular world. In one of his books, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer articulates the demand that Jesus makes upon his followers:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death—we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at

the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.²

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Bonhoeffer goes on to say that that death may be embodied in various forms in the lives of various believers. In other words, the cross will take shape in different ways in different lives, depending on Christ’s particular purpose for each disciple.

We see some of this reflected in today’s text. After Jesus tells the parable that points to Peter’s own martyrdom, Peter asks Jesus what will become of one of the other key figures in the community of believers, the one known as the “beloved disciple.” Jesus basically tells Peter that’s none of his business. Instead, Peter is to focus on the business of his discipleship, and the beloved disciple will focus on his. True, the beloved disciple didn’t die a martyr’s death, but he, like Peter, still embodied the gift of Jesus by the way he laid down himself as a witness to the gospel. According to Jesus, what matters most is whether a believer’s life matches with his own dying and rising, his own giving of himself, to the full, to the end, so that God is glorified.

That’s love without limits. And that’s the kind of love to which Jesus calls you. Not the kind of love that stays within the safe confines of your own personal well-being. Not the kind of love that holds back until others change their ways and merit your mercy. Not the kind of love that embraces only those who share your racial or ethnic identity, or speak your language. Not the kind of love that hangs out only with those who agree with your opinions and perspectives. Not the kind of love that gives up when others misunderstand you or fail you. Not the kind of love that refuses to work with those who rub you the wrong way. Not the kind of love that believes certain people are just beyond redemption.

Are there boundaries which you won’t go beyond in order to love? Are there parts of your life that are off limits to the cross, because hanging on to the status quo seems safer than risking change? Are there resources entrusted to you by God that you’re clinging to, rather than releasing them for the good of others? Are there things that you simply won’t do in order to live in deeper community with fellow believers? Are there limits on what you would do in order to lay down your life for Christ? God’s love for us, embodied in the gift of the Son, is love without limits. That’s the love we’re called to share in.

And we’re called to share in it to the end. Earlier in his Gospel, John opens the scene of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet by saying, “Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love” (13:1). The conclusion of that statement can be also translated, “he loved them to the last.”

Os Guinness tells about his last visit to the bedside of the great preacher and author John R. W. Stott, three weeks before Stott died. After an unforgettable time of sharing memories over many years, Guinness asked Stott how he would like him to pray for him. Guinness says, “Lying weakly on his back and barely able to speak, he answered in a hoarse whisper, “Pray that I will be faithful to Jesus until my last breath.”³ Loving Jesus, who loved us, without limits, to the end.

¹ Jayson Casper, “Sri Lankan Sunday School Was ‘Willing to Die for Christ on Easter.’ Half Did.” Christianity Today website. April 25, 2019. Accessed May 15, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/april/sri-lanka-easter-isis-zion-sunday-school-sebastian-funerals.html>>.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

³ Os Guinness, *Impossible People* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016) n.p.