

Chapel, Lutheran Theological Seminary
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“15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He says to him, ‘Indeed, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He says to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ 16 He says to him again a second time, ‘Simon, Son of John, do you love me?’ He says to him, ‘Indeed, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He says to him, ‘Shepherd my sheep.’ 17 He says to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved when He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he says to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things. You know that I love you.’ [Jesus] says to him, ‘Feed my lambs. 18 Truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and you walked about where you wished; but whenever you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.’ 19 This He said signifying by what death he would glorify God. And upon saying this He said to him, ‘Follow Me’” (John 21:15-19).

“Where You Wish to Go”

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

1. I thought today’s lesson looked familiar, and checking last year’s sermon files I was dismayed to see that I was assigned exactly the same passage—John 21:15-19—as last year at this time, that is, the week of the Third Sunday of Easter, for the service of Confession and Absolution. What to do, what to do! I suppose I could preach exactly the same sermon this year as I preached last year, in hopes that none of you would remember it, but that would be “cheating” and canned sermons never quite come off as well as those that are preached fresh for a specific occasion. So it is my great privilege to preach on the same passage again (as I preached on last year), but of course I have the freedom—and indeed, responsibility—of developing a different theme and application. It is always worth reminding ourselves that God’s Word is indeed bottomless, and just because we preached a text once—or indeed, several times—that we have somehow exhausted said text. There is always more from which to draw because the content of a Scripture passage is filled by the Spirit of God primarily, and not the insight of any one given preacher secondarily.
2. Last year I spent time on the three-fold repetition in the passage: Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him, to which Peter replies three times that he does. This is not a reproach to Peter, the way a casual hearing of the passage might suggest, but Jesus’s way of restoring Peter to his office as the leader of the church. Remember, at the courtyard of the high priest Peter had denied three times that he even knew Jesus; now on this occasion our Lord gets Peter to admit three times that he not only knows Jesus, but that he loves him and will feed Christ’s sheep. So our passage in effect “undoes” by bold confession his earlier denials. Right at the end Jesus says to Peter, “Follow me!,” which Peter does—and continues to lead the post-Resurrection church into an uncertain future, but it is Christ’s future. Indeed, it is our future as well.

3. I would like this year's sermon on the same passage to focus more on the restoration itself. Here again is what Jesus says, "Truly, truly I say to you, when you were younger you used to gird yourself and walk about where you wished; but when you grow old you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish" (21:18). Last year, you may recall, the point was made that this is a kind of prediction by Jesus to Peter of his old age, and indeed martyrdom: "You will stretch out your hands" is a direct sign of Peter's impending death. The tradition of the church (not in the NT itself) is that Peter was crucified upside down in the Roman circus—an event that could be associated with the pogrom against Christians that occurred in A.D. 64 (the Great Fire of Rome). Jesus, then, is looking ahead to the time of Peter's death, perhaps 30-35 years in the future. But this is the point of departure I would like to use with you this morning as you contemplate your own ministry—or indeed death—as a pastor or deaconess in Christ's church.
4. "When you were younger you used to gird yourself and walk about [where you wished to go]," Christ tells Peter. Here we may each of us insert ourselves into the unfolding scenario. If I may use myself as an example (always a dangerous and risky thing to do while preaching), I can remember being very much in charge of myself and valuing highly the ability to chart my own destiny during my formative years. I was a good student and made friends easily. I loved my seminary years at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and I got top grades from some of the best teachers in the church at that time: Dr. Hummel, Dr. Nagel, Dr. Rossow, Prof. Manteufel. If I'm honest with myself I never thought very long or very hard about why I was learning Greek and Theology and the Lutheran Confessions and Church History in the first place; all I knew is that I loved it—all of it—and I was good at it.
5. So I would stay in school as long as possible, and postpone to the last possible moment the rather unpleasant prospect (for me) of being a pastor in Christ's church. I was, in fact, a very selfish person, always putting myself and my interests ahead of others—ah, but I was very clever at avoiding detection. I thought others couldn't see what I was up to, or so I told myself. I went on and on in school, getting first the Master's degree in Classics, then the Ph.D. Then I was hard at work on my articles, book, book reviews, and research agendas.... I had a high reputation to support, and I couldn't let a little thing like the ministry get in *my* way!
6. So you can imagine that, when I finally did accept a call to be pastor at Grace Lutheran Church and School in urban Chicago, I had a rude awakening. No, the people were great! They treated my wife Sara and me with the greatest courtesy and respect. But the problem was with me—my selfishness in spite of the task of a pastor to put others ahead of himself and his own plans and agenda, the late

meetings, the dropping of everything to visit a member and his family who just had a stroke, the interminable meetings that lasted hour after hour till late in the night, etc. It was an abrupt change from graduate school, which was hard work and effort expended on myself; to the pastoral ministry, which is hard work/effort expended to help others succeed.

7. Every pastor or deaconess has to make this transition and live for others in the way that God intends—indeed, in the way of the cross. I don't know what drew you to study Theology at Lutheran Theological Seminary here in Pretoria, but perhaps your motives were not pure, just as mine were not, and indeed, sometimes still are not pure. Because, let's face it: there are great advantages and "perks" to being a pastor or deaconess in Christ's church, even for those of us who have less than pure motives. The church looks out for her sons and daughters who serve her professionally; there is a certain amount of respect to be had from being a pastor or deaconess; people pay us good money to preach at them, and it is always supremely gratifying to get our own ideas out into the general public and not listen to others; the pay is never excessive, but often Christ's people are generous to their pastors and remember them as they can. So, these "perks," these professional advantages, these honors bring out the very beast in us. We are sinners, like Peter was a sinner. When the apostolic band was under attack and things were falling apart Peter denied—and three times—that he even knew Jesus. Speaking only for the sinner that I am, I can see myself doing exactly the same thing—no, more than this, I deny my Lord Jesus constantly by my own fear and greed. This is just the way it is for people who live for themselves and their own advantages.
8. But as it was for Peter, so it remains for us: Jesus is risen! Jesus lives! The crucified One has come back from the dead—against all odds—and now there is hope and restoration for each one of us. Those of us who are selfish, like me, and others of my ilk, are forgiven by the righteous blood of Jesus and restored to fit service—in spite of our sinful predilections. It takes some faith to see this, but in our Lord Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, there is hope for such awful sinners as we are, and even the prospect of fruitful ministry for many years, just as Jesus restored Peter in today's text.
9. The wonderful thing about Easter and "He is risen!" is that it gives to me and other wretched sinners a new life and destiny. The forgiveness of sins. Life everlasting. After the restoration Christ builds/leads his church through the likes of Peter, rascally sinner that he was. Likewise, Christ will build/lead his church through the likes of us desperately wicked, though repentant, sinners—who live by faith in the Gospel, in the salvation, life, and new beginning that Jesus brings. Otherwise there would be no pastors or deaconesses or professors—or even Christians at all, because not a single one of us "deserves" such service in the

church. But Jesus is risen. He forgives us. He restores us. We have a message for others because He has defeated death itself. He is the life and focus of any ministry that is worthy of the name.

10. Therefore, I want you to imagine yourself far in the future now—perhaps 30 or 40 years from now when I am dead/gone, as well as the mentors who mold you now, like Dr. Weber, Dr. Boehmer, Rev. Mntambo, and others who are a big part of your life right now. When you grow old, then, like Peter, perhaps you will stretch forth your hands—maybe not in active martyrdom as Peter did, crucified upside down; but perhaps your arms will be stretched in benediction, giving blessing after blessing at the congregation you have served in the African wilderness for many years as you have brought the Gospel to others from this seminary so long ago.
11. “Another will gird you and carry you where you do not want to go.” Maybe not for crucifixion, as Peter faced; but your long-time members, those whose children you have baptized and confirmed and married and formed by the Word of Christ for many years will be in a position to take care of you now, as you adjust the rigors of old age. Growing old is never pleasant: the hair grows white, the body swells, there is the mid-life paunch, the teeth give out, as I am myself experiencing on this teaching trip to South Africa. But pastors and deaconesses who have served their congregations a long time are in a position to enjoy the sincere appreciation of their long-time members. Pastors who’ve been pastors a long time know that the true joys of the ministry are the people they are privileged to serve. May God grant you this privilege and joy of service many years from now as you near your end, as Peter, pastors, and other confessors of the faith have met their end. Faithfully, in Jesus’ Name. AMEN.

“And now the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” AMEN.