

SERMON – 10 April 2016

(Reading: John 21:15-19)

Jesus asked Peter three times if he loves him?

The number three was a very important number because it confirmed that something really was true and that it was intentional. When Peter denied Jesus three times previously, it was really a profound event. He really meant it! But now Jesus gives him another opportunity, a second chance, by asking him to confirm his love three times. And Jesus is also giving him options of how to show his love. It is clear that, according to Jesus, love is always followed by actions and if he really means it, he must show it through the actions of:

- feeding the “lambs” or the wee ones,
- taking care of the flock,
- feeding the “sheep” or those who are not lambs anymore,
- following Jesus,
- being a living sacrifice in the name of Jesus.

It is interesting to note that Jesus uses his official full birth name Simon, Son of John, to emphasize the importance of the matter.

It is also interesting to see how the writer made use of the words for love in the Greek text. When he speaks of the love of Jesus, he uses twice the word “agape”. When Peter responds with his statement of love, he uses the word “philo”. Why? Because in the Greek language there is a distinction between the love that God has for human beings and the love of human beings towards God. But interestingly the writer changes the order of words for love in verse 17. In verse 17 he uses, in both cases, the word “philo” – depicting the love of Jesus as “philo”. My theory would be that Jesus was referring to his sacrifice on the cross. He suffered, although He was fully God, the death of a human being. He showed the love of a “human being” which explains the choice to use the word “philo” and not “agape”. Jesus’ love of course is sacrificial love, love that is costly - something that Peter would soon learn more about in his own personal life. To follow Jesus would mean a life of sacrifice which corresponds with what Jesus said in verse 19, namely that Peter will eventually die a sacrificial death because of his faith.

So, in a sense, Jesus challenged not only Peter but all the rest of the disciples, you and me included.

Therefore, I would like to reflect on verse ¹⁸ *Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.*”

If we say that we love God, we need to show commitment, sacrifice and service. If we are called by God, we should know that our lives will be different, and challenging - something that I experienced and am experiencing as a minister.

21 years ago yesterday, I was inducted in my first charge in Cradock, a wee village in the semi-desert area of the Eastern Cape in South Africa. At first the congregation was not allowed to call a Minister as they had no Manse, no Church building and only a few members left. So I was asked by the Session of this congregation to help them out for two months, just to help them on their feet. I remember very well how it felt. Far away from my family and friends, having to stay with an unknown older couple, dealing with no administration, and with people who had no background in the Church.

But after a month, the congregation decided to call me as their Minister, despite their circumstances, as a “Minister with a minimum stipend”. So, on the 9th of April 1995 I was inducted by my good friend, a lady Minister Antoinette Geyser in the Voortrekker Hall, decorated by guns and other weapons. I knew that it was going to be a difficult ministry but I also knew that God called me and that He would help me. And He did in a big way. He helped me to build new relationships in the village which led to more people joining the congregation. He helped me to convince the congregation to get their own building. And again, God showed so much grace and mercy. The Baptist Church building was vacant for over 10 years and we started negotiations. They wanted 120,000 rand which equals about £6,000.00 – not a lot in our minds but in African terms it was a huge amount to raise. But God provided – in a time of drought the congregation raised enough money to buy this building.

And just as I thought my ministry was settling in calmer waters, He called me to another challenging ministry – this time to form a new congregation in a new part of the city Johannesburg – again with no Manse, no Church building, minimum administration and with the minimum stipend. Again, God showed me grace and mercy. In very difficult circumstances He showed me His way. And every time I rebelled, He called me back to do His will. For a second time, I had to lead a difficult process – to get a name for the new congregation, to sell the old Church building in the previous setting, which was becoming a very challenging neighbourhood, and to obtain a new building. And above all, to find new members as the roll was no more than 20. 10 years later, with a new Church building, and with a substantial amount of new members, I thought again that my ministry was settling in calmer waters.

But again God showed me that He had other plans. Yes, this time to emigrate to a different country, where everything would be different. Seven years ago, on the 2nd of April 2009, I was inducted to be the Minister of Kirknewton and East Calder. Again, God showed me His grace and mercy. He opened and closed doors. He convinced me, each and every time, that I AM NOT ALONE. In all these years, He sent people to support and help me. He provided all my needs. He is so patient when I moan and rebel. I can indeed proclaim, to Him be the Glory!

I guess just like all the Ministers I know, in the past and present, we are the living proof of what Jesus said to Peter. It is also the same for every member who follows Jesus.

If we decide to answer the call of God to follow Him, we should know that our actions must reflect the love that we have by our 100% commitment of serving Him through our lives of faith, hope and love. We need to look spiritually after our wee ones, the children and our youth. We cannot ignore the opportunities and wait for them to make their own choices, without us leading and guiding them properly.

We also need to look after one another, as brothers and sisters in faith. We cannot ignore each other, or gossip about one another. The easiest way to fall out with people is to always highlight all our differences. Maybe the time has come for all of us to just accept that God has made

us all so different with a purpose. We need to dance with one another, despite our differences, in a dance of God's inclusive love.

The only way the world will ever see our commitment of following God is through our actions of love, taking care of one another by ways of helping each other through sickness and health, through bereavements and suffering, through sunshine and rain, through thunder and stormy situations.

The only way our brothers and sisters of faith will ever see our commitment of following God is through our actions of feeding others spiritually and physically, meaning doing charitable work in our everyday living.

Christian following is like a musical where you and I are the players to show the world why we follow God. WE FOLLOW GOD BECAUSE HE LOVED US FIRST. If we do not perform in a sacrificial way – if we do not give our love away by giving everything we have, then the world will not understand the love that God has for us - A love that God will not let go - A love that God will sustain and nourish as long as we live it. In the love story of God, we have to and we can only respond to His love through our promise to follow HIM with grateful hearts. We can only respond with our love through our actions of commitment, responsibility and the willingness to sacrifice the self.

So let us just LOVE like God loved us by following Him with everything we have.

Amen