

Sermon Transcript: What is Love

"Follow me." That's the words that were said to me in Coach Sipher's class in sixth grade over at MG. Came into the room, they said, "Rob Dyer, follow me down to the principal's office." Now, I'm gonna tell you right now, I was a good kid—like really good, right? So, the first thought that went through my head wasn't, "Oh, you're in trouble, Rob." It was like, "Oo, I wonder. I don't go to the principal's office that often. Maybe there's something happening. Maybe I got an award." That's how that's the world. I was like, "Woo!"

So, I get down there. We get into the principal's office and there sitting in various chairs in the main receiving area were a bunch of other guys and I realized this is the entire second string of the basketball team. I was at that time second string; I knew the bench very well and I was like, "These are all the guys I sit on the bench with. That's weird." And then we went into the principal's office. And there waiting in the principal's office was not just scary principal guy, but even scarier, Mrs. Rose Stathum.

And some of you know her. She's a teacher here for many years. She taught physical education. And most of us were scared of her. She wasn't a gigantic person. She was rather petite. She just had this look about her that you thought, "Don't mess with her." And that day she had a particular look of "Don't mess with me" on her face. And I thought, "What's going on here?" And that's when the principal said, "All right, we know that one of you threw gum into Mrs. Stathum's hair during the basketball game last Friday, and until one of you fesses up, you'll all receive the punishment." It was so bad that she had to cut it out of her hair. At that point, I think I could hear Mrs. Stathum smoldering. I think I could feel the heat coming off of her. She was still mad in that moment. And then I went, "Uh-oh, I think I threw the gum in her hair."

You see, what happened was Darby Parker took out his gum. And by the way, I know we're online and I know this goes places, but I'm outing the kid. It was Darby Parker's gum. That's how I remember it. That's the truth as I will represent it. Some of you people know his family. He ought to know what he did. He took out his gum. And what happened was gum was being—took it out and stuck it on the person next to him. Well, they took it and stuck it on the person next to him. So up and down the bench, this piece of gum that had come from his mouth was getting stuck on our faces, on our bodies, on our legs, and it was gross. Yeah. And so what I did was when it got on me like the second or third time, I just tossed it over my shoulder and they said, "Where'd the gum go?" And I—don't know. So it was over. And I thought I was a hero. I was wrong.

So, I thought about it and I thought, "None of these guys know that I'm the one that got rid of the gum. I could just stay quiet, but—did I mention that I was like this really good kid?" So, I said, "I think I might have been the one that threw the gum, but it was an accident." And I explained the whole thing in the moment. I did say it was Darby's gum. So I mean I did out him in the moment and I said, "But it was getting passed around. It's getting on all this and I just tossed it over my shoulder to get rid of it." I was like—and I did not try to throw it at your hair, I just threw it backwards but that might have been how it got in your hair. They excused us from the office. They had some kind—I don't know what they—I don't know if they laughed after we left the room, but at the end of it I don't even remember what punishment happened but it wasn't very severe at all and I was just mainly afraid of getting in trouble with Joyce Dyer at home. So I didn't care about this principal. He could do very little to me compared to my mother. So got by no problem there.

So, a couple of years ago, I'm out and about in the community and I run into Mrs. Stathum. Her hair's still short. You're welcome. And when she saw me, her response was, "Rob Dyer." And she gave me a hug. And I started to bring up the story about the gum. And I don't know if it was crowded where we were and I don't know if she understood what I was saying or she just actually completely just let it

go. But I felt completely forgiven. I felt completely restored. And you know what? Even though it came a lot of years later, it felt good. It felt good.

Peter's Restoration: The Charcoal Fire

In our scripture passage today, Peter does something which doesn't seem like it should be given forgiveness. Earlier in the story of the Gospel of John, Peter is approached by people as Jesus is arrested—"Like, you're with that Jesus, aren't you?" And three times Peter denied Jesus, denied having a connection with him. And in fact, when that happened, it was around a charcoal fire. A curious particular thing to note that John brings up in his gospel. And now in this scene, Jesus welcomes them for a breakfast around a charcoal fire.

We're meant to be pulled back to the last time Jesus and Peter had something going on around a charcoal fire. We're meant to remember, yes, this Peter who denied him three times. And yes, Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love me?" And it says in the scripture, Peter says each time, "Yes, I love you. You know I love you." And so on the very basic level, you see, yes, Peter denied him three times. Jesus makes him affirm that he loves him and restores him a third time. Each time he says, "Okay, if you love me, then feed my lambs." "Okay, if you love me, tend my sheep." "Okay, if you love me, all right, feed my sheep."

Agape and Phileo: Love at Different Levels

But this is where we lost a little something in our English translation of the Bible because what actually happens is they're not using the same word for love. When Jesus says to Peter, "Do you love me?" he doesn't just say—he says, "Do you *agape* me?" *Agape* is a word for that kind of perfect love, that unselfish love that God has for us. "Peter, do you *agape* love me? Do you love me?" And in effect, Peter says back, "Yeah, I love you." He uses another word which is very close to a root that you know as *phila*, as in Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love.

Jesus says, "Do you love me with that kind of unselfish love that God has for us?" And Peter says, "Well, you know I brotherly love you." Jesus says, "Okay, well, just take care of my sheep." And then Jesus says, "Do you *agape* love me? Love me the way that God loves us." And Peter comes back with, "Yeah, I—I brotherly love you." And Jesus says, "Okay, well take care of my sheep." And then in the third time, what Jesus says to him is, "Okay, Peter, do you brotherly love me?" Jesus switches the word that he uses. And instead of expecting or asking for that *agape* kind of love, Jesus says, "Do you brotherly love me?"—that lower form of love that's less than what God has for us, but still good and wonderful.

And it says that Peter was sad that Jesus asked him on that third time, "Do you love me?" And I can't help but wonder, is it that Peter's like, "Oh, wait a minute. I get it. You asked me three times. I denied you three times. I see what's happening here. This makes me sad." Or I wonder if maybe it's just that Peter saying that "you keep asking me makes me think you don't believe me. That makes me sad." But I think that Peter heard exactly the words that Jesus was using. And I think that perhaps what made him sad was that he realized that he wasn't capable of the kind of love that Jesus had for him. And he was maybe a bit sad that Jesus had to come down to his level.

Forgiveness: The Heart of the Church

Peter does not seem like a character that deserves forgiveness or restoration. And yet he gets it. And when you walk through the scripture, what you see is a complete restoration, a forgiveness given to him. And then he's invited into the mission. And then what Jesus says to him is, you know, that thing that you were afraid of—which is the reason why you denied me? This is the subtext to it because what he does is he switches into telling him about that. Yes. And when you do this ministry with me, when you tend to my sheep, as you follow me, there's going to come a day when you are going to be arrested and you will suffer for this faith. The very thing you were afraid of when you

denied me at that other charcoal fire, now we stand at this one. And I'm telling you, the danger is still there. "Peter, follow me." And he does with the same knowledge and the same fear, but this time with a different decision.

In whenever we have new members join the church, whether it's with baptism or not, there's always this point where we're planning out the service and Pastor Alex will say like, "Oh, and then this is the part where you'll do your spiel about forgiving one another and that we forgive each other"—and she doesn't mean that at all, I know, in any kind of demeaning way because she talks about how much she likes the "spiel." But I think it's a really important spiel. I think it's really important because I think that what holds the church together and what can hold us together is the very nature of our capability to forgive and participate in reconciliation.

The most important thing for each of us as our part in this family of God in this particular church is not how much we volunteer. It's not how much we do. It's not how much we give. I think the center point, the thing which can hold us all together, is our ability to forgive one another and to truly seek a restoration of one another. Because without that, that's what gets churches in trouble. That's what causes churches to break apart. That's what causes relationships to get apart. It's when we cannot get past the wrong.

And we have a God who looks at us as we have denied that God again and again by our words and our deeds—our inability to hold on to the devotion that we've been invited into, our inability to return the love we receive from God with an obedient kind of love back. God sees that and says, "I will come down to your level." Jesus coming here was God coming down to our level. Jesus moving from *agape* love to *phila* love was Jesus coming down to our level. And this is the message that each one of us needs to hear clearly: You, in whatever brokenness, whatever burdens you are carrying, whatever you feel makes you less than worthy of the fullness of God's love, God says, "I see you. I love you. And I will come to where you are because I want you fully restored."

And the beautiful thing that you and I can do is to extend that same amazing grace to one another because they will not know that we are followers of Jesus Christ and devout Christians by how much money we give. They won't know it by the volunteer hours you put in. They will not know it by deep Bible study in the corner closet of your household. They'll know by the way you love. And the clearest representation of love that we get from Jesus, from the gospel, from the entirety of the Bible—the clearest expression of love is forgiveness, grace.

And so Christ tells you this day that you are loved and tells you that following that kind of love could cost you something. And then Jesus says to each and every one of you: "Follow me."

Will you? May your answer glorify God. Hallelujah. Amen.