

**“RESTORATION”**  
**A Sermon Preached at**  
**FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**Belleville, IL**  
**By The Rev Rob Dyer**  
**April 27, 2025**  
(transcribed from audio file)

Our scripture reading this morning is from the New Testament, John 21:15-19. Hear what our Savior is saying to us this morning.

*So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep .Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me. NRSV*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So, this jersey that I’m wearing today, as I said, is from the Agape 107 ministry in Bangkok. I went and participated in one of their events with the youth in the city there. I got to play soccer with the kids there and even after seeing my skills they still gave me a jersey, so I felt really good about that. Afterwards the pastor presented it to me and prayed over me and it was quite a humbling experience.

The thing though is that while I was playing with these kids the problem is sometimes my 54-year-old brain doesn’t remember that these 54-year-old knees are made out of Swiss cheese. There was a time when I actually was really good. I mean, not Tad Smith good, but like I was good, you know. But I was pretty good.

But my best thing was Track & Field, like I could run fast and I could jump and man this is how far back I have to go for glory days. Let's talk about 5<sup>th</sup> grade everybody.

But back in 5th grade I was one of the fastest. I could jump farther than anyone else and at Ellis Elementary School the long jump was not like a flat run with a board into a sand pit, it was slightly downhill so you could really get some speed going down that slight decline and then when you hit that wooden board that was half rotted all the time, you hit that wooden board and then you could, without abandon, just fly off into the sand and always did great on Field Day.

But then during PE we would also do long jump, but they didn't do it outside. They've got a sandpit. Let's use that. Instead, we did an indoor on a hard tile which was much like this tile right here. And what they would do is they would put down two jump ropes and you would run and jump over it. Then every time, after you made it, then they would move it one tile space over. So, it was like 9 inches at a time. It was the good kind of tile with the asbestos underneath, you know. So, they'd move it and you'd run and you'd jump and then do it farther. I was always one of the last two. It was me and this kid John.

I could always beat John outside, but indoors John had a superpower that I didn't have and that was that John didn't care if he got hurt. He would just run full steam and then he would jump, and he would leap as if there was sand there. I can't tell you how many times John cracked his skull on the tile, or you know fell back on his back as he'd go over, but he could always go farther. I was always scared of something happening, so I was much more careful. Always came in 2<sup>nd</sup> place. The reason why he came in 1st place was because he was willing, even in the face of that danger, to just give it his all.

In today's scripture passage Jesus is asking Peter to give his all. He says to him, "Peter, after you have denied me 3 times," and everybody knows what's going on here in the situation. We all know that when Peter was with Jesus, Jesus said, "Later you're going to deny me 3 times" and old eager Peter, he was like, "Oh no, Lord. I won't do that."

Sure enough, Jesus gets arrested. Peter denies him 3 times. That eager Peter, the one who ran into the grave on Easter morning; that eager Peter who when Jesus was walking on the water said, "I want to walk with you, too." That eager Peter that when Jesus appeared with Moses and Elijah said, "Let's build some booths. Let's really make a thing out of this."

Suddenly he wasn't so brave when things got dangerous and now at this moment Jesus is restoring him, but this process of 3 times asking Peter, which I don't think it was lost on Peter that like I denied him 3 times; he's asking me if I love him 3 times. This is awkward. Right? And the guilt that must have been there.

And Jesus says to him, "Do you love me?" But he doesn't just say, do you love me because in the Greek language there are multiple words for love. He said, "Do you agape me more than these?" He's asking Peter, do you agape which is a special kind of divine perfect love, that full all in without abandon kind of love and Peter answers, "Yeah Lord, you know, I love you." He doesn't use agape, he uses one of the other words, phileo, which means more of just like a brotherly love as in Philadelphia, City of brotherly love – phileo. It comes from the same kind of root, so he says to him, "Yeah, I phileo love you." That's not what Jesus asked, and Jesus says, "OK. Well, feed my lambs. Hey Peter, you agape love me?"

Now this time he's not asking, more than these. Jesus has already taken the 2 ropes and moved them a little bit closer for Peter to jump over. And he's saying, do you. I'm not saying, more than these, just do you agape love me?

And Peter says, "I phileo love you. I phileo love you."

And Jesus says, "Tend my sheep."

Jesus is moving the ropes back and forth, which you may not realize. Feed my lambs means feed the little ones. Tend my sheep is all of the sheep, of all ages. Don't just feed, but take care of them. Actually he lowered the bar a little bit on the love thing, but kind of expanded the call afterwards.

Then we get to the 3<sup>rd</sup> round and this time Jesus doesn't say, do you agape love me. He actually brings it so close together for him and says, "Do you phileo love me? Do you love me, not in that divine, perfect, completely all-in way, but in that other way? That we talked about love. Do you love me that way, Peter?"

And Peter said, "Yes."

And in the scriptures, Peter was upset he was asked 3 times. He doesn't even notice what Jesus has done for him in bringing it closer, making it an easier thing to hobble over and he says, "Yes. I phileo love you. I love you, Lord."

And Jesus says to him, "Then feed my sheep."

In that last statement Jesus brings it down, it's still out for all of them but you don't have to do the full tending, just feeding. Jesus is bringing the ropes closer and closer together for Peter to get over it so that Peter can be restored and make no mistake, this is not a simple thing that Peter is being asked to do because Jesus then foretells, this is the way you are going to die. He says follow me and Peter does follow him.

Peter is so eager. Peter, who made a horrible mistake in this relationship, is forgiven, is restored and made the rock of the church. We just lost a very beautiful, wonderful pope recently and Peter was the first of those popes, the first leader of the church. This broken, messed up, Jesus denying, eccentric gets restored, and Jesus makes it easier and easier. What you need to understand in this story is that this is not a story of Peter doing something amazing. This is the story of Jesus making it easier and easier for Peter to be restored.

Now here's the thing I want to tell you real quick though about this, is that we were talking about this Greek word and that Greek word, and he used this Greek word and he used a different Greek word. Well, I got some news for you, and I hate to burst your bubble, but Jesus and Peter never spoke Greek. They spoke Aramaic, so what's the worth in all this stuff if they didn't actually say those exact words. They wouldn't have.

Here's the thing. John's gospel is not mixed in with the other gospels. John's gospel was written 40-60 years later. This gospel was written is not an attempt to get the nitty details of everything that happened. It was written to tell the untold stories, but John is trying to correct our understanding of the way things went. It's telling us to see the bigger picture so John the gospel writer has chosen these specific Greek words so you can understand. Whatever exact dialogue in Aramaic happened between Peter and Jesus in his restoration, let's be clear, it was not Peter who made the mark. It was not Peter who stepped up. It was Jesus who stepped down. It was Jesus who brought the ropes closer so Peter could get over them.

And with all of that I don't expect you to learn the Greek language. Don't expect you all to dig into the deep theology of the gospel of John, I want you to leave with two specific thoughts today.

The first one is that there are some of you who doubt your place in God's family. One of the most heartbreaking things as a pastor is that there are way too many times in the last 20 years I have been a pastor where I have been at the bedside of someone who was in the last days of their life and they have wanted to have a conversation with me about whether or not they were good enough. Whether or not they had lived

a life good enough and I always tell them the truth. No! You didn't live a life good enough for what God has planned for you. Neither have I. Neither have any of us.

Jesus is bringing the ropes closer and closer together so with this broken messed up witness that you and I have in our lives that we can make it over cause it is Jesus that does the heavy lifting, the big work in our restoration. So, know this. Know this clearly. Shame and guilt should not keep you away from a relationship with God. You are not good enough. You will never be good enough, but Christ is good enough. Your witness is imperfect, and Christ's work is perfect and that's how we make it over the gap. That's the first thing. Remember that about yourself.

The second thing is to remember this applies to the person sitting next to you also. And the person in the pew on the other side of the church. And that person in your life who is out there and maybe you occasionally try to avoid. It applies to everyone, or it applies to no one. And there is good news for everyone is that they too are not going to measure up and they are not going to be perfect. They will not meet the measurement of Christ and might not meet your measurement either but at the end of the day we are called to love one another as Christ has loved us and Christ loved us enough to put the ropes a little closer together and perhaps we should do that – not perhaps, that's easy preacher language. You have to do it. There's no perhaps. If you're not doing it, you're wrong. There!

You are to be forgiving. You are to be filled with grace. You're supposed to see the brokenness in other people and recognize that there is brokenness in you and together, together we give an imperfect witness. So to give that grace and to give that mercy to others is part of the story of what Peter's restoration says, because when you show someone who is broken and messed up and has dropped the ball as royally as even Peter has; when you show that person grace and mercy and forgiveness there is no telling what beautiful witness might rise out of their life. And what the church would have been without Peter. That's something we don't want to know. There are so many people out there who have a beautiful set of gifts and abilities and passion and messed-up-ness that makes this the whole blended mess that they are.

There has never been a perfect disciple. There has never been a perfect pope. There has never been a perfect Presbyterian, but there has been the perfect one who has loved us and forgiven us. So, let's do that for one another as well.

To God be the glory.  
Halleluiah and Amen.