

Tag! You're It!
John 21:4-17
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Have you seen the 1994 movie, "Forrest Gump"? In this movie Forrest, who as a boy was deemed to have an IQ of 75 along with physical disabilities, lives a life much larger than those details would have you anticipate.

For those of us who have seen it, it is likely that there are several scenes that immediately come to mind, from Forrest's friend, Jenny, encouraging him to run away from the bullies to his cross-country run later in life, from scenes on battlefields in Vietnam to scenes in the White House or on a park bench or on a shrimp boat.

But until Dave Klein mentioned it in Bible Study recently, I had forgotten about the scene where Forrest, now a shrimp boat captain, upon seeing his old friend Captain Dan, jumps into the water because in his excitement he just can't wait to get to him.

Perhaps that scene is a bit like the scene in today's scripture.

The disciples are out fishing. It has inevitably been a long, hard night because their nets are empty. But then a stranger on the shore shouts out to them. "Have you tried the right side?" he asks. With the net now full, it becomes clear who this stranger is. And Peter, full-hearted and impulsive-as-ever, jumps from the boat into the water because he can't stand to be away from Jesus another moment.

Soon they are all around the fire, fish are being cooked - some that Jesus provided, some from the disciples' bulging net. They enjoy fish and bread, perhaps a laugh or two, maybe a yawn after a night of fishing.

But then, with full bellies, the focus zooms in on a conversation between Jesus and Peter. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks. "You know I do," Peter replies. "Feed my sheep," says Jesus.

Three times, back and forth, this conversation happens. The words, in both the Greek and English, change slightly, but the essence is the same.

Of course the question then becomes, why? Why these questions? Why this conversation? What is this all about?

Traditionally many have assumed that this conversation is about Peter's reconciliation with Jesus, about Jesus forgiving Peter for denying him. And yet, Jesus never utters the words, "I forgive you."

And when we notice that, then we are well served to remember which gospel we are in. While the story is told differently in the Synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in the Gospel of John it isn't really Jesus that Peter denies.

As Karoline Lewis, Preaching Professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota writes, "A rereading of Peter's denial in John exposes his true rejection — that of his own identity. The question asked of Peter is not, as it is in the Synoptic Gospels, 'do you know the man? To which Peter responds, 'I don't know the man.' Rather, in the Fourth Gospel, the inquiry posed to Peter is, 'aren't you one of his disciples?' Peter's response? 'I AM not' ['Do You Love Me?' - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#).

Professor Lewis goes on writing, "As a result, the conversation between Jesus and Peter [in John] should take on a completely different meaning. Jesus does not blame or shame Peter. Jesus does not ask for Peter's repentance. Jesus does not ask three times, 'Peter, do you love me?' to remind Peter of his three-fold denial, to test him or to trap him.... Instead...Jesus reaffirms who Peter needs to be; the disciple Jesus needs him to be. And the disciple Jesus needs Peter to be is the shepherd now" ['Do You Love Me?' - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#).

For some reason we seem to focus on what Peter did wrong, really on what all the disciples do wrong. In some strange way, perhaps we like seeing their frailties and failures. And not just the disciples. We do it with one another as well. And perhaps this causes us to expect that Jesus would do the same thing.

Yet here, sitting along the shore on this early morning, Jesus does not focus on what Peter did wrong. Jesus instead points Peter toward what he is called to do moving forward.

The challenge for Peter, of course, is to see himself through Jesus' eyes, to claim his identity as a follower of Jesus, and to live fully into that.

What if what Peter denied there in the courtyard of the high priest wasn't Jesus so much as his own identity? *What if* this conversation after a night of fishing wasn't about Peter needing to apologize to Jesus, but about him needing to reconcile himself to his own identity? *What if* this was about him learning to claim, without apology, who he was and whose he was?

And what about us? Perhaps our inclination toward noticing what we and others do wrong actually helps *us* deny our identity and step away from the call that is placed in *our* lives.

After all as Karoline Lewis writes, “Denying our identity is an all too often reality. We deny who we are because we worry that we won’t meet expectations. We deny who we are because we are afraid to disappoint. We deny who we are because we could be judged, even rejected, for that truth. We deny who we are because we do not believe that we will be liked for who we truly are, or that we will be loved for who we truly are” ([‘Do You Love Me?’ - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)).

Sometimes we deny who we are because living into the truth of it might mean risk, might mean opening ourselves to something new, might even mean having to live up to the best of who we can be.

What if Jesus doesn’t only look Peter in the eyes to ask, “Do you love me?” but what if he looks us in the eyes with the same question?

“Do you love me?” he asks.

And when our answer is, “Yes” the conversation doesn’t simply end.

Because faith isn’t just about loving Jesus. It isn’t just about a set of beliefs.

Rather, this conversation reminds us that faith is bigger because loving Jesus leads to action.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks.

“You know I do,” Peter...and we...answer.

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus responds.

If we are paying attention to these post-resurrection stories, what we will notice is that Jesus shows up not only to assure the disciples, not only to comfort the disciples, but to call them forward, to call them into the work that is theirs.

Jesus appears to Mary and says, “Go and tell the others.”

Jesus appears to the disciples and breathes the Spirit on them giving them the power of forgiveness.

Jesus appears to Peter and says, “It’s your turn now...go take care of the world.”

Jesus appears to us. And we, too, are called. We are called to continue his work of abundant love, extravagant generosity, and true compassion. We are called to see the humanity of our neighbors all around us and to meet them in both their need and their giftedness. We are called to feed bodies and souls, to care for all people, to continue the work of Jesus in this world.

There on the beach, Jesus looks at Peter and says, “Tag! You’re it! It’s your turn now.”

Here in our lives, Jesus says the same to us. May it be so.