

Loving God During The Pandemic

By Steve Hong

John 21:15-25

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” **16** A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” **17** He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. **18** Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” **19** (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Jesus and the Beloved Disciple

20 Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” **21** When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” **22** Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” **23** So the rumor spread in the community[c] that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”[d]

24 This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. **25** But there are also many other things that Jesus did;

if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

John 21:15-22

The disciple, Peter, is a complicated disciple. What would you do if a friend betrayed you? Or, what if a supposed friend who professed to you that he or she would stick by your side through thick and thin in private, denied knowing you in embarrassment, shame, or fear of being associated with you in public.

That’s what Peter did during the death event of Jesus, right? Jesus famously predicted that Peter would during their last meal together, before Jesus was arrested by Rome. Jesus said, before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times, Peter. And, so

when Peter is asked, three times by the mob if he is one of Jesus' disciples, the criminal's friend, Peter denies Jesus three times.

I feel bad for Peter. What must have Peter been thinking as the Son of God was being, mocked, beaten, and slaughtered?...Peter was with Jesus during the transfiguration event when the presence of Moses and Elijah was with Jesus, as his face shined as heaven. Peter heard the voice from heaven say to him, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

These days, I have been loving the documentary "The Last Dance" on ESPN. It chronicles the last meaningful season of Michael Jordan (those years with the Washington Wizards don't count). Everywhere else in life, Mr. Jordan MIGHT have a chance to blend in...but on the court, *whew*, he was super-human. I still remember as a high school freshmen watching game 6 of the NBA finals between the Bulls and the Utah Jazz while doing my homework. I remember that last shot over Byron Russell, Michael Jordan's hand up in the air frozen in time, as the ball, swish, goes in. The man was unstoppable. These days, we have so much access to famous people or sports stars...but back in the 80s and 90s, there was still a lot of mystery around someone like Michael Jordan. He was a human man with human flaws, but what we saw him do was be charming in his commercials and interviews...and be dominant as a basketball player...we worshipped him because he was a bonafide, rings-to-prove-it, WINNER. That's why 22 years later, people are still obsessed with Jordan...and when you think of Jordan, you think of a winner and greatness.

Peter followed Jesus because he thought he was THE winner. He was that son from the line of King David, who the prophets foretold about that would lead the Jewish people out from under the thumb of Rome. Peter lived in a culture and time when the Jewish people were also looking for this son from the line of King David, the messiah. And, this messiah was going to be a great political/military leader.

This is the image of the messiah that Peter was probably thinking about. A winner. There's a reason people talk about the "next Michael Jordon"...where is the next human being who will show us what winning looks like!

And, Peter thought Jesus was the next King David type. And here he is...being spit on...here he is being mocked by common soldiers!...Here he is having to carry the wooden beams that will be the instruments of his own death, like a common criminal.

Peter may have been thinking...Jesus is losing?
So, I empathize with him when he denied Jesus three times.

I think we need to have a lot of empathy for Peter, because it would reflect the mercy of Jesus toward Peter in our passage today in John 21.

After that awesome scene of the fish bbq that pastor Patty preached on last week, Peter is alone with Jesus. Jesus gives Peter mercy. Just as Peter denied Jesus three times,

Jesus asks Peter three times whether or not he loves him. Peter is being brought back into wholeness in relationship.

We are complicated disciples too. Of course, this includes our Christian scholars and pastors. Do we profess Jesus to be this and that, but then deny him in this way or that?

I own a commentary on the Gospel of John written by German Christian pastor and scholar, Ernst Haenchen, which is considered a classic of scholarship, worthy of use today, worthy of a legacy. If you don't know, commentaries are written by experts in Bible to help people with context, issues of ancient language, and guidance in application in some. This commentary has been helping preachers and theologians for decades as the church tries to wrestle with this Gospel. God placed Ernst Haenchen in a position to help his people understand the Bible well.

Yet, like Peter, Ernst Haenchen is also a complicated disciple. This is a recent practice of mine... but I like to research the authors of Bible commentaries and articles, because I think it's important to know about who is writing about the Bible. And, when I googled professor Ernst Haenchen, an interesting bio popped up that disappointed me and complicated my view of his work. As you might know, during the rise of Hitler in Germany and dominance of the Third Reich, the church of Germany was nationalized. Even the bylaws of the church reflected the church's requirement to preach Germany as the new heaven and hate against the Jewish people. Along side Jesus, Germany, Hitler were placed on the same level, if not held more important in Germany. During this time clergy and the church had a choice: submit to this nationalistic theology or face imprisonment, harassment, banishment, death. Unfortunately, the German church submitted to Hitler. There were some brave enough to preach and act against Hitler as church leaders and the church, but, I am sad to say that Ernst Haenchen was not one of them. He was a nazi first during the reign of Hitler, Christian second. Yet, his

commentary on John is still considered a classic...I actually used it to aid me in the prep of this sermon today.

What would I have done if I were Ernst Haenchen? Who knows.

There are many injustices today that I am intellectually horrified by...but it's not like I am living some radically different kind of life to combat these injustices in our country as compared to someone who doesn't care. The bible is clear, we are to be people of justice. The bible is clear, the church should be willing to go to those areas and tackle those issues that will cost us comfort and privilege. Yet, we often don't. What is the difference between the American Christians and everyone else in this country? I don't know sometimes. People like Gandhi saw this inconsistency too. Even though he admired the person and message of Jesus, he didn't see the same in his followers and this faith lost credibility for him. Many documents written by Native American chiefs and leaders say the same. Many of the Native Americans were perplexed by the difference between what Jesus said and what Christians did. What was preached and what was done.

We are complicated disciples.

I think Jesus knows that. And what is his reaction to our denials?

It's fishing advice and a fire-cooked piece of fish as we found out last week in the first half of John chapter 21.

Today, we see Jesus, out of pure mercy and love for Peter, give him a chance to be redeemed with kindness. More so, we see Jesus commissioning Peter to do his work:

John 21:15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

John 21:16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

John 21:17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord,

you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep.

Feed my sheep, Peter. Do my work.

Peter? Peter do Jesus's work? The denial guy!? Yes.

Even though we are complicated disciples, Jesus gives us the same work to do. To feed each other. To take care of each other. To love each other. To offer mercy to each other like Jesus does for Peter. Even denial of Jesus thrice doesn't seem to take away this responsibility.

During this pandemic, are you asking why or when? Are you asking God in prayer or maybe questioning the course of our current history? I have some good news for you, God hears them and holds them near without judgement with mercy and grace..he'll even make a fire so you can discuss with him under the bright stars of the night with some fish in your belly...BUT you are still asked to feed God's sheep. You are still expected to care for each other and love each other. You are still expected to behave in ways that you might not want to do, like wearing a mask to protect others around you. You are still expected to show up for each other as a community. You are still asked to contribute your gifts to "feed" each other, whether it's through loving emails, text messaging, financial commitments to the church or through zoom.

18 Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

The rest of this year, especially as a church, we will be asked to be a church through ways that doesn't not meet our wants or expectations. But, Jesus encourages us, empowers us, instructs us to continue to feed each other.

John 21:15 Jesus said to Maple Grove UMC, "Maple Grove UMC, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," we said, "you know that we love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

*John 21:16 Again Jesus said, "Maple Grove UMC, do you love me?" They answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that we love you."
Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."*

John 21:17 The third time he said to them, "Maple Grove UMC, do you love me?"

Maple Grove UMC was hurt because Jesus asked them the third time, "Do you love me?" They said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that we love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

May we be creative and flexibly and committed to each other through this pandemic.
May we have a desire to have heaven integrity in how we follow who we say we follow and our care for each other. Amen.