“Other Fish to Fry”
Text: John 21:15-25

**[Slide 2]** This is going to seem like a strange question, but how many of you have heard of “The Amazing Randi?” He was a stage magician, “mentalist,” and escape artist (in the tradition of Houdini). He once escaped from a block of ice and once escaped from a straitjacket while hanging upside-down over Niagara Falls. He once broke a record for staying underwater **[Click]** (in an air-tight coffin) for over two hours in a public pool in London, England. In his later years, he became something of a “debunker” who reveals the “tricks” behind some stage magic and alleged psychic powers.

**[Slide 3]** But the real reason I bring up the Amazing Randi is that Penn Gillette is writing a biography of him and, in that biography, he has revealed that when the fellow was performing as a “mentalist” on-stage, **[Click]** he would awaken each morning and take a note out of his wallet, destroy it, write a new one, and put it in his wallet. **[Click]** The note essentially said: “I am James Randi. This is xx-xx-xxxx and today will be the day I die.” **[Click]** Why would he do that? **[Click]** That way, IF he died on that day, someone would find the note, believe that he had accurately predicted the day of his death, and his legend would live on. That’s a lot of trouble to guarantee your legacy when you’re not, by definition, going to be around to enjoy it.

**[Click]** Today’s message is about legacies, too. In one sense, it’s about Jesus’ legacy because He was preparing both Peter and John, in particular, and the other disciples in general for continuing their ministries. In one sense it’s about Peter’s legacy and the fact that he would die a martyr’s death and John’s legacy when he allegedly lived a long, long time. In another sense, it’s about our legacy. Who is going to enter the Kingdom of God because of our faithfulness?

**[Slide 4]** Well, before we get to the text itself where we start at verse 15, I want to remind you that verse 14 just told us that this was **[Click]** the third time Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection. Of course, **[Click]** we also remember that Jesus had been in the grave for three days and nights while **[Click]** Peter had denied Him three times. There is a power of three. Any stand-up comedian will tell you that you can work a joke three times and then, it starts to fall off. In designing computer interfaces, we encourage our students to group choices in threes and sevens. I find that repeating something so that I say it aloud three times means that I’ll remember most of it. And we’re not through with threes in this chapter. **[Click]** Here is where Jesus gives Peter a chance to reconcile himself to the Lord and, probably, to the disciples, as well.

Like most interpreters, I believe that Jesus gave Peter a question for every time he had denied Jesus. I believe Jesus gave him a chance to AFFIRM Jesus for every time he had failed him.

So, let’s look at the text:

**[Slide 5**] **15) Therefore, when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon of John, do you love me sacrificially more than these?” He [Simon] said, “Yes, Lord, YOU, you know that I love you familiarly.” He said to him, “Feed my little lambs.”**

**[Click]** Peter must have been pretty embarrassed in front of his colleagues. I don’t know if Jesus called him to the side and spoke to him privately, spoke to him loudly enough so that the others paid enough attention to see Peter reaffirmed, or had him stand up in the group to publicly address the issue like on the next slide. I mean, even if Jesus said, “Excuse me, Peter, could I speak to you privately?” Peter would have been nervous and uncomfortable. But, if I were Peter, I would have been nervous right off the bat when Jesus addresses him with his birth name of Simon followed by his Father’s name. That was formal. It seems to me like it’s the equivalent of when my mother would say, “Johnny Lee Wilson, you know better than that!” When I picture the scene, I can almost hear the disciples saying, “Oh, no! He’s gonna’ get it now!”

First, Jesus asks Peter if the disciple loves Him sacrificially more than the other disciples. Not every pastor or scholar agrees that “apapao” means sacrificial love, but I think John is written so tightly that changes in vocabulary like Jesus using “agapao” and Peter using “phileo” is significant. Indeed, I think the shift from little lambs in verse 15 to sheep in the later verses is significant, as well.

But why would that be significant? Well, if the verb Jesus used means sacrificial love, that means love with a cost. And I believe Peter softened the verb to affectionate, caring, familial love because he was ashamed that in Matthew 26:33 and Mark 14:29 he had said, “Though all others become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” **[Click]** This is also why I believe “these” refers to the disciples. Some think the demonstrative pronoun *could* refer to the fishing industry since Peter had apparently returned to his old job after Jesus’ death. I know not every other pastor agrees with me, but it makes sense to me. From my perspective, Jesus is giving Peter a chance to admit that he wasn’t a special case—no matter what he had said before. Peter knew he hadn’t followed through on his earlier boasts. He *couldn’t* claim to love Jesus sacrificially and he *couldn’t* claim to love Him more than the others, so he appealed to Jesus’ knowledge and didn’t answer the part about the others.

Now, this is important! Getting right with God, whether initially at our conversion experience or at other times when we have failed Him, starts with confession. God wants us to agree with Him that what we’ve done or what we’ve failed to do is wrong. In fact, the words translated as “confess” and “confession” literally mean “to say the same as” and “same word” respectively. Yes, Peter already knew that Jesus knew that Peter loved Jesus as much as Peter could. But He wanted Peter to understanding that he didn’t have the capacity to love the way He had loved. At least, Peter didn’t have that capacity, yet. It took his admission of guilt—no matter how subtle—to be the first step toward what Peter would become with God’s help.

I translated the verb in v. 15 with a double YOU because there is both a pronoun separated from the verb and a pronoun in the verb. Just phrasing the answer that way, Peter was emphasizing that he knew he had to depend upon the Master. Jesus KNEW as a fact that Peter loved him like a brother, like family, like a close friend. So, Jesus rewarded him with a challenge: “Feed my little lambs.” The verb is used for feeding animals and sometimes people almost exclusively in classical Greek. I believe Jesus uses this archaic word to emphasize that the first step in His service is to provide nourishment for others to grow.

To be consistent with ancient usage, we have to be aware that lambs are immature believers, new believers, and folks who haven’t grown. If Peter loved Jesus, his challenge was to provide nourishment for these young, immature ones. And, of course, on Pentecost and thereafter, we see Peter doing just that. But we know there were already lots of new believers, already lots of believers who hadn’t had the privilege of walking and talking with Jesus regularly like Peter had. What was he doing out on the lake instead of feeding Jesus’ little lambs. This is also part of why I think the change in verbs between Jesus and Peter, and later by Jesus, is significant. The words for the flock Peter is supposed to tend changes, just as the verb for how to tend them changes.

**[Slide 6]** But Jesus wasn’t through. Let’s look at verse 16.

**16) He said to him again, “Simon of John, do you love me sacrificially?” He [Simon] said to Him, “Yes, Lord, YOU, you know I love you affectionately. He said to him, “Shepherd My sheep!”** Again, Jesus uses the verb for sacrificial love, but He doesn’t embarrass Peter by having him compare his love to that of the disciples. Yet, Peter still isn’t ready to claim a superior love. His denials are just too fresh in his mind. So, again, he appeals to Jesus’ knowledge and says that he loves Jesus like a close friend or family member. And again, Jesus challenges him. **[Click]** This time, Jesus tells him to shepherd His flock.

The Greek verb used in this second command is broader than just feeding. It means **[Click]** to watch over, **[Click]** to guide, **[Click]** to doctor, and provide for in more than just feeding. This is more than feeding the immature ones. This is about being involved with time, effort, and skill with the entire flock. Jesus broadened Peter’s authority right here.

**[Slide 7]** And what does it mean for us? Let’s just take those simple ideas and see what we should be doing if we love Jesus even affectionately, even if we haven’t reached that point of sacrifice.

1. **[Click]**Feeding – a teaching, training ministry
2. **[Click]**Watching Over (Protecting)
a) Intercessory Prayer
b) Accountability
c) Commitment
3. **[Click]**Guiding
a) Mentoring
b) Sharing
4. **[Click]**Provide
a) Service (transportation, food)
b) Fellowship

**[Slide 8]** That’s the cost of love in a nutshell. And Jesus follows the rule of three. It’s sort of like a fugue in classical music. **[Click]** One voice or instrument sets a theme. **[Click]** The second voice repeats the theme with very slight variation. **[Click]** And a third voice pulls everything together with bold tones while the other two continue their staggered progression.

**[Click]** Let’s see this third question.?

**17) He said to him the third time, “Simon of John, do you love Me like family? And Peter experienced grief because He spoke to him a third time, “Do you love Me?” So, he said to Him, “Lord, You, you know all things, You, you know experientially that I love You like family, He said to him, “Feed My sheep.”**

**[Slide 9]** This time, **[Click]** Jesus used Peter’s language. He asked Peter if the disciple loved Him like a close friend or family member. **[Click]** But even so, we’re told that Peter was either in pain or grieving inside because Jesus asked him THREE times. The mirror was too clear. An affirmation for each denial. But Jesus didn’t dwell on the past. His three questions were designed to get Peter off the sea and into the synagogues and temple. This time, **[Click]** Peter not only appeals to Jesus’ intellectual awareness that he loved Him, but he appeals to His personal knowledge—two verbs for “knowing.” **[Click]** Now, Jesus tells him to feed the entire flock.

Peter isn’t to be just a caretaker, he is to be a minister of the Word. And sometimes, people in ministry or in church leadership which is, itself, ministry, find ourselves settling for being caretakers when God wants us to be ministers of the Word. Yet, we get so busy we just can’t deliver. What’s wrong with this picture? I think we have not only forgotten the cost of love, but the cost of discipleship.

**[Slide 10]** Let’s read the text: **18) “You can build on it! You can build on it! I tell you, when you were younger, you belted yourself up and walked where you wished, but when you become older, you will extend your hands and another will belt you up and will take you where you don’t wish. 19) But He said this to signify how his death would glorify God, and then He said to him, “Follow Me.”**

Jesus isn’t through yet. He goes from Peter’s third affirmation and Jesus’ third challenge to prophesy about Peter’s future. He reminds Peter of how free and simple his younger life was. But when he gets older (the Greek is the word from which we get “geriatric”), someone else will bind him and he won’t be free. In case you miss the significance of that binding. **[Click]** Here’s what that binding would look like in the modern world. Now, to go to prison as the cost of discipleship is one thing, but John tells us that Jesus was signifying something more. Apparently, Peter will die in captivity, but John tells us that it will glorify God (v. 19).

As I was putting away one of the books I reviewed in preparation for this message, a sheet of paper dating back to my first full-time pastorate fell out. It asked, “If Jesus had to be glorified (put dramatically to death) to glorify the Father, shouldn’t we expect to be glorified (whatever it takes) to glorify Him?” It seems like a good question and even though it was a question from a sermon on John 17, it seems very relevant to this text.

**[Slide 11]** Now, isn’t it interesting that John would tell us that Peter’s death would glorify God? After all, in the early chapters of Acts, we see Peter and John as a team. **[Click]** Tradition has Peter crucified upside-down and John living to a ripe old age. Exact opposites! Peter preached the keynote sermon at Pentecost and John seems to have been responsible for being the pastor to pastors in what is now Turkey. Peter became so identified with God’s presence that his mere shadow caused people to be healed. John seems to be responsible for a gospel, three letters, and a book of prophecy (and I believe the core of all of these works goes back to him). They were different, but both dynamic when they acted in faith.

**[Slide 12]** Is it any wonder that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, not only a theologian but a martyr for Christ, warned the church about “cheap grace?” He wrote: “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living an incarnate.” (Cost of Discipleship, p. 36) And asked about discipleship, Bonhoeffer explained that it is where one takes an active step of faith: “Faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting—they must arise and follow him.” (Cost of Discipleship, p. 53) Indeed, one of the best paraphrases of Bonhoeffer I’ve seen reads: “In discipleship one is seemingly dragged into insecurity which in reality turns into the safety of Christ.” –Dallas Roark, Makers of Modern Theology: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 77.

**[Slide 13]** Actually, it appears that Peter I start following Jesus, but he took his eyes off Jesus as surely as he had on the water that day. Let’s read: **20) Peter turned around and he saw the disciple that Jesus loved following, even the one who reclined upon His chest at the feast and said, “Lord, who is the one handing you over?” 21) Therefore, Peter saw this one and said to Jesus, “What about this one?” 22) Jesus said to him, “If I want him to remain till I come, what’s it to you? [lit. “What to you?”] Follow Me!”**

That sort of reminds me of arguments I’ve made and heard among siblings. “Why does she get to go?” “Why do you always listen to him?” “Don’t look at me! He did it!” We could laugh if it wasn’t so true. It happens in churches today. “Why does she get to be a deacon?” “Why don’t I ever get to sing the solo?” But we need to learn the same lesson that Peter had to learn. It’s not about what happens to anyone else and it’s not what anyone else does. It’s about our following Jesus in obedience. This means that we aren’t to compare our spiritual maturity, opportunities for service, experiences of God’s blessing, or anything else with each other. We need to be sure WE’RE on the right path.

But we can’t stop there. I just want to read a little bit more:

**23) Therefore, the saying came to the brothers that one disciple would not die. But Jesus hadn’t said to him that he would not die, “If I desire him to remain until I come, what’s it to you?”**

See, there was gossip in the church and misconstrued messages from the beginning. Let that be a lesson to us. When you hear something, you’d better go to the source. If even Jesus can be misquoted and misinterpreted by his closest disciples, who are we to assume we know the truth?

**[Slide 14]** And now, John tells us that he has to stop because there just isn’t room for more.

**24) This is the disciple who is testifying concerning these things and wrote this, and we know that his testimony is true. 25) But there are many other things Jesus did which if they were written one by one, I suppose the cosmos [lit. world] could not contain the written books.**

Frankly, this ought to be good news to all of us. **[Click]** Even if we mess up multiple times, God wants to forgive us and get us back on track. **[Click]** It should also help us to remember that God doesn’t treat us “fairly;” **[Click]** faith is not “one size fits all.” **[Click]** God is going to do what’s best for us and what’s best for His plan.

**[Click]**And this leads us full circle to the weird anecdote I cited at the beginning of this message. What if we all had a sheet of paper in our wallet today? What if they all said something like, “I am Johnny Lee Wilson. Today is April 26, 2009 and I know that this will be the day that I die?” Would that day be spent doing something where we’re in control and comfortable, our version of a fishing expedition, or would that day be spent feeding lambs, tending the whole flock, and feeding the sheep? You see, I’m shamed by the useless dedication of the Amazing Randi to go through that ritual with the wallet when I have a Lord that can make sure that every day is His day—even if it’s the day that I die. How about you?