

“RECONNECTING”

John 21:1-19

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I've never undertaken a study of nudity in the Bible. There's the Garden of Eden which doesn't mention it until Adam and Eve feel the shame of their nakedness after eating the forbidden fruit. There is a little remembered story with Noah after too much wine which stirs up trouble between father and son. There are several accounts of rape in the Hebrew Scriptures which presumably involve nudity. I think there's not much said about nudity in the Bible, but there's certainly a lot of implied sex: Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar; Jacob, Rachel and Leah, along with their servants Bilhah and Zilpah; Solomon and his many concubines; the entire book of Song of Songs; and my favorite Ruth and Boaz. Only two mentions in the New Testament occur to me: near the end of Mark's gospel, during Jesus' arrest, a young man flees the scene leaving his garment behind and this story where Peter is found naked while fishing.

Now the Bible by no means considers sex shameful, but it does link the experience of being found naked with the feeling of shame. It's explicit in the garden scene and clearly implied in this story. Peter is completely undone when he realizes that it is Jesus on the shore. He quickly covers himself and then disappears into the sea and from the scene until Jesus has a very uncomfortable conversation with him.

The source of his shame is no mystery. On the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter denies knowing him three times after having professed that he would follow Jesus even into death.

This is now Jesus' third resurrection appearance to the disciples. The first time, they're in a locked room. The second time, they're in the same room, perhaps not locked. And now they're at the shore, where they seem to have gone back to business as usual. So now, added to the three denials are these three instances of hiding. Peter can take no more. His shame sends him overboard into the waters of the sea.

I don't think it would be too much to say that his shame sends him into a kind of death. And when you connect it with the conversation later, we see a dying and rising to new life. We see his baptism into the life of faith.

I suspect most of us have known these periods in our faith journeys where we've been in denial or in hiding from God's call. I ran into Tobi Hanna-Davies last week at a meeting of people engaged in environmental justice. Sometimes when I see Tobi, my first reaction is what I haven't been doing. I haven't been to an ISAAC meeting in some time, a group whose work for the community I have great respect for. One thing they're currently working on is the issue of affordable housing in Kalamazoo, an issue I feel quite strongly about. But I've not gotten involved in the struggle at the level where I might make a difference. Shame is too strong a word, but I am embarrassed that I haven't engaged this

issues more seriously. There are times when I've "hidden" in the business-as-usual to avoid stepping out into something new.

It's not unusual when I run into a member who hasn't been to church in a while for explanations and promises to be made without my asking. This habit of embarrassing people is an occupational hazard. People apologize to me for swearing when they learn that I am a pastor. They moderate or lie even about their views sometimes. They avoid certain topics.

But me being a pastor is not really the issue. I am no one's judge. What these encounters reveal is that we do sometimes step back from our faith, moderate our commitment. Denial is a little strong, but we do hide. Maybe it's not business as usual, but "busyness" as usual that distracts us from the commitments of our faith. Maybe we're overwhelmed by the complexity of the world's problems. Maybe we're just tired. Maybe, like the disciples, we're afraid.

Were it not for divine interventions like this one, we would probably all let faith slip into the background or off the screen entirely. Jesus recalls Peter to the life of faith with a simple question that both acknowledges the lapse and draws attention to basic premise of faith. The question exposes the loss of connection while reconnecting us to the source of our life.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Notice first that Jesus has gone back to Peter's old name. It was Jesus who named him Peter, a name Peter gave up when he went back to his old life. All three times Jesus addresses Peter from his old life, but only once does he call attention to his denial. When he says, "more than these," Jesus reminds Peter of his boast that he would never forsake Jesus.

Sometimes there is something that seriously disrupts our faith journey, that calls our loyalty to Jesus into question. All the disciples have just passed through a serious crisis. Jesus died. The messiah wasn't supposed to do that. The messiah was supposed to stick around and restore the community and to rebuild the nation. All their hopes and dreams died with Jesus.

Events occur in our lives that present a serious challenge to faith. And we need to acknowledge this if we are going to reconnect, but let's not dwell on it. I'm sure Peter never forgot his lapses at the time of Jesus' death, but he did manage to move it off center stage in order to come to the prime mover in the life of faith. Faith sees us through good times and bad times, through blessings and tragedies; because at the core of faith is not some reasoned proof of God's existence, but rather the experience and reality of love that connects us to the source of the universe.

"Do you love me?" This is the question that draws Peter back to the world of faithful discipleship. Jesus asks it three times, using a different word for love each time. Peter's answers declare that his love is deep, as intense as close friends, and finally unconditional.

“Do you love me?” This is the question that reconnects us when we have pulled back from the journey; reconnects us when life has knocked us about; reconnects us when we have strayed and done harm to those around us.

This is the question that draws estranged children back to their parents, estranged lovers back together, estranged peoples into dialogue, and estranged believers back to faith.

Maybe you’ve recently been disappointed by a decision or in a relationship within the church. Maybe a loss or a drastic change has upended your life.. Or maybe circumstances have filled up your time in ways that distract you from the practice of faith. Maybe something else has drowned out the call of Jesus in your life.

Getting back on the path, restoring broken relationships, renewing faith or reconnecting with God begins with this question: “Do you love me?” Jesus is asking.

He asks, not to distress you or judge you or condemn you. He asks because he loves you, desires life for you, and calls you.

If you’re already feeling connected, we can’t be reminded too many times that love sits at the center of that connection. If not, perhaps now is the time to return to the love in which we live and move and have our being. Amen.