

Jesus' Unchanging Love
John 21:1-25
Key Verse: 21:12

by Sarah Barry

"Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast' None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord."

John's gospel is a love story. The writer identifies himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." The key verse of the whole Bible is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The chapter which we will study today is John 21, the Epilogue of John's Gospel. It is about the Resurrected Jesus' unchanging, life-giving love for his disciples and for us. It is a story about God's grace. I found here a contrast between John and Peter. John identifies himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved; Peter is identified as the disciple who loved Jesus. (of course, Jesus loved all of the disciples and they all loved him. But there is a difference in emphasis and approach.)

1. The Disciples whom Jesus loved--"Come and have breakfast" (1-14)

A. Seven disciples come to Galilee

"Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples by the Sea of Galilee." "It was the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead." (14) The first two appearances were in Jerusalem. The Risen Jesus had come through locked doors to bring his disciples peace, to plant in their hearts resurrection faith and to give them mission. As chapter 21 opens, the scene has changed. The disciples are no longer cringing in fear in Jerusalem. They had come back home to Galilee. The terrible picture of the crucifixion and the memory of their own failure lingered in their minds. They had seen the Risen Jesus, but they didn't understand the meaning of the resurrection. And they didn't know what they should do. Jesus had sent word for his disciples to meet him in Galilee, so they had come. Seven of them were waiting for him by the Sea--Peter, Thomas (who no longer doubted), Nathaniel, James and John and two others. This place was full of memories. It was the place where Peter, Andrew, James and John had fished for a living. It was here that Jesus had called them to follow him. He invited them to be his disciples and promised to make them fishers of men. And they had left everything to follow him. They had followed with great hope and with a vision that he would change their nation and change the world. Now they had no such hope, and their vision had died on the cruel Roman cross. They had lost direction and meaning in life.

The shore of the Sea of Galilee was a special place. Here, three years before, Peter had had an encounter with Jesus that changed his life forever. It led him to repent of his sins and worship Jesus as God. (Lk5:1-10) Jesus had turned Peter's fishing failure into success and had turned Peter's self-centered life into a life lived for Jesus and for others. Jesus had been teaching the crowd. He borrowed Peter's boat and pushed out a little from the shore. After he finished speaking to the crowd he said to Simon Peter, "Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch." Peter knew that fish weren't biting, but "Because you say so" I'll do it. The result was a great catch of fish, and a new life and new direction for Peter.

B. John and Peter

John, who wrote John's Gospel, was one of the seven waiting for the Risen Jesus by the Sea. He does not mention his own name in this book. Beginning with chapter 13 he refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He describes himself as, "the one who leaned back against Jesus at the supper and asked, "Lord, who is going to betray you?" (21:21) John did not talk about his love for Jesus. He talked about Jesus' love for him. He is the one who wrote about Jesus' washing the disciples' feet (Jn 13) and about Jesus' prayer for his disciples. (Jn 17) Jesus loved all of his disciples. But it was John who deeply accepted Jesus' love and grace. He wrote, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins....we love because he first loved us." (1Jn4:10,19)

Jesus' disciples needed his grace of forgiveness and his love. At the time of Jesus' arrest, the disciples had scattered--they ran away. (Mk 14:27-31,50, 66-72) Peter had followed at a distance to the courtyard of the High Priest. But

under pressure, Peter denied knowing Jesus. He had vowed that he would never disown Jesus. (Mt 26:31-34) But to save himself, he denied Jesus three times. When the rooster crowed and Jesus looked straight at him, Peter realized what he had done. He remembered Jesus' words, and went out and wept bitterly. He repented. Peter suffered because of his failure and his guilt.(Lk22:60-62)--and because of his broken relationship with Jesus.

When the Risen Jesus visited the disciples in Jerusalem, Peter could not say anything to him. And Jesus did not say anything to Peter. Jesus came back a second time to help Thomas believe the resurrection, but still, he had said nothing to Peter. The broken relationship was very painful. Could Jesus forgive him? Judas had betrayed Jesus. When he realized what he had done he bitterly regretted it. But he did not repent and surrender to God. He tried to fix things himself. He tried to give the blood money back. He could not erase what he had done, so he killed himself. Peter was different. He kept on loving Jesus. He repented and threw himself on the mercy of God. He longed to restore the broken relationship, but he could do nothing. He only waited on God.

I can understand Peter. When we betray Jesus by careless words or actions or by deliberate sins, it is painful and shameful. We feel useless. Everything seems to be meaningless. We blame ourselves and become depressed; we blame others and complain. Sometimes we even blame God. The devil tries to make us doubt God's love. We need to meet Jesus. Repentance is an open door into the heart of God. There is no failure in Jesus. There is only repentance, forgiveness and a new beginning.

As Peter waited for Jesus by the Sea of Galilee, he was sad. His relationship with Jesus was broken by his own unfaithfulness. His life had no direction. His tears did not solve the problem. Jesus had not come to keep his appointment in Galilee. Peter was restless. He couldn't sit around and do nothing. Peter said to the others, "I'm going fishing." They said, "We'll go with you." Peter was still their leader. It looked like the time to go back to his old life and do the thing he was good at doing. So they all went out and got into the boat. They were experienced fishermen. But they fished all night and caught nothing. Peter's sense of failure deepened. Peter had failed as a disciple; he now failed as a fisherman. This was the lowest point of Peter's life. He had no hope and no future.

C. Jesus' Unconditional, unchanging love

As Peter looked toward shore and saw someone standing there. The man called out to them, "(Children) Friends, haven't you caught any fish?". In a tired voice they answered, "No." Then the man said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did so, a miracle happened. The net was so full of fish that they couldn't haul it in.

John recognized Jesus. He said, "It is the Lord." When he heard this, Peter didn't wait. He put on his outer clothes and jumped in the water and went to Jesus. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish. Jesus' appearance there, in that place, could only mean one thing to Peter: Jesus had not given up on him. This was how, three years before, in this place and in this way, he had started his life as a disciple. Jesus was giving him a second chance. He realized that Jesus' love was unchanging love. He waded ashore and found Jesus grilling fish on the beach. He told them to bring some of the fish they had caught. Peter was quick to obey. The grilled fish smelled good. And they were hungry. And there was bread. Jesus knew the hungry disciples' love language. He invited them, "Come and have breakfast." The disciples didn't have to ask, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. His love told them everything. He asked no questions; he did not rebuke them for running away or tell them to repent; he just told them to bring some more fish. This is grace

Our hearts are moved and our lives are changed by what Jesus has done for us, not by what we do for Jesus. Sometimes, as we follow Jesus and try to serve him, like Martha, we get caught up in our activities. We need to sit at his feet and listen, like Mary. What I do for Jesus is important, but it is more important to remember what he has done for me. May he give me eyes to see what he is doing now, in me and in those for whom I pray. This means to spend personal time in prayer and in the word. On the beach of the Sea of Galilee Jesus wanted his disciples to know that he loved them. He knew that they were hungry. Like a mother, He cooked breakfast for them. His love was unchanged and unconditional. This is what he wants us to know, too. He wants me to remember what he has done for me. He wants you to remember what he has done for you. He wants us to see what he is doing in our lives and in the lives of others, and be thankful. Repentance is turning away from my self-centered life, turning away from myself, to Jesus. It is taking "me" out of the center of my life and putting Jesus there.

Paul knew the meaning of grace. He knew that he was a terrible sinner. He could never stop being amazed that Jesus loved him. The Risen Jesus came to him in love, forgave him and called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. He confessed, by the grace of God I am what I am. Because he accepted God's grace in Jesus, he could know God's love. He understood grace and love. He wrote: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love cooks breakfast for hungry disciples.

God invented Love. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit give and receive love among themselves. The three persons of the Trinity are bound together by love. Timothy Keller, quoting C.S. Lewis calls their relationship a dance. They move together in perfect unity, pouring love and glory into each other. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit worked together to create this world in love. God embraced his creation and loved it. He said, "It is good." Because God was the center of his world, the world was beautiful, full of life and there was real peace, Shalom. God was pleased with the world he had made. He made Adam. He loved him and walked with him in the garden in the cool of the day. Adam co-worked with God to take care of God's world. God loved Adam and knew what he needed, so he made a woman--bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. He gave Adam someone to love. And someone to love him back. Their love relationship was bound up in God and reflected God's love for his world. When the love relationship between God and mankind was broken by the sin of Adam and Eve, their relationship was broken, too. God was grieved. His heart was deeply troubled. He felt pain. But he did not stop loving this sinful world. He did not stop loving sinful mankind. Beginning with a promise to Abraham "through your offspring all people will be blessed", God set his great redemptive plan in motion. It climaxed when he sent his Son. Indeed, "for God so loved the world that he gave his Son." When Jesus the Son was baptized by John the Baptist, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were there. The Spirit came on him like a dove; the Father's voice spoke: You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Mk1:11) Jesus came to teach mankind what love is. Jesus loved his disciples. He spent time with them. They watched him heal the sick and cast out demons and welcome the children and feed the hungry multitude. They learned his mind and heart. Eating together was important. Jesus often showed his love and poured out his grace while eating together with his disciples. He ate with them at tax collector's parties. He ate with them in the home of Simon the Pharisee; he ate with them in Martha's house. He ate with them at weddings. He taught the Bible to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and went into their home and ate with them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. In Acts 1 the Risen Jesus was eating with his disciples when he told them to go the Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. He risked his life to eat the Passover with his disciples. That Easter morning they felt his deep love when he grilled fish and said, "Come and have breakfast."

Jesus' love is unconditional. He knew them better than they knew themselves. He knew beforehand that in the moment of trial they would scatter and that Peter would deny him. He told them so. And he told them that they were fulfilling Scripture. (Mk14:27-31) He loved them anyway. He knew that they were too shameful to come to him, so he came to them. First of all, he restored their fishing failure. He also knew they were tired and discouraged and hungry. So he prepared breakfast on the beach for them. This was the best expression of his unchanging, unconditional love.

2. The disciple who loved Jesus (15-25)--Feed my Sheep

After breakfast, Jesus turned to Peter and asked him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Simon was his name before he met Jesus. It was Jesus who changed his name to "Peter." Peter means "Rock." Jesus had had hope for Simon to grow up to be Peter, a man of rock-like, unshakable faith. Peter thought he had failed. There is no failure in Jesus. Failure is the opportunity for a new beginning. It was the time for Simon Peter to make a new decision and a new beginning as a disciple of Jesus. He needed Jesus' forgiveness and grace. When he jumped in the water and went to Jesus, his heart was full of thanksgiving and joy, for he realized that Jesus loved him and had forgiven him. He realized that this Galilean visit of the Risen Christ was for him. His relationship with Jesus was restored by Jesus' forgiveness and love.

Now, Jesus turned to him with an important question. Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus responded, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Again Jesus responded, "Take care of my sheep." The third time Jesus said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus kept on asking the same question, "Do you love me?" Jesus asked him three times. Peter had denied Jesus three times before a servant girl in the High Priest's courtyard. Jesus gave him opportunity to confess his love

three times. Simon Peter answered, "Lord, you know all things--you know my heart. You know that I love you. Jesus' word to Peter was the same: "Feed my sheep." We show our love for Jesus by taking care of his sheep. It is by loving and taking care of Jesus' sheep that we learn the heart of the shepherd. Who are Jesus' sheep? In John 10 Jesus tells us who his sheep are. His sheep are the people for whom Jesus died. In John 10 Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (10) The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, so he runs away--he abandons the sheep when the wolf comes. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me--just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep.

We who have received forgiveness of sins and eternal life from Jesus have received his abundant love. We show our love for Jesus by knowing and loving his sheep. We have no strength to do this, but when we accept his love and his word and make ourselves available, he comes to us to help us--just as he came to his disciples, gave them his Holy Spirit and poured out his love on them.

3. A New Beginning--Follow Me (18-25)

Jesus continued to speak to Peter about his future as a disciple of Jesus. When he had followed Jesus as a young disciple, he followed joyfully. He listened to Jesus as he taught in the Synagogues and on the mountainside and on the lake shore. He participated in Jesus' healing ministry. He even cast out demons in Jesus' name. He was full of hope and vision. He believed that Jesus would restore the Kingdom of Israel. He left everything and followed Jesus. Jesus loved his disciples; he protected them; he trained them. Now they would be on their own. He would no longer be physically present with them. His presence with them is internalized. The risen Jesus is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. At the same time, he who promised his disciples to be with them to the end of the age keeps his promise by sending his Holy Spirit to indwell and be with Peter and the disciples and with us forever.

Jesus told Peter that he would not live a self-centered life, but that he would live and die for the glory of God. Jesus challenges us also to live a Jesus-centered life, not a self-centered life. Jesus' direction for Peter and for all of us is "Follow me." It is an invitation to live and die for the glory of God, as Jesus' disciple. Peter saw John following them. He asked a question that all of us are tempted to ask, "What about him?" (Why me?) Jesus' answer made it clear that God's will and leading for each of us is different. "If I want him to remain alive until I return what is that to you: You must follow me."

Jesus doesn't promise a problem-free life to those who follow him, but he promises to be with us to the end of the age and bring us to his heavenly kingdom. He loves us and he wants us to receive his love and grace and live joyful, prayerful, thankful lives. Jesus who invited his hungry disciples to "Come and have breakfast" is the same Jesus who says to us, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me, (Rev 3:20) "Come and have breakfast."

We know that, according to history Peter was crucified in Rome, upside down. John lived a long life and died a natural death. He wrote this Gospel after Peter's death. He lived in Ephesus and took care of Jesus' mother. He spent his latter years in exile on the Isle of Patmos. He wrote John's Gospel, the three Epistles of John and the Revelation. In this Gospel, he did not try to write down everything. He was selective in his materials and the purpose of his writing is stated in 20:31-- "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in his name."