

"TELL ME AGAIN"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
First Sunday After Easter  
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"TELL ME AGAIN"

### INTRODUCTION

If there is one thing that turns me off from being a good listener, it is redundancy. As a preacher of the Gospel, it is a constant battle for me to come up with fresh ideas every Sunday morning. Many have been the times across the years that I have walked away from here following a service thinking that I gave you the same message that I gave you a few weeks before, only the text and the title are different. I dislike being redundant, and yet there is a time for redundancy - a time to repeat over and over again certain things, certain truths.

And it is with this thought in mind that we turn to this morning's lesson which is taken from the 21st chapter of John's Gospel, verses 15 - 19.

### THE SETTING

This is a story about a man who on one occasion deliberately and conscientiously chose to be redundant. The man is Jesus. The time is post-Easter. The resurrection has already taken place. The setting is a camp-fire on the beach of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus surprises the disciples by appearing before them while they are busy fishing. At first, they do not recognize Him. While they're out on the Sea in their boats, Jesus comes along and shouts to them a way they could catch more fish. Strangely enough, they follow His advice and the end result is a good catch. The disciples finally recognize Jesus when they come to shore.

It's a joyous time. One Risen Lord was with His disciples again. A fire is built and some fish are prepared for a meal. No one is feeling pressured to wrap things up and get home. There are no political authorities hanging around them to stir up a controversy. No one is giving a sermon. No lesson is being taught. This is a peaceful moment...void of pressure of any kind. A small band of faithful followers are enjoying the company of their Messiah and He their company.

### THE REDUNDANCY

This then is the setting for the occasion when Jesus chose to be redundant. Turning to Simon Peter, He asks, "Simon, son of John do you love Me more than these?" The question it seems is not confusing, but it is confronting. Jesus is simply asking Peter if his love for Christ is greater than his love for the other disciples. What does Peter say? He says to Jesus, "Yes....Lord. You know that I love You". And Jesus responds "Feed My lambs".

The conversation between Jesus and Peter continues. But the question does not change, neither does the response. Suddenly, this easy dialogue is caught in redundancy. Again, Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him. Again Peter reaffirms his original statement. Again Jesus says, "Tend My sheep". The redundant conversation is still not finished. It reads,

"He said to him the third time, 'Simon, Son of John, do you love Me?' Peter was grieved 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...' And after this He said to him, 'Follow Me'"

There is a time for redundancy. And perhaps this morning's story is such a time. The words expressed in this dialogue are clear. There is no mystery here...no unfinished business...nor words left unsaid. What does this story suggest to us. Let me offer several suggestions.

SOME THINGS SO OBVIOUS WE DO NOT SEE THEM

I would offer this thought that some things are so obvious we do not see them. It was obvious that Peter loved Jesus. It was also obvious that Jesus wanted Peter to never forget that love. We recall that that love and that loyalty had wavered back in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion.

Several years ago my son, David, played a trick on me as I was celebrating a birthday. He got up early that morning and went over to the garage where I kept the car and unknown to me taped a special sticker across the back bumper of my car. He knew ahead of time that I would be using the car that day to run up to White Plains to a church meeting. A strange thing happened to me on my way to the meeting. I had barely gotten on to the FDR and the driver of the car began to honk his horn. I thought I was driving too slowly so I put the foot on the gas and moved. Not long after another driver honked as I was going across the Triborough. Again, I checked my speed, got into another lane on the the bridge and still the honking persisted.

It seemed that driver after driver would pass me and honk and some even smiled and waved as they went by. I began to wonder what it was all about. The car didn't seem to have any problems...tires weren't flat, it was going along smoothly. I was behaving. Finally, when I got to the parking lot in White Plains behind the Church, I checked the back of the car and there on the bumper was this wonderful sticker, "HONK...I'M 50 TODAY!"

Some things are so obvious we do not see them. And I think that love is like that. You might love someone very much, but if you forget to tell that person or to show your love, in time that other person begins to hold your love in question. Love, to be love, has to be passed on.

In today's story, Jesus was not so much in need to hear Peter's love expressed, as Peter himself needed to hear his own expression of love that he held for Jesus. Yes, during the trial of Jesus, Peter had openly denied before others that he even knew Jesus. Three times. In that sense, Peter had denied His Lord and was living under the weight of shame and guilt. Jesus' redundant questioning was meant to help Peter recognize the love he felt for the same Man he had earlier denied. Three questions for the three denials.

And if there is a message in all of this for us, it's this: Love must be redundant or else it will be lost. Love not shared is lost. Love understood as only emotion or feeling is not the fulfillment of what love is meant to be. Love only knows a relationship, especially the love one person holds for himself or herself. Love is an "action"...which links one person to another, or one person with himself or herself.

God is so obviously present in this world, that we sometimes do not see Him. His love for you must be redundant, because you and I are likely to forget it...or question it...or hold it in doubt. "Love...so amazing, so divine". However, there is more to this and so let's move on...

NO SUCH THING AS A CHRISTIAN

In the strictest sense of the word, there is no such thing as a Christian in this world. There are, however, Christians. This dialogue that took place between Jesus and Peter was not in isolation from the other disciples. The conversation was heard by all the disciples who were fishing that day. Now there's both bad news and good news in regard to this observation.

The bad news, insofar as it is news that confronts us and beckons an honest response, is the news that God addresses us individually to ascertain whether we consider ourselves to be His disciple. And the good news is that we are not alone in being a disciple. There are always others. You are not the only Christian in the world. There are many others. You are not the only Christian who has denied God.

To say there is no such thing as a Christian in this world but that there are Christians in this world is to simply say that you and I cannot really be a Christian in ~~isolation~~. It just does not work that way. The path we follow which begins with us and leads to Christ is a path filled with other people. At times, we may even wish it didn't have so many people along the path, but it does and it is to no avail to wish it otherwise.

You and I cannot really be included amongst the Christians of this world unless we are Christian to those people already around us. "Feed My sheep" said Jesus to Peter. This is no option. This is the path which leads us to God. There is no person in this world to whom you and I are not meant to be a Christian. Faith in God and "feeding sheep" are full time jobs.

I remember the story of a little girl who awaited her first day at school. Her mother and father had tried to tell her what her first day at school would be like and wanted it to be a special experience. They even took her several days in advance to meet her first grade teacher and to see her class room. She was well prepared the night before for the big day - the first day of school. The day came and the little girl went to her first day of school. When she got home her anxious parents immediately asked, "Well how was it...your first day of school?" The little girl said, "Well, I guess it was all right. But I didn't know all the other kids and I lost one of my pencils and dropped my tray of food during lunch. I think everyone should have a first day of school, but I don't think I'll ever go back". Her parents looked at each other and said, "You don't think you'll ever go back? What do you mean? You have to go back, you have 12 years of school". And the little girl said, "What? I thought I was through!"

The redundant message, dear friends, that we need to hear is that we are never through being a Christian. There is no such thing as a day when we can go into isolation and be a Christian - alone in constant solitude. When we keep our Christian actions to ourselves, when we dare not express our Christian beliefs to anyone else, when we see only ourselves in this world and forget the needs of other people, we might be able to fool ourselves, but we are not fooling a God who says, "Feed my sheep....follow Me".

And the comforting thing about it all is that we are not asked to go it alone. There are other Christians who need our support in reaching this world, just as we need their support.

"Lovest thou me, Peter?" "Lord, you know I do." "Then feed my sheep....and follow me."

TREATING PEOPLE LIKE THEY WERE GOD

One more point to make before I close this up. I think that this story suggests that the only way we can treat God as if He were more important than people is by treating people as if they were more like God. It sounds rather simple. I'm not suggesting we worship other people; we are meant to worship only God. But the God Jesus knew and the God that Jesus wants us to know is a God who wants His people to treat all other people as the ultimate of creation.

"Treat people as a God" means to love them, to respect them, to honor and support them. It means to forgive them, to trust them, give and receive from them. "Treat people as a God" means that we cannot really have a relationship with God at the exclusion of other people. The cross has both a vertical dimension which connects us to God and a horizontal dimension which connects us with humankind.

Soren Kierkegaard helped to shape the whole history of Western thought. A Danish philosopher and theologian who lived in the early 19th century, he once preached a sermon in a church in Copenhagen in which he told a parable which helps us to catch the essential message of our Christian faith. You may have heard it before, but let me read it to you again:

"Once there was a king who loved a humble maiden. This king was so powerful and well established that he could not marry her without being forced to abdicate. If he were to marry her, the king knew that he would make her father grateful. It occurred to him, though, that something would be wanting in her happiness. She would always admire him and thank him, but she would not be able to love him for the inequality between them would be too great and she would never be able to forget her humble origin and her debt of gratitude.

So he decided upon another way. Instead of making her queen, he would renounce the kingship. He would become a commoner and then offer her his love. In doing this, he realized that he was taking a great risk. He was doing something that would be foolish in the eyes of most people in his kingdom, perhaps even in her eyes. He would lose the kingship and he might also be rejected by her, especially if she were disappointed at not becoming queen. (And then Kierkegaard concluded) Yet he decided to take this risk. It was better he believed to risk everything in order to make love possible."

This parable is really a statement about God. It speaks of a king who is willing to lose His crown in order to become a commoner. It speaks of a King who chooses not to be merely worshipped from afar, but loved as one who is near. It speaks of a King who chooses not to be aloof, but present with those He loves most. And according to our Christian faith, such is our God. Our God is one who comes to serve, one who believes in us. If your idea of God is one who asks you to do all the serving, then it is time you exchange your idea of God.

Tell me again, Jesus. It's OK to be redundant because I need to get this straight - now and forever. Tell me again....that You and God have come to serve me - me of all people - because...I carry this shame of knowing that I have not served all people at all times. Tell me again, Jesus, that how I treat other people....how I feed Your sheep...is of more importance than the sum total of mankind's arrogant and possessive knowledge of who it thinks You are. Be redundant, Lord...'cause I really need to get this straight and maybe, just maybe...I'll then be ready to understand You when you say, "Follow Me."

PRAYER We pray, O God, as a company of those who love You, that we may be given whatever it takes to run with patience the race that is set before us. Make us the kind of Christians that invite rather than hinder faith -

Disciplined and informed,  
Generous and compassionate;  
Venturesome and joyful,  
Loving and loyal.

After the manner of our Saviour, keep us at the side of those who need us. Thicken the ties that unite us together in this place with all who love You, by whatever name or sign.

Use us where and as You wilt,  
Until the fever of life is over,  
And our work is done,  
And we rest in You.

All which we pray in faith and with thanksgiving through our Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation...delighted to have you with us...and we hope that we'll have opportunity to greet you in a more personal way...
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name. Take a moment to fill out a visitor card...or to sign....Join us on other Sundays, come and work with us in the programs...
- C. You worship in a Church whose roots....ministering here since 1837....fourth building, neighborhood church. We minister in the name of Christ...

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. The parish concerns are listed there in the bulletin for you and I invite you to review those announcements on your..noting that we have busy week approaching...three important meetings and at the end of the week the Adult Fellowship Wine and Cheese Party. Be sure to sign up for it downstairs...
- B. And remember that next Sunday we shall be holding Bake Sale III. Be in touch with Doreen Morales regarding your possible gift.

III. "CONVERSATIONS IN MEMBERSHIP"

- A. Please note that new members will be received into the Church two weeks from today and that persons interested in strengthening a tie with the Church at this time should be in touch with me and also come to the "Conversations in Membership" set for next Sunday evening, April 17th, at 6:00 pm.
- B. John Wesley once said: "If your heart is, as my heart is, then come and give me your hand".
- C. I like that inclusive invitation and the tone that it conveys.. ...and so to new friends of recent weeks and months...who have found a church home with us..."hearts and hands are welcome.. and needed to continue to do the Lord's work in this busy corner of His Kingdom". Next Sunday evening. 6 pm.

IV. TODAY AT ONE

- A. Memorial Service. Mabelle White. Passed away, March 1st. One o'clock here in the sanctuary.

( over )

V. UNITED METHODIST WOMEN

- A. You'll note from the bulletin that today around 1:30 we shall hold the annual meeting of the United Methodist Women of our Church....and that one of the main items on the agenda is voting allocations to difference causes and concerns from the receipts of our All Church Fair of November. It's always an exciting time and a spirited, enthusiastic time...all are invited - men and women both.
  
- B. And it's not too soon to be thinking about next year's Fair. Things are already happening in connection with it. Take along the "fair flyer" in the bulletin and also let me introduce to you the Chairperson of our 1988 Church Fair, Jackie Notestine. We've invited her to say a few words to you about what's coming and what we can be doing at this time.
  
- C. Mary Lou McGanney will be "herding elephants" this next Saturday and will be glad to hear from you regarding your donations for the Fair.

VI. OFFERING

- A. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive". Let us worship God with our gifts and offerings.

VII. A ROSE ON THE ALTAR



"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

1. MARIEL WEST
2. HELEN BREITZ
3. ADA KINARCY
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to \_\_\_\_\_ who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation....a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink...nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

PASTORAL PRAYER: April 10, 1988

ETERNAL GOD, OUR FATHER....we come from many backgrounds, many places, and bringing many moods to this great sanctuary and the inspiration of this April Sunday service.

There are some here, O Lord, who feel that life is simply a treadmill stretching between birth and death, and we're just being pulled along on some meaningless trip.

There are some here, Lord, who are feeling despair over the pains and problems of everyday living...some who have grown cynical and bitter because of too many disappointments that have deflated their spirits.

There are some, O God, who feel completely defeated by the troubles that seem to pile up and overwhelm them.

O LORD, come and minister to us as you once ministered to the Disciples. Roll back the rock from our tombs of despair.

AND as you lifted the sadness from the hearts of those who were "down" on that first Easter, lift our spirits out of the depression and the sadness we may be feeling.

THE WORLD, O GOD, once again is reminding us of Your renewing power. That which appears dead seems to be coming alive again!

MAY THAT remind us, Lord, of how we can be renewed in spirit and revitalized in outlook. That which was dark and dull has color and vibrancy once again.

MAY THAT remind us of the beauty of spirit that can come to us when we grow in Your love and in Your goodness.

LORD, WE ARE GLAD FOR LIFE, and in the spirit of this Easter season, we are grateful for the promise of renewal.

WE PRAISE YOU for showing us that kind of love that never give us...

- that hopes all things, and believes all things...
- that endures all things,
- that love that is eternal.

SO WE COME this day with our symbols of music, of flowers, with the greatness of the hymns and anthems, with our prayers and sermon...all given to Your glory and in the strong name and loving spirit of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord in whose name we pray.

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