

By a Charcoal Fire  
John 21:15–19  
Sunday, April 26, 2026 (Easter 4)

Let us pray: Show us who we are, Lord, and who you are calling us to be, in Christ. Amen.

There is a quote by Maya Angelou that has become increasingly popular in recent years, and it goes like this, “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.” The idea is that people’s actions reveal their true character better than their words do. They can *tell you* anything, but if someone *shows you* that they are unreliable, unkind, selfish, or mean, trust that that is who they truly are, and it is who they will continue to be in the future, rather than giving them another chance that will only end up hurting or disappointing you. Believe what you see *now*, not what you *hope* will be true later.

And there *is* wisdom in that. I think a lot of times, we want to ignore people’s bad behavior, make excuses for it, pretend that isn’t who they really are, or think that we can change them. We often want to believe the *best* about people, so when someone does something hurtful or disappointing, we’re tempted to say, “They didn’t mean that. That’s not really them. They’re just having a bad day.” But what Maya Angelou suggests is that it’s not just a one-off, isolated incident; it’s a revelation. What someone does, especially under pressure, often tells the truth about where their heart is and who they truly are.

For years, Peter had talked a big game. When Jesus told his disciples that he would be arrested and that he would suffer and die, Peter *swore* that he would never let that happen to him. When Jesus said that Peter would deny him, Peter said that even if it meant he would die *with* him, he would never deny him. But when Jesus was arrested and brought before the high priest, Peter was watching from a distance, warming himself by a charcoal fire because it was cold. A woman comes up to him and says, “You’re one of his disciples, too, aren’t you?” Peter says, “I am not.” Then some other people say, “Yeah, you are one of his disciples, aren’t you?” Peter says, “I am not.” Then one of the slaves of the high priest

says, “Didn’t I see you in the garden with him?” And again, Peter denies it. At that moment, the cock crows, reminding Peter that Jesus said, “Before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.”

It was Peter’s worst moment, his greatest failure. The number one disciple, whom Jesus called the *rock* on which he would build his church and to whom Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom, denied being a follower of Jesus, because he was scared that he would get arrested, too. You could make the case that, when it mattered most, Peter showed Jesus who he really was. And when someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time, right? Well, fortunately for Peter, Jesus *doesn’t*.

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Last week we heard a story about how, after Jesus’ resurrection, Peter went out on a boat fishing with the other disciples, but they hadn’t caught anything all night, until Jesus appears on the shore and tells them to cast their net on the *other* side of the boat, and they catch so many fish they can barely haul them in. When they realize that it is Jesus, Peter jumps out of the boat and swims to him, and it says that when he gets to the shore, Jesus is there with bread and fish cooking over a charcoal fire.

*A charcoal fire.* Like the one Peter stood warming himself by in the courtyard of the high priest while Jesus was on trial. The one he was standing by when he denied being Jesus’ disciple three times. The one he stood by and wept when he realized what he had done. Jesus is preparing a meal over the scene of Peter’s greatest failure. You think things were a little tense at that breakfast?

John doesn’t tell us that any words were spoken while they ate. But when they had finished, Jesus says to Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Most of the time we focus on the question that Jesus asks him. But let’s start with how he asks it. Jesus doesn’t call him *Peter*. He calls him by his original, pre-disciple name, *Simon, son of John*. When he first meets Jesus back in chapter 1, the very first thing Jesus says to him is, “You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called *Cephas, Peter*.” Ever

since then, Jesus has only called him *Peter*. Until this moment, when he calls him *Simon* again. Almost like he's starting over and calling Peter to be his disciple all over again.

*Do you love me more than these?* We don't know exactly what *these* refers to. Jesus could be saying, "Do you love me more than bread and fish and fire, the things of this world?" It could be, "Do you love me more than you love these people, the other disciples?" It could be, "Do you love me more than these other disciples love me?" It could be, "Do you love me more than these three denials that hang over this fire suggest you do?" It could be *all* of it. Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my lambs."

Again, Jesus says, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Again, Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Tend my sheep."

A third time, Jesus says, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And it says that Peter felt hurt. It doesn't say exactly *why* Peter felt hurt, but we can guess. It could be because Jesus questioned his love for him three times. Didn't he believe him the first two? It could be because Peter realizes exactly what Jesus is doing. Peter says, "Lord, you know everything." *Everything. You know how I denied you three times around this very fire, even though you weren't there to hear it.* "You know that I love you." And Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

Three denials around a charcoal fire, met by three chances to profess his love. And it ends with Jesus saying, "Follow me." Just like he did three years earlier, when he first called Peter. Jesus is going back to the beginning. He is wiping the slate clean. He is calling Peter to follow him again. He is giving Peter the chance to start over. To get back on track. A second chance.

But it's easy to *say* that you love someone. Peter has done that plenty of times. Jesus wants him to *show* that he loves him. He wants him to *prove* it. And the way that he *does* that, Jesus says, is by taking care of the people that belong to Jesus. Feeding people as *he* has been fed. Teaching people as *he* has been taught. Forgiving people as *he* has been forgiven. And Peter is going to spend the rest of his life doing that; trying to make up for what he has done wrong; trying to make the most of his second chance.

What this story shows us is that God is a God of second chances. Jesus died, and now he is alive again. Peter denied, and now he is restored. And God gives those second chances to *us*, too. After our failures and mistakes and sin, after the ways we hurt others, the ways we have *been* hurt, after all the ways we fall short of what God wants for us, no matter what we have done or what has been done *to* us, God *loves* us and *forgives* us and gives us another chance. And another. And another. As many as it takes.

What was it that Jesus told Peter? "Forgive seventy-seven times," or, "seventy *times* seven." Would Jesus call *us* to do something that he was not willing to do himself? He's already done it. In his death on a cross is all the forgiveness we will ever need for the rest of our lives. We did nothing to earn it or deserve it; it's not because we were good enough or faithful enough or proved ourselves worthy of it. But we *are* called to spend the rest of our lives making the most of the second chance that we have been given. Whatever has happened before now, we are called to prove our love for Jesus from this point forward. And the way that Jesus calls us to *do* that is by *sharing* what we have been given with others. Teaching people as we have been taught. Feeding people as we have been fed. Forgiving people as we have been forgiven. Extending second chances to others. Taking care of the people that belong to Jesus. And who belongs to Jesus? *Everyone*.

Jesus asks *us*, "Do you love me," and the way we *show* our love for Jesus is by loving *others*. *All* others, no matter who they are or whether we think they are worthy or deserving of it. Doing that may take you

places you do not wish to go. That's what Jesus told Peter. He said, "When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and 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." And it says, "He said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God." A little over 30 years later, Peter would be killed by the Romans. Tradition holds that he was crucified upside down, because he did not feel worthy to die in the same way that Jesus did. Living out our love for Jesus, loving and forgiving others can be *hard*. It may feel like it is *killing* you. Jesus and Peter felt that, too. But as followers of Jesus, we cannot *receive* forgiveness and then refuse to forgive others. We cannot *receive* a second chance and then refuse to give a second chance to others. We cannot *receive* Jesus' love and profess to love Jesus in return and then refuse to love others.

Who is the person in your life that Jesus is calling you to love, to forgive, to give a second chance? Can you do it? Yes, you can, with God's help. You can do *all things* through Christ who strengthens you. You might stumble and fall short and fail over and over again, because it's not easy. But the good news is that we can keep going back to that charcoal fire for the forgiveness that we need, over and over again. Because God is a God of second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seven times seven chances. As many as it takes.

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*When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.* The good news for Peter and for us is that Jesus does *not*. When we stumble and fail, when we show Jesus who we are, Jesus meets us there and invites us to become something *new*; to become the person that he created us to be.

*You are not your worst moment.*

*You are not your biggest mistake.*

*You are not your greatest failure.*

And neither is that other person. You are a *child* of God, created in the *image* of God, forgiven and loved by Jesus Christ. And so is that other person. When they show you who *they* are, meet them there, and give them the chance to become something *new*.

Jesus has shown you who you are. Believe him. And then spend the rest of your life, from this moment forward, showing him that he was right.