

7-9-2021

## Homiletical Exegesis on John 21:15-19

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

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### Recommended Citation

Nichols, Toni Marie. 2021. Homiletical Exegesis on John 21:15-19. *Obsculta* 14, (1) : 168-172.  
<https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol14/iss1/14>.

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ABSTRACT:

This is a homiletical exegesis on John 21:15-19. It brings together Peter's denial of Jesus during the Passion and Jesus' restoration of Peter, revealing an important message of John's Gospel--victory is achieved in remaining faithful to the end. In 1944 from the Ravens Bruck concentration camp, Corrie ten Boom and her sister, Betsy left us with an example of how to live into this Gospel message.



## Homiletical Exegesis on John 21:15-19

by Toni Marie Nichols

### BIBLICAL READING

*"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.'*

*He then said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'*

*He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was distressed that he had said to him a 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.'*

*Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.'*

*He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, 'Follow me.'"<sup>1</sup> (John 21:15-19 NAB)*

1 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, "John," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020, accessed October 17, 2020, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/john/21:15-19>



Photo by Hossam M. Omar on Unsplash

When you think of Simon Peter, the apostle, which Gospel story comes to your mind first?

A google search today shows 26,000,000 hits on Simon Peter's denial of Jesus during the passion:<sup>2</sup>

At the Last Supper, Simon Peter tells Jesus he will lay down his life for him. Jesus replies, "Amen, amen, I say to you, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times." (John 13:38 NAB) John, in his Gospel describes each of Simon Peter's denials of Jesus, which occur only one day later.

Google hits on Peter's restoration that we read today is less than a fifth of those of Peter's denial: 4,650,000 versus 26,000,000.<sup>3</sup> As humans, we tend to focus on the negative over the positive.

Looking at one of these two accounts without the other, the message in the Gospel of John is lost. Without the restoration narrative, the denial ends in despair; without Simon Peter's denials, the wonder of his restoration is lost.

In the restoration narrative we just read, Jesus asks Simon Peter three times if he loves him; three times Jesus points the way in which Simon Peter could demonstrate his love:

2 Search conducted on October 17th on "Peter denied Jesus."

3 Search conducted on October 17th on "Peter's restoration."

Feed my lambs...  
Tend my sheep...  
Feed my sheep.



Photo by Patrick Schneider on Unsplash

For John, the Evangelist, the bigger story is Peter's restoration. Victory is in remaining faithful until the end, as Jesus did on the cross. John concludes the restoration narrative hinting of how Peter too would show both his love and faithfulness to the end.

*"Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." (John 21:18 NAB)*

Digging deeper, what is John trying to relay to us in Simon Peter's story?

Simon Peter was likely considered the leader by the apostles from the moment of his first encounter with Jesus. It was then Jesus gave him the name that means "rock" from which he would build his Church. "You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter)." (John 1:42 NAB) Is it not the fall of leaders that tends to grab ahold of our attention?



By El Greco [1], Public Domain  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11900127>

What was behind Simon Peter's denial of Jesus? Fear? But of what? St. Augustine of Hippo suggests that Peter was afraid of death. Why the drastic reversal then that Simon Peter would live into the teachings and callings of the Lord to the point of his own death on a cross?

St. Augustine offers:

*"While our Lord was being condemned to death, [Peter] feared, and denied Him. But by His resurrection Christ implanted love in his heart, and drove away fear. Peter denied, because he feared to die: but when our Lord was risen from the dead, and by His death destroyed death, what should he fear?"<sup>4</sup>*

Corrie ten Boom in her book, *The Hiding Place*, provides a real-world example of living into the restoration narrative. In a story involving fleas, she reminds us of a simple but powerful idea that we can apply in our own everyday lives.

Corrie was born and raised in a devout Christian family from Haarlem in the Netherlands. During WWII, the family became engaged in the underground and began hiding Jewish people in a hiding place in their home. In 1944, they were betrayed to the police and Corrie's 83-year-old father, Corrie, and her sister Betsy were imprisoned. Corrie's father died within a week, and Corrie and Betsy were ultimately deported to Ravensbrück in northern Germany. Upon arrival at the concentration camp, Corrie and Betsy were led to their assigned barracks. When they were shown to their beds, they discovered they were full of fleas. Corrie cried out to her sister, "Betsy, how can we live in such a place!"<sup>5</sup> Betsy replied that she knew how! The answer was in the passage they had read in the morning from the Bible, which they had smuggled into the concentration camp: "In all circumstances give thanks." (1 Thessalonians 5:16 NAB) Corrie struggled to imagine how she could do that but agreed that she would try.



Photo by Toni M. Nichols

In the concentration camp, Corrie and Betsy clandestinely organized a nightly worship service in their dormitory. Strangely—unlike every other place within

<sup>4</sup> "Catena Aurea by St. Thomas Aquinas," e-catholic 2000, accessed October 18, 2020, <https://www.ecatholic2000.com/catena/untitled-109.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> Anita Mathias, "Praise the Lord for Fleas and Lice," *Dreaming Beneath the Spires*, December 26, 2015, <https://anitamathias.com/2012/03/30/praise-the-lord-for-fleas-and-lice/>.

the concentration camp—the guards never came around to their barracks. As such, Corrie and Betsy were able to continue ministering to the women night after night. One day after the labors of the day, Corrie returned to the barracks and saw Betsy waiting for her with a big smile on her face. Corrie asked her why she was so pleased with herself, and Betsy replied that she had discovered the reason the guards were leaving their barracks alone: Because of the fleas!

Betsy died in Ravensbruck, but Corrie went on to become an international Christian speaker and author. She set up a rehabilitation center in her homeland for concentration camp survivors—and consistent with her message of forgiveness—the rehabilitation center tended also to people who had collaborated with the Nazis. Feeding the Lord's sheep, helping restore the fallen, and being faithful to the end, Corrie and Betsy lived into the teachings of the restoration narrative. Like the Apostle Peter, they were victorious!

Let us conclude with the words of Silouan the Athonite who provides insight into the kind of love witnessed by the Apostle Peter and the ten Booms:

*The Lord loves all people, but He loves those who seek Him even more. To his chosen ones the Lord gives such great grace that for love they forsake the whole earth, the whole world, and their souls burn with desire that all people might be saved and see the glory of the Lord.*<sup>6</sup>

May we too seek him even more. Amen.



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6 "Sayings of the Ascetics of the Orthodox Church," Holy Wisdom Orthodox Church, accessed October 18, 2020, <https://www.holywisdomnevadacity.org/wisdom.html>.