

WGUMC Sept 14, 2014 "Still Crazy After All These Years"
Luke 10:25-28 and John 21:15-17

"Are you crazy?" was the reaction when I announced in my sophomore year in college that I wanted to go to seminary. In high school, I'd been salutatorian in a class of 640. I was a Presidential Scholar and dined at the State Department. I got a full-ride to Boston University. And by that time, I was more than halfway through the premed program. Why would I waste all that potential to be a preacher?

I was all of 19 and maybe clueless, but not as crazy as the Apostle Peter, who in mid-life, leaves everything—wife, kids and career—to follow a Nobody by the name of Jesus. But, if you remember the story, he doesn't follow him all the way. When Jesus gets too close to a cross, Peter denies that he even knows him, denies him three times and then slithers away.

Now it's after the resurrection. Peter is back fishing and Jesus appears on the beach. While they are eating breakfast

together, Jesus has a question for Peter. He says, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Think back when you first encountered that question. I doubt that any of us had any better idea of what it means to love Jesus than Peter did when he first considered following him. So I always tell our youth who are about to be confirmed, "We're going to ask you some questions, and you're not going to have any idea what you're doing when you say 'yes' to Jesus." And what is true of each of them when they reaffirm their baptismal vows was true of me when I took my ordination vows. I had no idea what I was doing.

When I was first a wannabe for ministry, I was worried because I had no heart-strangely-warmed story to tell to the congregation that had to approve me for candidacy. I was a Christian in my head more than in my heart. And I wondered, "If my love is intellectual, does that mean it isn't real?"

When I shared my worry with Bob Thornburg, Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, he read this verse to me: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." Then he said, "Few enough people love God with their minds. Never be ashamed of that gift." And his wise words got me through candidacy and helped me survive three years of seminary.

But how was loving God with my mind going to help me once I left the safety of the academy? And how was it going to help a congregation of farmers struggling to scratch out a living along the Snake River?

Peter answers Jesus' question with, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Then Jesus says to him, "Feed my lambs." When I arrived to take my first pastoral appointment in the tiny town of Filer, on old Highway 30, six miles west of Twin Falls,

Idaho, in late June of 1989, I was 24 years old. I had no idea how to feed lambs, let alone lay people.

But I said my prayers and moved into the parsonage. There I was, all alone and lost in an empty house with five bedrooms and a full basement. The house was as big as the job. And I felt as if I had no more faith than I had furniture, but you have to start somewhere.

So I found an old dresser at a yard sale (I'm still using it). I bought a bed at Sears (Kristen is sleeping on it). They hauled over a dining room set from the church, and someone donated a couch and chair, one of those gold floral sets with complimentary cat scratches. A few months later, I bought a TV set, and I used the box it came in as an end table.

Moving into the ministry was a second-hand process for me, in more ways than one. You could say that I didn't start out with a couch or a faith of my own. That was when I realized

that I wasn't going to be able to feed others until I first let them feed me.

That's how I spent those first few years in ministry. Like John Wesley, I had to preach faith until I had it. I wasn't going to get it from a book, not even a Bible. I was going to have to receive it from the folks who were already living it.

So, I watched and listened and learned from my parishioners. Lucky for me, farmers have a lot of faith. They sow their seeds with no guarantees. They have to work hard and there's no weekend. Every blessed day, they have to feed the lambs. Along the way, they take care of their extended family and create community, because that's life in rural America. Now that I think about it, being in a pastoral setting is a pretty darn good place to learn how to be a pastor.

Twenty-five years later, I'm in Silicon Valley, which seems very far removed from its rural beginnings. I was so disappointed to discover that the Pruneyard is a shopping

center! And the past is not missed much because most of the people who live here now didn't live here way back when.

Everything is new and everything is now.

In this fast forward world, churches like this one often seem to be stuck on a slow rewind. Maybe so, but I would argue that churches are the last, best places where real community can still happen, where people of different generations and life experiences can learn to love and live together.

I've been blessed to be the pastor of churches with plenty of people who were old enough to be my parents and grandparents and who were much farther along in faith. For 25 years, I've been watching them and taking notes, and in doing so, I'm beginning to learn what it means to love Jesus.

But Jesus asks Peter a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And we wonder, was Jesus not listening when Peter answered the first time? Or did Jesus want to be

sure that Peter was really thinking? If love is automatic, how do we know if it's authentic? So Jesus asks again. "This time, Peter, go a little deeper," which tells me that every time Jesus asks us that question, we have to dig deeper.

And let me tell you, sometimes it gets pretty deep. Ministry is messy. Being in relationship with people is risky. We might think we love Jesus, but at the same time have trouble loving the people who say they love Jesus! And that's the big challenge of being a member of a church, because you can't really love Jesus without loving his people! No matter what they do, no matter how they disappoint you.

Just look at how Jesus loved Peter. Peter denied him and ran away. But Jesus showed up on the beach that day. He wasn't about to give up on Peter or any of his disciples, because relationships are what the kingdom of God is made of. If you're following Jesus, you're always working on relationships.

I don't have to tell you that excrement happens in churches. Words get said. Decisions get made. Feelings get hurt. And trust gets frayed. Then rather than try to reconcile the relationships, some people and some pastors just walk away. Well I may be crazy, but I still believe that we are here to be ambassadors for Christ, that in Christ God reconciled the whole world and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. [2 Cor 5:18-20] So I haven't learned to give up on church members.

Ask the lady who was mad at me in Novato. I didn't have a clue that she was angry with me until years later when someone whispered to me. Immediately, I wrote to her and called her, hoping to make amends with her. But she refused to tell me what it was I had done or failed to do. Maybe she didn't want to tell me because then she would have to forgive me. And you know, that still grieves me, because if pastors can't teach their people to practice forgiveness, what good are we?

If we can't be ministers of reconciliation, how can we be ambassadors for Jesus Christ?

Forgiveness is what love looks like when it's not all dressed up and smiling for Sunday worship. Forgiveness is what love is doing down in the trenches where we live during the workweek. We all know that love is work. And forgiveness isn't optional for the followers of Jesus. It's fundamental. I have never encountered a problem in church or in life that couldn't be solved by more people practicing forgiveness.

If I've learned anything in 25 years of ministry, it's that it's far more important to treat people right than to be right. Pride isn't worth the price. Saving face isn't as important as saving grace. Repentance is a very good exercise for your heart muscle. And despite all the evidence to the contrary, I still believe that reconciliation is possible. So, even if you're mad at me and won't tell me why, I'm not going to give up on you, even when my clergy colleagues tell me I'm crazy.

I'm still crazy after all these years. I'm still learning what it means to love Jesus. And what I'm seeing more and more now is that loving God is really about losing yourself. Notice that Peter is all hurt when Jesus asks him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" But it's not about Peter and it's not about any of us. It's about God and what God wants of us: feed my sheep! But we can't feed the sheep if we're so focused on ourselves or on our feelings getting hurt.

We have to let go of the ego. It was a challenge for Peter and it has been for me. For most of my life, I've majored in examining my inner life. That was, after all, a big attraction of going to seminary. But whenever I'm tempted to think that what is going on with me is more interesting and compelling than what's going on in the people around me, Lord have mercy!

I find that one of the best gifts of getting older is getting over—me and a lot of anxiety. By the grace of God, I've gotten

through my traumatic twenties, my thirsty thirties, my frustrated forties, and now I'm looking forward to the faithful fifties! I think, I hope, I'm starting to let go of ego. And I discover that the less of me there is, the better life is! So Jesus is telling the truth when he says, "Lose your life for my sake and you will find it." [Mt 16:25] After twenty-five years in the ministry, I'm not just preaching it. By the grace of God, I'm finally ready to live it. And after all these years, I'm still crazy enough to believe that the love of God can so fill my heart and soul and strength and mind that I can live in heaven long before I leave this earth. What's more, I'm crazy enough to believe that you can, too.