

Things Come in Threes

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John 21:15-25

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World
Gospel Endings

*Things come
in threes in
John's gospel.*

Things come in threes: three feet in a yard, three wheels on a tricycle, three sides to a triangle and third times the charm. We have three-bean salads, three-ring notebooks and three-ring circuses. Maybe you recall the three stooges or the three musketeers.

Things come in threes in children's stories. There are nursery rhymes involving three little kittens, three blind mice, three little pigs and Goldilocks and the three bears.

Things come in threes in the world of sports. There are three goals in a hat trick, three races in the Triple Crown, three strikes and you're out, a three-point shot in basketball and a field goal worth three points.

Things also come in threes in the world of literature. It's called the "rule of three." Three is the minimum number needed to set up or break a pattern. This may explain why so many plays follow a three-act structure. It also tells us why so many jokes are told in threes.

Things come in threes in John's gospel. Our story opens with Jesus serving his disciples breakfast by the sea. After breakfast, Jesus and Peter go for a little stroll along the beach. Jesus asks, "Simon, son

of John, do you love me more than these?" Jesus could be asking, "Do you love me more than these things?" (i.e. fishing, boats). He could also be asking, "Do you love me more than these other disciples do?" Peter boasted at the Last Supper, "Even if all the other disciples fall away, I never will." Peter no longer compares himself to anyone. He has learned his lesson and answers simply, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." "Feed my sheep," Jesus says.

A second time Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" "Yes Lord, you know that I love you," Peter answers. Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

When Jesus asks a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter expresses his exasperation. "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." "Feed my sheep," Jesus says.

This exchange reminds me of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevye asks his wife Golda, "Do you love me?" "Do I what?" She asks. "Do you love me?" "I'm your wife," she answers. "I know," he says, "but do you love me?" "Do I love him?" She sings to the audience. "For 25 years I've

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lived with him, fought with him, starved with him and shared my bed with him; if that’s not love, what is?” “Then do you love me?” Tevye asks. “I suppose I do,” Golda concludes.

Maybe you’re in a love relationship with someone who asks the same question, “Do you love me?” Despite an affirmative answer, the inquiry is pressed a second and even a third time, but do you really love me?

I find this exchange between Jesus and Peter intriguing in the original Greek. There are several words for love in the Greek language. Agape is the highest form of love; a love attributed to God. Agape love is unconditional and unmerited. Philos is the Greek word for love which refers to friendship. We derive Philadelphia from this Greek word, the city of brotherly love.

Jesus asks, “Simon, son of John, do you agape me?” Peter answers, “I phileo you.” Jesus asks a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you agape me?” Peter answers, “I phileo you.” A third time Jesus asks, “Do you phileo me?” Peter answers, “I phileo you.”

There is considerable debate among Biblical scholars about the meaning of this interaction. Some claim these two words are used interchangeably so there is no real difference between them. Others believe Jesus deliberately condescends to Peter’s level in his use of this

word. Since Peter no longer wants to claim too much, Jesus is willing to receive Peter’s act of sincere friendship.

While Jesus and Peter converse together, “Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them” (John 21:20). This disciple, whom Jesus loved, is never identified by name in John’s gospel. Since he was present at the Last Supper, he’s one of the 12 disciples. Since most of the other disciples are identified by name in John’s gospel, this leaves one logical choice. The one who Jesus loved is none other than our author, John.

This might seem like a rather presumptuous way to refer to yourself as the one whom Jesus loved. Yet John appears to write this description without a whiff of entitlement or self-importance. The fact that no one is quite sure today whom John references suggests that John never flaunted his privileged status.

Peter senses John behind him and asks, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus says, in effect, never mind about him. It’s none of your business what ministry I have in mind for him. “Follow me” (21:22).

Peter and John become premier leaders in the early church. Peter emerges as the primary preacher of Christ’s gospel. According to Clement’s writing in 95AD, Peter dies a martyr’s death by crucifixion. John lives a long life as a writer of Christ’s

*...this story
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gospel. He pens the gospel that bears his name and the book of Revelation that completes the New Testament.

Our story recounts Peter's rehabilitation. During Jesus' arrest and trial in John 18, a woman recognizes Peter and asks, "Aren't you one of this man's disciples?" Peter answers emphatically, "I am not." Other people overhear their conversation and ask essentially the same question. Again Peter emphatically denies any association with Jesus. A short while later another person recognizes Peter. "Didn't I see you with him in the garden of trees?" Again Peter flatly denies it and a rooster crows just as Jesus predicted that it would.

Jesus doesn't call Peter out three times just to embarrass him. His questions represent a symbolic undoing of Peter's threefold denial.

It's hard to conceive that the most revered and celebrated leader of the Christian church is also the biggest failure. Peter not only fails, he fails spectacularly. What other religious movement exalts someone who denied his master three times in quick succession? Jesus says, in essence, you who have been the biggest failure will also become the biggest leader.

For any of us who feel as though we have failed God and denied Jesus, this story has grace written all over it. If the biggest failure can become the biggest leader, there is yet hope

for us. If you feel as though you have failed Christ, it's not too late.

You may feel as though you've failed as a friend, failed in a job, failed in your marriage, failed as a parent or failed the standards you've set for yourself. Failure doesn't have to have the last word. Jesus Christ can transform failure. If Christ can do this in Peter's life, he can accomplish it in our lives also.

Paul writes in Romans, "It is Christ who died, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed makes intercession for us" (8:34). I am grateful to Tim Keller for his insights into this passage. In the early days of my Christian life, I struggled with this matter of God's forgiveness. I used to promise God, "This is the last time I am ever going to do this sin again." Yet, I would turn right around and do it again. I wondered how long God would put up with me. I imagined Jesus in his role of high priest going before God and saying, *Father, it's about Pete again. He did it again. He promised he would not sin against you, yet he did it again.*

What should we do about it? God asks. *Just give him one more chance,* Jesus says, *please, be merciful, please.* I pictured Jesus in the role of my defense attorney throwing himself on the mercy of this heavenly court because he

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knows his client has no case. *Well, all right,* God says.

How long will God keep this up before he runs out of patience? I've come to realize Jesus is not asking for mercy after all. We read in 1st John, "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:9). Jesus is essentially saying, *Father, it's about Pete again. But I'm not asking for mercy; I'm asking for justice. You see his sin. I paid for it in full, so it wouldn't be just to expect two payments for sin.*

If you profess faith in Christ, you are forgiven. Relax, friends. God, through the person of Jesus Christ, has done for you what you cannot do for yourselves. If God can rehabilitate Peter's life, he can do the same in our lives, also.

If Christ has done all this for us, what is there left for us to do? The question Jesus asks Peter is relevant for our purposes also. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" The first thing Jesus asks Peter is not will you serve me or obey me, but will you love me? You see, if we love Christ, this love will issue forth in loving obedience and faithful service.

Jesus doesn't ask Peter, do you love my sheep? Sheep aren't all that lovable. They're stubborn creatures and smelly besides. As we fall in love with Christ, the good shepherd gives us greater capacity to love his sheep.

I'll hear from some of you that I didn't preach a sermon about Mother's Day. How dare you not preach a sermon about the institution of motherhood!

Actually, this sermon is all about mothers and fathers, children and grandparents. Our ability to love others in Scripture is directly linked to loving Christ. Christ gives us greater capacity to love people in our lives, especially people we don't like.

How do we learn to love Christ? We learn to love Christ the same way we do anyone else—by spending time with him. We talk with him through prayer. We read his Word. And we spend time with his sheep, smelly as they are. You're not all sweetness and light either!

We talk about prayer, reading the Bible and Christian fellowship repeatedly from this pulpit. Some of you smile in tacit agreement and then write it off as the stuff for super Christians. No, these practices are intended for all Christians. Listening to sermons alone just doesn't cut it.

Do you love me? Lord, look at all I do for you. Yes, but do you really love me?