

John 21:15-19
A Place to Understand
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Disney/Pixar's newest film, *Inside Out*, is the story of an 11-year-old named Riley who endures the difficult experience of moving from the Eden-like paradise known as Minnesota, to the strange world on the Left Coast of San Francisco. Frankly, I'd have a problem with that move, as well.

What's interesting about this story is not what happens on the outside, but rather what happens on the inside. The main characters who drive the story are not the humans themselves, but the anthropomorphized representations of Riley's emotions – Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust – each represented with a different color.

One recurring plot point is how the memories we make can be changed when they are remembered. In the movie, memories are shown as translucent globes that each represent an individual event. Each globe takes on a different color depending on the emotional experience of that event. A golden-hued joyful memory starts to turn blue when held by Sadness, showing the transformation of a previously happy memory to one that becomes bittersweet or even outright painful.

In the hands of the right person, our experiences can be transformed. When Jesus is present in our lives, he fills us with his love and grace, mercy and wonder. However, when Jesus is absent from our experiences of pain and sadness, they remain shrouded with despair. But held in the hands of our Savior, even difficult memories are redeemed; they're given the hue of hopefulness, the pigment of promise.

This morning, we are continuing a brief series of Easter messages in which we've been looking closely at the last two chapters of John's Gospel. I want to begin by asking this question: does anyone here have a past? Does anyone here have experiences they recall, happy or sad, that in some way shape you today? Does anyone have a past? If you don't have a past, then I want you to listen closely, because one day you will meet someone who does.

This morning, we are picking up where we left off last week as Jesus returned to spend a few final intimate moments with the disciples, particularly his most enthusiastic disciple Peter. A man who very clearly has a past.

This chapter is an epilogue of sorts to John's Gospel, taking place after Jesus was risen from the dead. And because news like this takes time for us to process, Peter and some others go back to the thing they knew well, the thing they were good at. They went back to fishing.

And while they were out in their boat one morning, after a long night of fishing in which they caught nothing, a stranger calls to them from the beach, telling them where they can find a big catch—spoiler... it's Jesus. And when one of the other disciples points out that this stranger is actually Jesus, Peter throws on his clothes (???) and swims in to see him. There Jesus, the Logos, the Word made flesh, the creator of the cosmos, invites his friends to have breakfast with him on the beach.

In this moment, the memory globe Peter had formed may be the color of joy. After all, his Rabbi, his teacher, his friend Jesus, who he had witnessed die just a few days ago, was now sitting with them. What a joyful thing that was. But for Peter, it would be impossible not to remember Jesus' final moments before the cross without remembering the shame, the sadness, and the guilt Peter felt. You see, it was beside another charcoal fire that Peter had a very different response to Jesus.

On the night of Jesus' arrest, he was taken to the home of the high priest. And his disciples followed at a distance because they wanted to see what would happen. Peter and some others stood outside the gate, beside a charcoal fire. Now, as they stood there, one of the women who was nearby recognized that these men were with Jesus. "You are one of that man's disciples, aren't you?" And three times, Peter is given the opportunity to prove his loyalty to Jesus, and three times he lies. "Are you one of Jesus' disciples?" "I am not. I do not know the man."

Those are the last words that come out of Peter's mouth in the Gospel of John, before Jesus invites him to breakfast on the beach beside a different charcoal fire.

Peter is left with lingering discouragements. Does anyone here know the feeling of a lingering discouragement? An experience where you said something you shouldn't have, or not kept a promise you made to a colleague, or acted in a way that hurt someone you loved? Anyone know this feeling? The answer is: all of us do.

With this in mind, can you imagine what it was like for Peter to approach Jesus on the beach? Imagine seeing that fire and thinking of the other charcoal fire; imagine seeing his face and knowing that your past is all-together known by him. If it were me, I would probably be walking just a little bit slower, with my head bowed a little bit lower and my shoulders slouched a little bit more. This memory would have been a very painful memory for Peter.

But in the midst of this, a moment full of anticipation, Jesus begins his redemptive work in his friend Peter. And it begins with a question.

Jesus asks Peter a question, but it's not the one you'd anticipate. He didn't deal with Peter's behavior. He didn't say, "Why did you chicken out? Why were you such a wuss the other night?" No, Jesus cut to the core question: "Do you love me?"

Now it's interesting that the word Jesus uses for love is the Greek word Agape (unconditional, crazy, mega-love). But Peter's response suggests that Peter cares more about Peter. He says, "Lord, I care about you." Think of it: after all the ways you may have failed God in your life, this morning he comes and asks you one question. It's not, "Are you sorry?" It's not, "How do you plan to make up for that swath of destruction you've left behind you in life?" or "Do you promise not to do it again?" Just one question, and that one question is so important he asks three times, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?"

And all Peter can muster is: "Lord, I care about you." Well, God says, "That's close enough. I'll take it. My love is big enough for both of us. Peter, welcome back."

The second way in which Jesus redeems Peter is with a little of what I call Judo Theology. Jesus took a core memory of Peter's, his campfire denial on Thursday night, and redirects it. Jesus took a painful experience and uses its momentum to reorient it for his own purpose.

There is a concept in Neuroscience called Memory Consolidation. Researchers say that when core memories and core emotional learnings are formed in intense emotions, they are locked into our brains by these extraordinarily durable synapses. And it's these mental models that we use to make sense of the world around us. And because these models are created and stored without our awareness of it, it becomes our default mechanism when future events occur.

Just a few days ago, Peter was asked three questions: "Do you know him?" In this moment, Peter would have immediately returned to that solemn night when he had failed Jesus so terribly. But on the beach that morning, Jesus then asks Peter essentially the very same questions—only this time in an entirely different context. When Jesus asks the question, it's in the context of good friends having a beach brunch.

There is a neuroscientist by the name of Alexander Ecker who discovered that while these memory synapses are very durable, they are also have great elasticity. Not only can these core memories be unlocked and opened, but they can also be reprogramed. He calls this memory reconsolidation. The mind is able to recall, for example, a painful memory from one's childhood, but by opening it in a new context, it can be reprogramed. For example: a person who might have had a fear of large groups because she or he was picked on by a group, might have the ability to recall that memory in the context of a church small group in which love and safety are primary. When that person experiences large groups that are focused on love and support, the person is capable of having their core memory changed.

Apparently, Jesus was the original neuroscientist because this is exactly what his grace for Peter does. Grace can take difficult experiences and reconsolidate them. When Peter is asked the question that morning by Jesus, three times just as he was that evening, he would have immediately recalled his past failure. But now Jesus is with him in a moment of intimacy and love, and again asks the question. Only this time, Peter knew he was safe to give an honest response. In this way, Jesus is able to transform Peter's life by reframing the question.

Interestingly, not only does Jesus ask virtually the same question, but he does so in almost the same place. It was around one charcoal fire that Peter denied the Lord, and around another that Peter was transformed. Jesus not only redeems us with words; he redeems with places, as well. The God who created us knows that we learn not only by hearing words, but we learn through visual experiences. God can take any place from our past, no matter how painful or sad, and turn it in to a place of grace.

I want to ask Amy to come forward and share a story of an experience of grace reconsolidation.

[Amy's story]

Nothing in our lives, no matter how distant or bleak, is beyond God's redeeming love. Because if the blood of Jesus that was given at Calvary doesn't cover all sin, then it covers none at all. Jesus is

in the business of life reconsolidation, turning dark places into light; turning heartache into hope; turning grief into grace. Know this: your brokenness, your failure, is no impediment to greatness.

When Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” he responds, “Lord, you know I love you.” Then Jesus says something interesting. He doesn’t confer upon Peter an honorary doctorate in faith. Instead, he gives him a job: “Feed my lambs.” Interesting that Peter, who would go on to be a man of towering faith in the book of Acts, is given such a simple, basic instruction. Care about my people. Love the people I love.

This grace you’ve been shown, go and do likewise.

The world can be a complicated place. We may think that we were destined to move mountains for God, but Jesus’ question (“do you love me?”) and his response (“feed my lambs”) is a consummate call to remember that core teaching: **“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

Jesus gives you and me power to transform people’s lives, he gives us the ability to reconsolidate one another’s experiences of heartache and shame. But it doesn’t happen with grand miracles. Instead, it happens with everyday expressions of love. Do you love me? Feed my lambs. Do you love me? Tend my sheep. Do you love me? Feed my sheep. If we can get that right, then maybe, just maybe we’ve got a shot.