

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." John 21:15 NIV

During vacation bible school this year, one of the bible scenes that were acted out on the fourth day of VBS was about Peter, after he betrayed Jesus, just before Jesus Resurrection. That scene helped those who watched and listen understand how devastating it was for Peter, who was at the forefront in his devotion and allegiance for Jesus, to completely deny him, and really let Jesus down in his time of suffering and death. In the scene Peter tells those gathered how bad he felt to let his best friend down.

The participants were encouraged to let Peter know that God forgave him, reinforcing the theme of the day "God loves you no matter what".

One wonders how much Jesus himself knew that Peter needed to know that. In one gospel, Peter is singled out among the disciples when the resurrection is proclaimed (Mark 16:7), and in another Jesus appears to Peter after the resurrection (24:34). The verse for John's gospel is a part of the section where Jesus is supposed to have "reinstated" Peter. When you read that account of Peter's reinstatement there is no mention of Peter's awful betrayal of Jesus. It is as if Jesus love for Peter is greater than the act of betrayal.

When Paul is knocked down on the road to Damascus in Acts 9, Jesus acknowledges that Paul has been persecuting him, there is no outright condemnation of Paul. Perhaps we say that God loved Paul "no matter what".

This is a perspective you and I always need to keep before us. It should be what the church conveys to a very broken world. Many times good people will not attend church because they had "told" themselves, or somebody else had told them that they had done something that made them "unacceptable" to God.

God doesn't work that way. In both the Old Testament and New Testament God may have "punished" those who rebelled, but through it all it did not mean God stopped loving them, and guiding them on the way forward.

During college, there was a time I drifted from my relationship with God. The greatest incentive to me to return to that relationship was the lack of judgmental attitudes from those around me. It allowed me to know that God hadn't turned away from me. Yes I'd done some things I knew were against God's standard(and I knew that I needed to turn from them), but there was always a sense(which was helped by my Christian friends) that God loved me and cared about me.

You may be discouraged about your relationship to God as you read this. It's easy to do and the devil helps us along in that direction. You also maybe someone who has invited someone to church, and they won't come because something has happened in their life that they think "disqualifies" them from stepping foot in the door.

It is in these situations or others like them we need to "model", "reinforce", or "proclaim" that "God loves you no matter what". It might be the greatest positive encouraging step towards God in our lives or in the lives of others.

Pr. John Van Haneghan