

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

May 4, 2025 (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year C)  
Grad Sunday  
John 21:1-19

In that place between wakefulness and dreams, I found myself in the room. There were no distinguishing features except for the one wall covered with small index card files. They were like the ones in old libraries that list titles in alphabetical order. But these files, which stretched from floor to ceiling and seemingly endless in either direction, had very DIFFERENT headings.

As I drew near the wall of files, the first to catch my attention was one that read "Girls I have liked." I opened it and began flipping through the cards. I quickly shut it, shocked to realize that I RECOGNIZED the names written on them.

And then without being told, I knew exactly where I was. This lifeless room, with its small files, was a crude catalog system for my life. Here were written the thoughts and actions of my every moment, big and small, in a detail my memory couldn't match. A sense of wonder and curiosity, coupled with alarm, stirred within me as I began randomly opening files and exploring their content.

Some brought joy and sweet memories; others brought a sense of shame and regret so intense that I would look over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching. A file named "Friends" was next to one marked "Friends I have BETRAYED." The titles ranged from the mundane to the outright weird. "Books I Have Read," "Lies I Have Told," "Comfort I have Given," "Jokes I Have Laughed at." Some were almost hilarious in their exactness: "Things I've yelled at my brothers". Others I COULDN'T laugh at: "Things I Have Done in Anger", "Things I Have Muttered Under My Breath at My Parents." I never ceased to be surprised by the contents.

Often, there were many MORE cards than I expected. Sometimes FEWER than I HOPED. I was overwhelmed by the sheer VOLUME of the life I had lived. Could it be POSSIBLE that I'd had the TIME in my life to write each of these THOUSANDS or even MILLIONS of cards? But each card confirmed this truth. Each was written in my OWN HANDWRITING. Each SIGNED with MY SIGNATURE.

When I pulled out the file marked "Songs I have listened to," I realized the files GREW to contain their contents. The cards were packed tightly, and yet after two or three YARDS, I hadn't found the END of the file. I shut it, shamed, not by the QUALITY of the music, but by the vast TIME I knew that file represented.

When I came to a file marked "Lustful Thoughts," I felt a chill run through my body. I pulled the file out only an inch, not willing to TEST its SIZE, and drew out a card. I shuddered at its detailed content. I felt sick to think that such a moment had been RECORDED.

An almost animal rage broke in me. One thought dominated my mind: "No one must EVER SEE these cards! No one must ever see this ROOM! I have to destroy them!"

I pulled out a card, only to find it as strong as steel when I tried to tear it. Defeated and helpless, I leaned my forehead against the wall, letting out a long, self-pitying sigh.

And there it was, right in front of me. The title said "People I Have Shared the Gospel With." The handle was brighter than those around it, newer, almost unused. I pulled on its handle and a small box fell into my hands. I could count the cards it contained on one hand.

And then the tears came. I began to weep. Sobs so deep that they hurt. They started in my stomach and shook through me. I fell on my knees and cried. I cried out of shame, from the OVERWHELMING SHAME of it all. The rows of file shelves swirled in my tear-filled eyes.

But then, I saw Him. No, please not HIM. Not HERE. Oh, ANYONE but JESUS. I watched helplessly as He began to open the files and read the cards. I couldn't bear to watch His response.

And in the moments I could bring myself to look at His face, I saw a SORROW DEEPER than my own.

He seemed to intuitively go to the WORST boxes. Why did He have to read every one? Finally, He turned and looked at me from across the room. He looked at me with pity in His eyes.

But this was a pity that didn't anger me. I dropped my head, covered my face with my hands and began to cry again. He walked over and put His arm around me. He could have said so MANY things. But He didn't say a WORD. He just held me, and CRIED WITH me.

Then He got up and walked back to the wall of files. Starting at one end of the room, He took out a file and, one by one, began to sign HIS name OVER mine on each card. "No!" I shouted rushing to Him. All I could find to say was "No, no, " as I pulled the card from Him. HIS name shouldn't be ON THESE cards. But there it was, written in red, written in BLOOD. He gently took the card back. He smiled a sad smile and began to sign the cards again.

I'll never understand how He did it so quickly, but the next INSTANT it seemed, I heard Him close the last file and walk back to my side. He placed His hand on my shoulder and said, "It is finished."

I stood up, and He led me out of the room. There was no lock on its door. There were NEW cards to be written.

In our gospel today, Peter found himself in HIS room.

Imagine if someone you care about asked whether you REALLY love them, not once, not twice, but THREE times. Would you be hurt? PETER was. He was HURT by this REPETITION.

That alone would have painful ENOUGH, but that was NOT the ONLY reason he was hurt. Can you think of ANOTHER instance in the story of the Passion of our Lord, when something was said THREE times? You can sure bet that SIMON PETER remembered it. THREE times. Not only had he DENIED LOVING Jesus; he had SWORN that he didn't even KNOW Jesus, hadn't even MET him. Over and over again. He was ashamed of himself, ashamed of what he'd done.

Jesus had already appeared to him and the other disciples in the upper room, and given them the commission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." So, if he was SENT, what was he doing going FISHING? He was running AWAY. He didn't feel WORTHY of that calling: he didn't think he DESERVED it.

And now, HERE JESUS WAS, the Lord he had FORSAKEN, looking RIGHT AT him, and asking him that PAINFUL question: "Do you love?"

Making him REPEAT his answer hurt, but when Jesus asked THREE times, Peter REALIZED what was REALLY happening. Jesus knew. He KNEW how many times Peter had denied him, how many times he said he didn't even KNOW him. He KNEW. And Peter was ashamed.

We KNOW his pain. We read the story of our Lord's death in Holy Week every year, and every year we get ANGRY at Peter, angry that he doesn't STAND UP for the Lord, or for HIMSELF. But deep down, we know that we're NOT angry at PETER; we're angry at OURSELVES, ASHAMED of our OWN denials.

And we KNOW SHAME too. We torment ourselves over past failures. We beat ourselves up for our mistakes. We replay our offenses over and over in our minds.

So, it would only make SENSE that our LORD would repeat them too. That's what WE would do.

But that's NOT what JESUS DOES. He doesn't RUB Peter's mistakes in his face. He doesn't ask him "Do you love me?" three times to HURT Peter; he asks him three times...to HEAL Peter. Each time he asks him "Do you love me?" he's ERASING one of those denials.

ONE time wouldn't have been enough. Peter would have only CONTINUED to punish himself, saying, "Maybe Jesus could forgive ONE of my sins, but what about the OTHERS. The OTHER sins are TOO MUCH. God CAN'T forgive those. I don't DESERVE to be forgiven."

But Jesus KNEW what Peter was feeling, and Jesus went to that lake SPECIFICALLY for HIM. He looks RIGHT AT him, and ERASES EACH and EVERY ONE of his sins. ERASES them. They are forgiven. They are forgotten. They no longer matter. Erased.

And then Jesus says to Peter AGAIN what he had said to him at the very BEGINNING: "Follow me."

You see, NOTHING you can do can place you OUTSIDE God's love, NOTHING. You are forgiven. The cards that name your sin and shame have all been erased.

Jesus is HERE, TODAY, SPECIFICALLY looking for YOU. He's asking you:

P: "Christians, do you love me more than these?"

**All: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."**

P: "My followers, do you love me?"

**All: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."**

P: "Members of my church, do you love me?"

**All: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."**

You graduating seniors, today Jesus is calling YOU, ESPECIALLY: "Child of God, you are mine. I have called you by name. Like all the others, YOUR room is UNLOCKED, because there are NEW cards to be written. Follow me." Amen.