Please take out the worship bulletin and look at the front cover with me. There’s plenty of emotion shown in this picture of the moment right after Peter denies his knowledge of Jesus Christ three times.

Peter is in the front left of the picture. His head is turn down and his hands are folded together.

What is Peter feeling?

You can see two chickens and a rooster on the steps. It looks like the rooster just announced the morning hour. I will not ask you what the rooster is feeling.

There are three people are on the right side with one person pointing toward Peter, maybe two women and one man. The Luke account read earlier tells us that a servant girl asks Peter first, then another person, and finally someone else does the same. John’s account has the servant girl ask first, then some others, and finally, one of the high priest’s servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenges Peter about being in the garden with Jesus.

At a distance, you can see Jesus looking toward Peter. Jesus has soldiers and authorities all around him. Although you can’t see his face clearly, I think you can answer this question.

What are his thoughts about Peter?

Maybe this: “I’m so sorry, Peter. I knew you would fail even though you promised to die for me. I don’t hold it against you because we will see each other again. We will talk, and I will resolve your feelings. But right now, I know how terrible you feel about yourself. Know this Peter: I love you dearly.”

Now, travel with me to later Friday when Jesus is on the cross.

Where is Peter, and what is he feeling?

Although, we don’t know where Peter is hiding, we can guess he is feeling bad about himself. He has broken his promise, and has denied Jesus three times.

When Mary Magdalene sees the Risen Jesus, she goes to where the Eleven and other disciples are hiding, probably in the Upper Room. The door is locked. Peter hears her report, and runs to see for himself.
As he runs, what is Peter feeling?

Peter does not see the Risen Jesus, but along with John, sees the empty tomb. That night, Jesus appears to ten of the disciples without Thomas. Peter doesn’t say anything.

What is Peter feeling?

A week later, Jesus appears again and Thomas is present this time. Again, Peter doesn’t speak.

What is Peter feeling?

Afterward, Peter is restless and decides to go fishing. We don’t know how long it has been, but Peter gets itchy to do something. Some other disciples join him. In the morning, Jesus appears again. Peter runs to greet Jesus after John proclaims, “It’s the Lord.” And when Jesus wants some of the fish they just caught, Peter climbs back into the boat to drag the net ashore.

What is Peter feeling?

Then when Jesus wants to serve them bread and fish, he gets them to sit down for breakfast and goes around the circle serving each one.

When Jesus gets to Peter, what is Peter feeling?

This brings us to our passage today.

15 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.”

Did Jesus talk to Peter in front of the other disciples, or did they talk privately?

There are good reasons for both answers. Let’s consider both.

No, he did not pull Peter aside, because they were family, and maybe Jesus wanted to allow reconciliation to occur in front of the others. And no, Jesus didn’t pull Peter aside, because the writer of the story, John, is silent about the moment.

We can ask the same question about the story of Nicodemus going to see Jesus at nighttime. Did Jesus pull Nicodemus aside for a private conversation? Or did he talk to Nicodemus in front the disciples? The writer, John, doesn’t tell us.

Yes, Jesus pulled Peter aside, because the denial was a personal matter. and Jesus wanted to be alone with Peter. Yes, Jesus pulled Peter aside because it didn’t make any difference one way or
another. All of the disciples knew that Peter did not fulfill his promise to die for Jesus, and they knew he denied Jesus three times.

Personally, I think Jesus pulled Peter aside for this difficult, yet important conversation, and I think Jesus does the same today. Jesus is quite personal with us – whether he needs to encourage us or discipline us or guide us or forgive us or get us to confess our sins or just tell us how much he loves us. He does so in a private and personal way.

Jesus begins by using Peter’s formal family name: “Simon son of John.” This is like when my mom would call me “Robert William Bardeen.” My mom had rebuke on her mind, and in our passage today, Jesus means business. Although, Jesus dearly loves Peter, he knows the depressed state of Peter and realizes he must be forthright.

“Do you love me more than these?” Jesus asks his first question, a comparison of love for him to the love Peter would have for his fishing buddies. It is a comparing love. It’s like when we are asked about our children: “What child do you love the most?” It’s not an easy question.

It’s a relief to hear Peter’s response: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Peter knows that Jesus knows Peter’s heart – his heart of disappointment and anger in himself that is all related to the denial of his Lord three times. But Jesus also knows Peter’s heart of devotion.

Thanks be to God that Peter does not appeal to self-confidence that he used so many times before. This is not the time to lie or cover up, or to make any comparisons to the other disciples. They are watching from a distance and I suspect are being very quiet. (Do you remember when one of your siblings got into trouble, and you acted very still?)

The single command to Peter is this: “Feed my lambs.” It will be said two more times with some variations, but the tone is set with the first command.

Jesus wants Peter to get over whatever feelings he has about the past, and to be responsible. Peter has a high calling, and he can’t fulfill this calling by moping around anymore.

Maybe the use of the word “lambs” refers to feeding the weakest, the youngest, and the “least of these.” The word “sheep” comes later, but Jesus starts with an emphasis of “little people.”

The most interesting word is the use of “feed.” It means give nourishment. Love! Teach! Get them ready! Help them grow! “Pour your heart into their lives.”

Finally, notice the word “my.” It is our job to take care and feed all of the lambs that really belong to Jesus. He says, “My lambs.” They are not our lambs.

Jesus said to Peter: “If you love me, then love my little ones by taking care and nurturing them.”

**John 21:16**
Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The second time has a few word changes. In the first exchange, the writer, John, uses “agape” for love when Jesus asks his question, and “philos” when Peter responds. In the second exchange, John uses the same pattern, but the word “feed” becomes “take care,” and “lambs” becomes “sheep.” I trust Dale Bruner in his commentary: “The word usage doesn’t change the message.”

John 21:17
17 The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.

The third and final question is asked. It was hard hitting, and I think Peter felt it. This time John has Jesus use the word “philos” for love, and Peter does the same.

Many scholars have written plenty about these changes, but I don’t. Certainly Jesus wants Peter to know about God’s love, agape love, for him, but I think the use of the word “philos” teaches us that John wants to show that Jesus wants a friendship with Peter even though Peter denied him three times. Peter feels terrible about his behavior, but Jesus wants him to get over it.

I think Jesus is saying to Peter that he wants to be friends.

John 21:18-19
18 Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

Follow me! This is Jesus’ final charge to Peter. Peter is forgiven by Jesus. Peter has received a special assignment from his Lord to feed the lambs and take care of the sheep.

Likewise, Jesus reckons us, forgives us, gives us love, provides a specific calling for us, and then says, “Follow me.”

It’s our choice about how we will respond.