

Sisters and brothers!

Sometimes the way other people act or behave seems very strange to us. What they do or what they say makes us angry, at other times it makes us smile, sometimes we think or say: He must be completely crazy! What's the matter with her?

Lots of stories could be told...

**Mr. F., 89 years old**, always switches to the other side of the street, as soon as he sees someone in a uniform coming along. He suddenly becomes very agitated and nervous. Strange.

**Mister K.**, a former member of the Friedenskirche congregation, died 20 years ago. He was a widower. He had been married for more than 50 years. When I visited him some weeks after his wife's funeral, I realized that there wasn't a single photo of his beloved wife in his flat. Very strange, isn't it?

**Mother and daughter M.**, former members of Friedenskirche as well, also died nearly 20 years ago. In their shared flat in Obersendling every spare place in the cupboards, under the beds, on the shelves,...was filled with tinned food, pasta, tea and coffee. Enough supplies for years. Very crazy.

Unbelievable stories which make you shake your head.... But only until you learn something about their background...

**Mr. F. is Jewish.** He survived a concentration camp in 1945, but lost the rest of his family. Whenever he sees a uniform he remembers his sad family story and becomes very agitated and nervous. Not at all a strange behavior.

**Mister K.** had cared for his wife for more than 30 years because she was very ill. He had to make a lot of sacrifices, because he didn't want to move her into a nursing home. He was at her bed day and night until he was completely exhausted. Only once he left for the bakery. When he came back, she had died. He felt incredibly guilty. The only way to manage his feelings was to put away the pictures of his wife, because they always recalled his feelings of being guilty. Not so strange any more...

**Mother and daughter M.** had been starving during World War II. The mother had nearly died of hunger even in World War I. Never again did they want to go through the same experience. So they provided for the future. For years. For you never know. And as a visitor you suddenly know which story you are part of.

Unbelievable stories which make you shake your head.... until you learn something about their background...

Another one of these stories?

**When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ (John 21: 15-18)**

To be honest: Wouldn't it get on your nerves, if your husband or your wife started asking three times in a row: Do you really love me? Finally, when you are asked for the third time, you'd answer: Can't you stop it? Is there something wrong with you? Has the record got stuck? What's going on?

Unbelievable stories which make you shake your head.... until you learn something about their background...

This biblical story as well can only be understood when you learn about the different background stories, hidden between the lines.

**When they had finished breakfast** – at a charcoal fire, as the text told us... It sent hot and cold shivers up and down the spine of Simon Peter, when he saw the charcoal fire. He immediately remembered: Shortly before that day there was another charcoal fire. Closely linked to the fire was how he had betrayed the Lord three times: Jesus? No idea, who that is! Of course I don't belong to him. A background story – suddenly far too vivid!

Then the calling of his name: **Simon, son of John!**

Exactly the same name as three years ago, when Jesus had called him to become his disciple. Cephas, the rock! Totally enthusiastic he had left everything behind. Remembering the “rock” he suddenly felt very bad. He was anything but a “rock”!

Next this question, three times: **Do you love me?**

Three times he had betrayed Jesus, and three times he is now asked for his love. No chance to avoid all the memories. Every single question lets the cock crow again.

**Do you love me more than these?**

What we may find doubly strange has its own background story as well. “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you”, these words of Peter were full of self-confidence. “I am better!”

And now: **Do you really love me more than these?**

Background stories – suddenly far too vivid!

What comes out into the open through these background stories? What comes out into the open through these questions about love? What are we really talking about when we talk about love?

Being loved and to love always means: I am precious. You are precious, just the way you are! I don't have to be, you don't have to be Superman or Superwoman. Just be who you are. You don't have to prove anything!

I appreciate you, the way you are!

Is it easy for us to accept and to believe that?

To accept and to believe that we are loved by God the way we are?

That the main point in loving is, that we are allowed to be human beings?

Human beings, just as we are, without any need to prove anything, without any need to be Superman – just being loved!

Jesus asks Peter: **Is there such love in you?**

And there are still more background stories hidden in this question.

They show how much Peter, as we do today, tries to remain in control instead of being open to the adventure of faith and love.

How much pressure do we feel upon us, that we always have to be the winner; that we have to be part of the competition of the fastest and the best and the most beautiful, the most successful and most prosperous.

Do we still realize how much our character and our personhood are infected and changed by this weight of expectation: to be in control of our lives, to participate in everything, to not just let life happen.

Do we still realize which price we pay for being a winner, which price our families are paying, our kids, what that means for our health, for our inner peace...

Aren't we like Peter?

He always wanted to be the best, the first of all, the one who wanted to walk on the water, the one who wanted to build huts on the mountain top, the one who wanted to sit next to Jesus, the one who couldn't accept a suffering Jesus, which of course would mean a loser-Jesus. Peter, the one who calculat-

ed how often one had to forgive before it is enough, the one who promised the world, who wanted to be an extraordinary faithful believer. Peter, who always wanted to be the winner!

To be always a winner, to be in complete control of life, to manage the world, to be my own savior...in the end Peter has gained nothing. And we are so often like him.

Walking on the water – he sinks.

He has to be corrected by Jesus all the time.

There are no huts to be built on the mountaintop.

There are no first places to be assigned, just last ones.

Forgiving can't be limited, life has to stay open.

In the very end Peter is totally exhausted by always wanting to be the winner.

In the most important hour in the garden he falls asleep, he isn't able to stay awake and pray with Jesus.

All of his love for Jesus, which he had promised, has got lost under this pressure: I have to be the winner!

He had lost everything: his faith, his courage, his confession, himself. He had become a refugee. This pressure "I have to be a winner!", "I have to be in control", "I cannot let go!" – This pressure produces nothing but defeats. Nothing but victims. This pressure destroys life, my own and those of others, too.

**Could you stop that?, Jesus asks.**

**Are you able to love? Do you love me?**

This threefold-question of Jesus leads Peter back into the fellowship.

His answers sound very miserable, sheepish and sad.

Yes, of course! Surely you know that I love you.

And with every answer all the effects are felt, the effects of his obsession to be the winner, the best, the first...and the effects of his defeats...on the water, at the charcoal fire, in the garden...

How much do we need it, to be brought back by the grace of Christ into his fellowship!

How much do we depend on the grace that Christ's measure is not, what we had promised and what we wanted to do, but how much we need him!

How much do we need what we call "grace": We don't have to be in control of our life all the time. We don't have to produce the worth of our life. We don't have to be the masters of our life. We don't have to guarantee for ourselves. We don't have to justify ourselves.

We don't even have to know how to pray.

We cannot produce, we cannot organize and buy, we cannot enforce whereof we deeply live: love and friendship, forgiveness, redemption and salvation! God's grace releases us from the pressure to produce and to guarantee our own lives, his grace releases us from the pressure always to be a winner.

The grace of God lets me know, that I am precious beyond my usability, beyond my efficiency and beyond my fitness.

I am allowed just to be! I don't have to justify myself. I can hand over my life, I can entrust myself to the greater love of God.

God's grace upon Peter's life, God's grace upon our lives says:

You don't have to be always a winner.

You don't have to be able to walk on the water.

You don't have to avoid suffering all the time. You can accept it from time to time.

You don't have to be in control of life, you don't have to fight to be first.

You don't have to calculate forgiveness and love.

You don't have to be God!

You are allowed to be a human being. You are allowed to live within limits, you don't have to be an all in all person.

What a relief it could be – to live in this grace of Jesus Christ.

The German theologian Fulbert Steffensky once wrote:

“There is a strange new suffering, which is born out of an excessive expectation of life.

My profession has to satisfy my life. My marriage has to be happy without any dark clouds. My partner has to be the best lover ever, and the best cook of course as well.

The education of our children has to be successful. Such expectations for a totally happy life are a recipe for disaster. Life isn't like that. Most of the marriages could be described as halfway failed, but that's because we are human. Most of the efforts to be a good father or a good teacher could be described as halfway failed – but that is because we are human! Life is limited. The one who can accept life only as long as it is a whole and successful life, will panic as soon as he notices the wounds and the pain!”

How much suffering, because we want to be winners.

How much suffering because we can't accept the limits of our lives.

Let it be! Jesus says to Peter.

You shall not win, you shall love!

And then the loser, the one who always wants to be a winner, the failure, the one with the small faith, the one who is in doubt all the time...and then all of

us, who are like Peter again and again are entrusted with a new task – three times lest we forget:

**Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep**

We shall not win at any cost. We shall not waste all our energy to save our life...we shall serve the community. Tend, feed, shepherd, care about the life, watch and pray, let no one get lost.

Simon Peter shall be and remain “the rock” by serving the fellowship, the church of Christ.

Only in that way.

Let people feel, how the grace of God takes away all pressure; that the grace of God says:

You are justified just as you are!

You don't have to be the best. You don't have to walk on the water. You don't need to try that. Let it be!

Being such a “rock”, serving in that way, being a fellowship and a church without any pressure to be a winner...

Peter followed this commandment.

We can follow this commandment.

How many people are looking for a church, that doesn't put pressure upon them but takes away all burdens in the name of Christ!

How many people are looking for such freedom, such relief – not to be measured, not to be evaluated, not having to justify themselves...but to feel, and to listen to and to meet the grace of God.

All those background stories we carry with us can become as vivid as they want. All our pain can become as dark as it wants.

In the German and Latin tradition the name of this Sunday is Quasimodogeniti, which is translated: Like the newborn children.

The heart of God and his love lead us back into the fellowship and lead us into a new life, like newborn children.

It is a life path following the principle:

It is not about winning- it is about loving and being loved! Amen