

“Do You Love Me?”

John 21:15

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Peter was a rough, probably illiterate, fisherman. He also was a leader as well among the followers of Jesus. While he ran after denying even knowing Jesus, the love of Jesus brought him back. Back to a tomb that was empty. Back to the upper room. But only for a time. All this messiah-chasing was just too much for Peter. As far as he could tell, Jesus' ministry was over, and there were fish to be caught, a living to be made. So, he gathers several of the disciples and heads to his boat.

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John 21:1-19

21:1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.

21:2 Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.

21:3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

21:4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

21:5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."

21:6 He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

21:7 The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea.

21:8 But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

21:9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.

21:10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

21:11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

21:12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.

21:13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish.

21:14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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

21:16 A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."

21:17 Jesus 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 Peter said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

This is the WOG – Thanks be to God!

Has life ever felt so out of control that the only thing you know to do is something very familiar? Something you could do on auto pilot. No decisions to be made, no hard questions to wrestle with. Just mindless routine tasks. Maybe it is cutting the grass? Or doing the laundry? Or making the bed? A colleague of mine who was an avid and quite excellent knitter said one day after lunch, "I have so much to do, I don't know where to start. Plus, I do not have any hope of accomplishing much of it at all! I think I will just go knit instead!"

Peter and the other disciples did just that. They didn't knit, but they went fishing. It was what they knew. It was where they felt at home and comfortable. It was in the middle of this very common activity that Peter, and the others found themselves in the middle of a miracle. After fishing all night with nothing to show for their hard work and efforts, this man on the shore tells them to drop their nets again and suddenly they are dealing with a net full of fish. So many fish that they had to drag the net to shore. They couldn't lift it into the boat. Talk about hitting the jackpot! This was the ultimate lottery for fisherman. More fish than they had ever caught at a single time. So many fish that Peter could easily have restarted his business: "Peter's Fresh Fish Emporium, Inc." All he had to do was get those fish to market before they started to spoil. That was something he knew how to do. And most likely his bank account could have used a boost. Ah yes, Peter could have easily cashed in on this miracle and done what he was good at. But there was a second miracle staring Peter and the others in the face.

It was the Lord!

The crucified and risen Jesus standing by a charcoal fire making preparations for breakfast. And so instead of following his own agenda, making money on all those fish, Peter stayed for a meal. Jesus broke bread, and in the breaking of the bread Peter and the rest remembered the Passover

meal just a few days before. And the words of Jesus about God's love and grace. Love that had prevailed on the cross, and grace that overcame the power of sin and death and raised Jesus from the grave. Suddenly, in the midst of an ordinary task of eating the catch they had just hauled in. The disciples knew it was the Lord. We might be tempted to end the story there. What incredibly good news! The promise of forgiveness and new life was fulfilled.

But for God that is not the end of the story. Salvation – new life in Christ is not the end. It is the beginning. God's goal is not just to get us in these pews, God's plan is to send us forth. There is work to be done and a story to tell. And Peter in particular needed to know he had a part to play.

I am sure it was awkward and uncomfortable for Peter knowing his words and behavior in the garden and during Jesus' trial did not reflect his love for Jesus. Did not show all that he had learned. And certainly, did not live up to his boasting that he was willing to die with Christ. What could he possibly do for Jesus now? All he was good for was fishing. Jesus asked, Simon, son of John, "Do you love me?" You can hear the discomfort in Peter's voice, "Do I love you? Well ... yes Lord, even though my words didn't show it, yes Lord, I do."

And then a second time: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Ouch again! I know my actions betrayed you along with my words. But yes, Lord you know that I love you."

And yet again the question came one more time. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Oh Lord, You know everything and you know that I love you."

But what does that mean, to love Jesus? The answer is in the charge that Jesus gives to Peter after each declaration of love. Jesus says, "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." None of these commands have anything to do with the "feelings" we so often associate with love. Those warm fuzzy, heart thumping, and joyful sensations. We often associate with "love." Instead, these are action commands. Feed my sheep and tend my lambs.

Feed means to nourish, provide for and supply. It is a doing for others and a giving to them something they need. While everyone needs actual food – bread, meat, dairy etc. They also need, more than anything else the good news of God's love and grace. And they hunger for it as well.

Tend means to look after, keep an eye on, take care of, cultivate, grow, develop, foster, support and help. Again, this is not a feeling, but an action, and a choice. And Jesus' command is not just for Peter, it is for us as well. For you and I like Peter, we have been called by God, chosen in Christ, sought by God's Spirit, and best of all loved beyond measure by the Triune God. And our response to God's love is to also love in return. Not love in the sense of simply showing up for worship and putting our 60 minutes in on Sunday morning, or even love that remembers to read a quick devotional every day and shoot off a fast prayer before going to sleep. Or love that does a good deed every now and then. It is not a love that seeks to make ourselves worthy through earning points with God. Truth is we can never earn enough points. It is impossible. Nor is it love that begrudgingly serves and gives hoping that God will notice and bless us somehow. Love is not love if it expects anything in return.

The love we chose to give to God is a response to God's love. It is a love that is grounded in the joy of God's gift of acceptance and grace. It is a love that is given with thanksgiving and wonder and awe. Because this is a love that takes action with delight. And the action we are called to take is to feed and tend God's sheep. Which raises the question "Just who are Jesus' sheep?" Are they just those who are members of First Presbyterian Church?

NO!

They are all whom Jesus loves. All whom he calls by name. And all whom he seeks to lead as shepherd leads his own. Can we possibly know exactly who these sheep and lambs are?

NO!

Only Christ knows. So, what are we to do? Do we throw our hands up in the air and say, "Since I don't know who your sheep and lambs are, I will focus on those I think are yours. Those who are "active" members of your church. Certainly, those are your sheep." And so, we perfect our programs, and polish up our worship, and spend, most of our time feeding and tending those we know, those who are "just like us."

And certainly, these are some of God's sheep. But probably not all. Let's go back to Jesus' first question to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me *more than these?*" Hum ... who or what are the "these" about which Jesus is asking? Well, they had just brought in a huge catch of fish. It could mean do you love me more than tangible things like fish with which Peter made his living. Or maybe Jesus was referring to the other disciples. Those whom Peter knew well and had spent the last three years with. Either way, it seems that Jesus most likely was referring to that with which Peter was familiar and comfortable.

If so, then, the question. "Do you love me more than these", suggests a question or command that stretches Peter to see and reach beyond his comfort zone beyond the familiar, the safe. I believe Jesus is asking us the same question. Do we – you and I - love him more than all the people and things that makes our lives comfortable, familiar and safe. Jesus knows that the world has a deep, desperate hunger for God. And He is telling us that it is our responsibility to feed that hunger and tend to that need.

How do we do this?

We do so by sharing our amazing relationship with Christ with others. A relationship whose love and grace and power changes us and transforms us. A relationship that gives us hope and joy and peace. Jesus said to Peter and to us, "Feed and tend my sheep and flock." And inherent in this command is don't worry who my sheep and flock are, that is for me to know. Just feed and tend anyone who looks like and is a sheep a human being – a child of God.

This means tend and feed those in the church and those outside the church. The sad part is that we are a lot better about reaching those who are in the church than those outside. After all, those inside are familiar, safe, have similar values, lifestyles, speak the same language and have the same priorities. There are so many needs within our own flock, why we just don't have time for

those outside the church. We need to get our own house in order first, then maybe we can think about others. Besides those at church are our friends and our family. Those outside – well ... that's not so easy. We open our doors, but they don't come. They have different interests and priorities. Why they have the audacity to see church as irrelevant and boring, something that is not connected to their real world and not worth the inconvenience or discipline. They think golf and soccer, or a newspaper and cup of coffee is a better use of their time and their life.

And when they do come, they like different kind of music. They expect us to serve really good coffee and not just before or after worship, but during it as well. They don't know the code words for church. They ask for a program instead of a bulletin, and they can't sing the doxology, and they don't even know the Lord's prayer.

Feed them? We've tried. It's no use. The problem is them and not us!

True, there is a problem. Its roots are in a relationship – or lack of one. People can't and probably won't worship and serve a Lord they don't know. If they don't have a relationship with God in Christ, why should they come to worship or Sunday School or mid-week Bible study or prayer group? If someone doesn't understand the good news of the gospel what's all the praise and thanksgiving about? If church is not seen as relevant, maybe we in the church need to find out how we are missing the mark?

Without doubt, the gospel message of God's love and grace desperately needs to be shared with the world today. And somehow, we need to do a better job of sharing that good news. So how do we do that in ways that fit with who we are as individuals and as Presbyterian? One way is simply to be willing to talk about our own relationship with Christ. Who Jesus is to us and the difference God and God's Spirit has made in our lives.

I can't do that, you say. I might offend someone or embarrass myself. Truth be told, we don't have a choice. You are here today because someone had the courage and cared enough to tell you about Jesus. The time is past for making excuses, placing blame, for busying ourselves with other tasks. God wanted a relationship with his creation. And so, Christ left heaven and came to earth to show God's desire and love. We already know the good news of the gospel and it is our responsibility to share it with others.

I am excited that so many people reached out to others in the community to share God's love during Impact week. And we will have ongoing opportunities to continue to do so this fall. We will have opportunities to explore how we –you and I might feed and tend God's sheep. Jesus says to you and to me, I wanted a relationship with you, I came for you, I chose you, I called you, by name. I love you. Do you love me?

If so, then feed and tend my sheep. AMEN