

“Love You”
Acts 9:1-6; Revelation 5:11-14;
John 21:1-19

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
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Have you ever stood at the door as someone leaves, and said, “Love you.” Those two simple words express some level of what you are feeling, identify this relationship with the person as important in some special way. As we get on in this particular story, we’ll see those words take on some importance. But we already know in the lives of the disciples that Jesus was a very important person for them. He was their teacher, their guide. And now they were struggling to understand what his death and resurrection meant. Well, they had made it a ways. They encountered him and at least had gotten out of the closed room where they had huddled in fear. They were along the lake.

It’s easy for me to imagine that perhaps Peter was still struggling. He had heard what Jesus had said about peace and being sent, forgiveness and about the Holy Spirit being present with them. But it almost feels to me that he still had something stuck in his craw. He couldn’t quite figure out what it was that he was to do. Or maybe he was wondering if he had some place in this group. Sure, Jesus had come into their midst, but Peter had denied him. He denied him three times on that fateful evening. So, maybe as he was standing along the sea he was wondering, “Where am I in all of this? Who am I?”

Ever ask those kinds of questions? Who am I? Why am I? What’s this all about? In the midst of that, sometimes the easy thing to do is to go find something to be busy with, to at least do something I know. So what does Peter do? He was a commercial fisherman. He went back and got in the boat. He told the guys, “I’m going fishing,” and they said “OK, we’ll come along. We’ll fish, too.” And they spent that night out fishing.

It wasn’t quite the kind of fishing Jesus told them they would be doing with their lives. It feels a little to me like they were throwing their net on the wrong side of the boat. It wasn’t until morning that Jesus came and told them to throw it on the right side of the boat. They probably had been a little bit frustrated with the evening. Not sure it really helped to go out and come up empty handed. Peter already felt, to my mind, a little empty-handed the way it was. So, when the guy came along and told them to change sides, I’m surprised they did it. And this begins the surprise. The surprise of the way God enters into our lives. Moments where we catch more than we expected and wonder what it’s all about. And so they came in and Jesus feeds them. We know the story.

The highlight of the story, then, is when Jesus has that conversation with Peter. Peter, the one who was still burned by his own denials, wondering where he stood. Could he be part of this group? Jesus begins the questions. He gives him three questions. It correlates pretty well with three denials. But what it makes me wonder about, especially since the story is here for us, is if it’s not also about any of Jesus’ disciples who have

experienced or recognized our own denial of Christ and the possibility that Jesus will come again and help us see the real forgiveness God brings us, the opportunity to know that the denial does not have to define our lives. That, yes, we can be part of the community.

So for each denial, there was a question. “Do you love me?” and Peter answers, “You know, Lord, I love, you. So maybe it’s simply that, a restoration of relationship.

It’s interesting, as we heard Kathy’s story, that she went through a process. She grew up, began to understand more, encountered a faith that was leading her deeper, in her study she found more, got to a point of making new decisions.

The disciples had already met a resurrected Jesus in a closed room. You’d think that would have been enough, but here they are again, with Peter needing to once again encounter Jesus and to find his way. I think there’s more involved here than just the forgiveness.

First, there’s some disagreement about this, but some people say the two words for love mean pretty much the same thing. I’m going to argue that they don’t and the difference here is important because Jesus is asking, “Do you *agape* me?” and Peter is answering, “I *phileo* you.” These are two words for love and they could just mean the same thing. However, *agape* is hardly ever used in secular Greek and is almost always use in the translation of the Old Testament into Greek and the New Testament Greek.

I think there’s a difference. And if you look at it, the *phileo* love is used in opposition to a word that’s sometimes translated “hate” in the book of John. I think it gets at what we’re talking about. That other word kind of means hostility, it’s the ones on the out-group. The *phileo* ones are the ones on the in group. It makes sense with Peter. He wants to be back in the group of Jesus. He wants to identify his loyalty to Christ. If we think about it as a feeling, it’s the feeling of being part of the group and for the people who are part of our in-group.

I would argue that *agape* goes a little bit further. It asks not only to look at somebody to see whether they’re in or out, but to look at their value, their worth, how they are an important person, not based on whether they’re in this group or that group. And particularly with God we see the value, the wonder, the worth of God.

Perhaps Peter just isn’t quite there yet. He seems to move in his faith. If we were to keep following Peter we would see that. And our verse from Revelation describes the worth, the value of Jesus—worthy of power, wisdom, wealth, might, honor, glory, blessing—that’s quite a list. I’m not sure Peter is quite there yet. He’s on his way. Jesus at least asks the question to draw him in.

However, it feels to me like Jesus does what he often does with us when we’re not quite ready for something. He comes to where we are, gets us to the point where we can do what we can do, helping us move along in our journey. So the last time, Jesus asks

Peter, he uses *phileo* rather than *agape*. It's a recognition of where's Peter's at. Yes, Peter, you can be part of my in-group, you can be part of my disciples. So that's the first thing that Jesus is doing, I think, is drawing him deeper in to understand what God is doing in his midst. He may not quite get there all the way yet, but it's another step along in his story and his forgiveness.

The wonderful thing is to think about it simply as the forgiveness, the restoration of Peter to his role of leader and disciple. But he keeps going. It's interesting that each time, Jesus makes a reply. Not only "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, I love you," and that enough. Then there's an encouragement, an idea of what to do in the relationship. "Feed my lambs." The second one, "Tend my sheep," and the third one, "Feed my sheep."

Now, I don't know if there's really a reason for the slight differences in what Jesus says. I don't think it's just to be more interesting and to keep our attention. But it does feel like he wants to at least keep us from saying it's just one simple little thing. If he said, "Feed my Sheep" each time, I could say, well it's just about teaching the people of God about God. But it doesn't feel like it's quite that simple. He says, "Feed my lambs," the young ones. "Tend my sheep." Make sure they're safe, take them where they need to go. "Feed my sheep." Make sure they have the sustenance they need. What it feels to me like is it's an expansive way of talking about what he's calling Peter to, calling his disciples to, in feeding his sheep. It's not just one piece; it's looking at a wide variety.

So it can include everything from doing a rummage sale and providing the opportunity for people who need clothing to find clothing at very little cost. Or it can be a way for us, who are perhaps not in need of a lot of clothing, but who want to give to a good cause a way of reaching out and doing more in our community and around the world through the Presbyterian Women. That's part of feeding God's sheep. It's part of what we're called to. We come this morning, and I think this is another way of being fed, of worshiping together, of hearing God's Word, thinking about it together, being encouraged by each other's stories and by the music and the opportunities of prayer and worship.

As I think through this whole thing, it's easy for me to look at what God has done—the gift of grace, the restoration of Peter and how God is willing to restore us all, that reconciliation. Sometimes I want to stop there, but it feels to me that it then begs for a response. Not only is it a recognition that God loves us, but it's a relationship beginning that I get to give back to — Yes, Lord, I love you — and to hear that that relationship calls us not only to look inward at what God has done for each of us, but to look outward and to see how God calls us to care for one another, to feed the sheep.

Jesus says to Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter replies, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you." "Feed my sheep."

It's still a question to Jesus' disciples: "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, we love you." "Feed my sheep." Amen.