

“John: Do You Love Me?”

John 21:15-25 • Jeremiah 3:12-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • April 28, 2024

This morning’s passage from John 21 takes place after the resurrection and before Jesus ascends to heaven. Jesus has visited his followers twice already, in the upper room where the doors were locked. The climax of John’s gospel is when Thomas sees Jesus and falls down in worship and says, “my Lord and my God!” Everything in the gospel of John is there to lead you and me to say the same thing – *my* Lord and *my* God!.

Now Jesus appears to Peter and some of the other disciples a third time, this time on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Peter and the others had been fishing all night but they didn’t catch anything. At the first light they see someone standing on the shore. Jesus tells them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. When they do they catch a record number of fish. When they realize it’s Jesus, Peter jumps in the water and swims to shore while the others bring the boat and the fish. On the beach Jesus feeds them. But while they are sitting and eating, maybe things get kind of quiet. Uncomfortably quiet. Most of them had abandoned Jesus when he was arrested. Peter went so far as to deny three times even knowing Jesus. The feeling of guilt had to have been weighing heavy on Peter.

So Jesus breaks the silence with a question for Peter. He’s going to restore Peter. Verse 15 says, “When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Notice first of all that he calls him “Simon, son of John.” This was his name his whole life. Simon Johnson. But back in chapter 1, when Jesus calls him to follow, he gives him the nickname “Peter,” which means *rock*. For the last three years he’s been called Simon “the Rock” Johnson. It’s a name he felt he had grown into. He was a natural leader. He was the rock. But now Jesus doesn’t call him The Rock. Jesus is reminding Peter of when he was first called.

Second, we don’t really know what Jesus was referring to when he says “these.” One

possibility is that he was pointing to the fishing boats and nets, basically saying, “do you love me enough to leave this familiar way of living in order to be a part of what I’m doing in the world?” Jesus certainly does call each of us to make him more important than everything else in our lives.

The other possibility is that Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him more than the other disciples. On the night Jesus was arrested, Peter had declared forcefully that even if all the other disciples ran away, he would not. He was willing to die for Jesus. He claimed he loved Jesus more than the rest. Now as part of the restoration Jesus asks, do you really love me more than everyone else? It’s not a coincidence that Jesus asks Peter the question three times. Just days before, Peter had denied Jesus three times. To be restored fully, Jesus required Peter to profess his faith and love three times as well.

The third thing we want ask is what Jesus meant by love. In ancient Greek, which is the language that the New Testament was originally written in, there are actually four different words for love with very different meanings. The first Greek word for love is *storgé*, refers to the family love, such as parents and children. The next word will be more familiar to you— *eros*. When we hear the word *eros* we tend to think of sexuality, and that’s certainly a big part of it, but that doesn’t cover everything that the word meant in ancient times. *Eros* is defined as “passionate love, with sensual desire and longing.” By sensual we mean that our senses are engaged – sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste. *Eros* is love that is fueled by desire to please our senses. It’s what makes us appreciate beauty. Your love of the arts or music falls under *eros*.

The problem today is that the culture around us wants us to believe that *eros* love is the truest or highest love, that it’s the only thing that matters. Too often today we confuse the outward acts of *eros* with love and the message from the media is that if you’re not satisfied with

your relationship – if you aren't feeling the *eros* love anymore, then it's time to move on and try again with someone else. Sadly, Christians have bought the lie. We spend our lives trying to find romantic love and miss out on true love.

The third Greek word for love is *Phileo* or *philia*, which means friendship. *Philia* is the root for a number of our English words. For example, if you add *philia*, love, to the Greek word for brothers, *adelphos*, you get Philadelphia, brotherly love. If you add *philia* to the Greek word for wisdom, *sophia*, you get philosophy, love of wisdom.

In the New Testament we find *philia* used with a broad range of meanings. For example, it's used to describe the love of family or friends for one another, but it's also used to describe the Pharisees "love of money" in Luke 16. *Philia* was the most common word at the time the Bible was written to describe love that wasn't romantic.

But that's not the word we find used for love most often in the Bible, especially by Jesus. The word Jesus uses for love is *agapé*. *Agape* describes the love that God the Father has for the Son and the love the Son has for the Father and for the world. According to the New Testament, *agapé* is unconditional, sacrificial love. When Jesus speaks about God's love or the love that his followers are to exhibit, he refers to *agapé*. When Jesus commands us to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," or to "love your neighbor as yourself," he uses *agape*.

In First Corinthians chapter 13, the famous "love" chapter that is read at most weddings, we find a clearer picture of what *agape* love is all about. "Agape is patient and kind; agape does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Agape bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Agape never ends." This is very different from the desire of *eros* and even the affection of *phileo*.

So this brings us back to this dialogue between Jesus and Peter. Twice Jesus asks Peter, "do you love me?" and he uses *agapé*. But both times Peter answers with *phileo*. In other words, Jesus asks, "do you love me?" and Peter answers, "you know I care for you." The big difference between the two is that *Agape* love originates with God. C.S. Lewis calls it "gift-love," as opposed to the other three types of love that he calls "need-love." He writes, "need-love cries to God from our poverty; gift-love longs to serve, or even to suffer, for God."

The use of the two different words for love in this passage sets up the contrast between Jesus, who has demonstrated *agape* love, and Peter, who at this point is not even certain that he is capable of *phileo* love. You and I have the same problem. We have enough trouble with the brotherly affection of *phileo*. The idea of an unconditional, self-giving love that is willing to die on a cross for us is almost impossible to grasp.

The third time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, he doesn't use the word *agape*, he uses *phileo*. It's at this point that John tells us that Peter was grieved. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Peter are you sure that you even have that much love for me?" Peter understood that *agape* was beyond his reach. At that moment he knew that of all those who were with Jesus that day on the beach, he had betrayed him more deeply than the rest. And this is the key to understanding *agape*. R.C. Sproul puts it this way, "There is a sense in which the depth of our affection for Christ is inseparably related to the depth of our understanding of that which we have been forgiven." The more we understand what God has done for us in and through Jesus, the more grateful we are and in turn the more we know how to show *agape* love to other people.

The gospel ends with one last story. Jesus told Peter, "follow me." Apparently they got up and started walking and John followed them. Jesus tells Peter that after spending the rest of his life shepherding Jesus' flock, he will end up being crucified himself. Peter seems to accept

that without comment. But he asks, “what about him? What’s going to happen to John?” Jesus tells Peter, “that’s none of your business.” Sometimes Christians can get very worked up about other people. Some people concern themselves with other peoples’ sin. Jesus says, “what is that to you? You follow me!” At the same time I have found that this is why some people struggle with the Reformed concept that God chooses those who are saved. They say, “what about that person?” Jesus says, “what is that to you? You follow me!” He’s not saying we shouldn’t be concerned for others or that we shouldn’t work to make sure they have their needs met and that they hear the gospel.

That brings us to my final point. Jesus doesn’t just restore Peter. He commissions him. Three times Jesus makes it clear that to love him

means tending to his sheep. We understand that Jesus’ sheep are people. If we truly love Jesus, we will care for and feed his sheep. That means, among other things, doing as Jesus commanded in Matthew 28, “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded.” Caring for Jesus’ sheep is the job of the church, which is every one of us. How do we care for Jesus’ flock? We do it through worship, Bible study, fellowship, ministering to each other where there is need, and sharing the good news with other people. So what about you? Jesus asks you and me the same question: “Do you love me?” Not with the self-seeking love of *eros* or even *phileo*, but with the pure love made possible by God Himself, *agape*.

Amen.