

Do You Love Me?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Church

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Reverend Kristy Manion

John 21:15-25

This week we return to an Easter series on Jesus' encounters with people after he is raised from the dead. Today we turn to the last chapter in the gospel of John. This is the third post-resurrection interaction Jesus has with a whole group of his disciples; we're especially paying attention to his interactions with Peter today. Following Peter's lead as usual, a group of 7 disciples have just been out fishing all night and haven't caught a thing. From the shore a stranger directs the discouraged fishermen to cast their nets to the other side of the boat; to haul in an incredible catch!

John, the Beloved Disciple, recognizes Jesus and speaks up: "It is the Lord!" Peter flings himself over the side of the boat to meet Jesus on the shore. Jesus has already made breakfast and invites his friends to fry some of the fish they've just caught too. And after breakfast, Jesus has this remarkable conversation with Peter. Listen to John 21:15-25.

The 2021 animated film *Encanto* tells the story of a young girl named Mirabel Madrigal. Mirabel is an ordinary daughter in a Colombian family of extraordinarily gifted people. Lin Manuel Miranda, who wrote the music for *Hamilton*, led the songwriting team for this musical. The film received an academy award for Best Animated Feature; and the music garnered critical acclaim too, receiving three Grammy awards, including one for the best soundtrack. One of Miranda's songs stood out to me when I first watched the film. His song "Surface Pressure" captures the inner world of Mirabel's big sister Luisa. Luisa is fantastically strong, unhesitatingly helpful, and seemingly impervious to weakness. Impervious, that is, until things start to break in the magic that holds her and her family together. In answer to Mirabel's gentle question, "What's wrong?" Luisa responds with a song whose lyrics, beat, and melody resonated with people around the world.

I'm the strong one, I'm not nervous/I'm as tough as the crust of the Earth is/I move mountains, I move churches/And I glow, 'cause I know what my worth is...Give it to your sister, your sister's stronger/See if she can hang on a little longer/Who am I if I can't carry it all? ...Give it to your sister and never wonder/If the same pressure would've pulled you under/Who am I if I don't have what it takes? /No cracks, no breaks No mistakes The song reached number 8 in the United States in January 2022, number 5 in the United Kingdom. A whole lot of people could relate to the pressure Luisa expresses.

We start with Luisa today as a picture of the kind of pressure faced by the Apostle Peter. During his years with Jesus, Peter resembles Luisa. He's the strong one. He's not nervous; he's prepared. He moves mountains by his faith, and on this Rock Jesus will build his church.

Peter rushes in where other disciples fear to tread. And yet, as we just recalled together during our Lent sermon series Peter has just lived through a really terrible Passover. The weekend of Jesus' arrest, the Rock cracks. His bold claim to lay down his life for Jesus collapses under the pressure of scrutiny and suspicion and fear. He has denied Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. Now, after Jesus' resurrection, who is he? Is he still the Rock, or is he the Rock crushed under pressure?

It was really ok with Peter the first and second time Jesus asked him the critical question. But the third time that did it for him. That third time, plus the smell of the charcoal fire, the early morning sky, and the look in Jesus' eyes as he asked, "Do you love me?" All of these things brought Peter right back to the high priest's courtyard. There in the courtyard he had denied knowing his Lord, warmed himself over a similar fire, and saw his failure in the light of a new day.

No one else had failed Jesus the way Peter had. Sure, many of them had run when Jesus was arrested. And no one else had promised undying love and greater loyalty than Peter. But why couldn't he just be more like John? On the night of Peter's denial John had been there in the courtyard, too. The high priest knew John, and so it was John who had advocated with the servants to let Peter come in too.

Now, as all the disciples wonder and wait for what's next after Jesus' resurrection, it would be oh so human for Peter to make comparisons and draw conclusions. John, the Beloved Disciple, so different from him, so quick to recognize the Lord, so slow to get himself into trouble, so steady. What if Peter's denial has

disqualified him for good? What if Jesus no longer wants him around? Maybe Jesus will decide it's time to exchange Peter's leadership for John's among the disciples.

Jesus speaks into the swirl of Peter's heart with one well-chosen question. Simon son of John, do you love me more than these ones do? Yes, Lord, Peter says. You know that I love you. Feed my lambs. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Take care of my sheep. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Cut to the heart, Peter says, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." "Feed my sheep. I'm telling you the truth. Just as certainly as you once denied me, you will again be faithful to me. You used to dress yourself and go wherever you wanted. But when you're older you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

Though the sun is rising, Peter shivers. He turns and sees John following along behind him and Jesus. And he can't resist asking: "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answers, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

This conversation is only the second time in John's gospel where Jesus calls Peter by his full name, Simon son of John. The first time is right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he first meets Peter and gives him his nickname. And now using his full legal name Jesus keeps asking Peter the same painful question. Simon son of John, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? From any other person, the formal posture and these repeated words would seem like a scolding. If you found someone raiding the cookie jar and said to them, Kristy Manion, did you eat the last cookie? And then asked again and again after receiving honest answers, well, reasonable people might call that approach condescending. But these questioning words are on the lips of Jesus, completely just, completely merciful in ways that even the best humans can't be. And despite Peter's pain in response to Jesus' third question, Jesus is up to something for Peter's good.

Without wasting breath or using extra words, Jesus takes Peter through a three-part recognition of his denial. Jesus does this not to rub Peter's face in his failure but to heal him. He forgives Peter's sin completely at the cross. And then he goes to work healing Peter's shame. No longer does the denial define Peter. Instead, Jesus invites Peter to reaffirm his commitment, and not only to tell it, but to show it too.

"It's so good to see you again, Simon son of John." Jesus says. "Do you love me? I'm willing to start over again, if you are." Do you see the mercy in the question? Jesus knows Peter loves him. Peter knows Jesus knows. But Peter needs to say it out loud too. Jesus doesn't rake Peter over the coals with his failure. He doesn't say, "You know, Peter, you really blew it. Do you think you can manage to stay in the game this time? I'm counting on you."

He doesn't say, "On second thought, I'm not sure you've got what you need to care for my sheep. I'll get someone else to do it." Instead, he meets Peter within the arc of his past and with his future and grants him belonging, purpose, and a promise. He says, "If you love me, well, Peter, let's get to work. I choose you again. Since you love me, feed my lambs. Since you love me, take care of my sheep." "Don't be surprised by your future suffering, Peter. It's not a punishment for failure, but a way your life will honor God. I went through it; and I will bring you through it too. You follow me."

On a morning when we ordain new council members, on a day when we are celebrating new graduates and the lives they will go on to lead, it's good for us all to listen for Jesus' good & hard question to Peter. Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Jesus asks us. It's not the only important question, but it is certainly a foundational question for everyone trying to serve as a representative of Jesus Christ. It applies to every Christian at home, school, and work. Do you love me? Good. Nurture that love by living it. How? Not first by your devoted prayer life, your thoroughly biblical reasoning or your unimpeachable ethics important as those are. First, love me. Love me more than anything else. These things will come into place too as you live with and for me.

Do you love me? Jesus asks. Since you do, take really excellent care of my people. Nurture, care for, and teach those I love, the ones I call you to lead and to serve. Create a community where all whom I bring you receive my grace and truth through you, my under shepherds. It's the simplest thing in the world, and the most difficult thing to which you will ever devote yourself. Love Jesus. Feed his sheep.

This week I thought about the expectations and pressures facing teachers, school board members, church leaders, young adults getting started in careers. I thought about the high reported rates of burnout and anxiety in these places. And I thought of people whose names I know who have decided for weighty reasons to make career shifts. And I know there's no magic formula that would adequately alleviate pressure points in every

household, every classroom, or every church if only it were applied. After all, Peter and John do have different paths to follow as they pursue their Lord. But I did try to sit with Jesus' questions and expectations for Peter here.

As the first head of the church, Peter's primary call is to love God and to nurture the people God brings him. Ours is the same. Maybe in roles that have gotten more demanding and complex the Holy Spirit would ask us to renew our commitments to human-sized expectations for under shepherds serving the Good Shepherd.

For parents of toddlers sometimes paralyzed by pressure: Your first call is not to be an expert in child psychology or nutrition. It isn't to conquer the sleep strategies or lie awake worrying whether your child's future life all hinges on your choice of the right preschool. Your first call is to love Jesus. He loved you from before the foundation of the world. And from the overflow of that love, God's love spills out of you into your child in a thousand beautiful and wearying ways, ways as unique as you are.

For non-profit board members and council members: Your first call is not to craft agendas and to-do-lists. It isn't to solve complicated questions or lay out a definitive pathway for long-term visioning. Your first call is to love Jesus. He chose you to be holy and blameless in his sight. And from the overflow of that love God's love spills over into the prayerful and studied decisions you make for the life of your community.

Dear friends, what our households, boards, and schools need most is not more of our anxious efforts. What our communities and relationships need is more souls saturated with Jesus. Someone will say, and they'd be right, that our tasks create the settings for our relationships. They give us ways to offer practical care for the people God puts in our path. But what if we also reflected on our days a bit differently? What if we also sat with God in the quiet and asked: Jesus, did we love you well today? Did our actions, thoughts, and attitudes reflect that love? Did we love your people on your behalf today? Yes? Ah, then it was a good day. Thank you for it. Please give us what we need to love you tomorrow.

The Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. That Shepherd is also the real Rock, the one on whom Peter's leadership is truly founded. That Shepherd is the fully-divine, fully-human second person of the Trinity who was at work long before he asked us to help him, and whose good purposes and loving wisdom far outlast our vision. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Kristy Manion