

Do You Love Me?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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John 21:15-19

I want to do a deep focus on that question Jesus asks Peter in this passage: “Do you love me?” It’s a good question. It’s an attention getting question. What’s in this question for Peter, and what’s in this question for us? I think we will learn something as we reflect on this question.

First, Jesus asks Peter the question as a way of addressing Peter’s guilt. In asking this question Jesus is leading Peter through a kind of re-affirmation of faith. In our church we have a couple of ceremonies in which a person can show their commitment to the Lord. The first is a profession of faith where a person stands up in front of the congregation, answers three questions from the pastor and then promises to follow Jesus the rest of her life. You’ve seen that many times.

But in our denomination’s liturgical resources we also have something called a service of readmission. You could find it in the back of the old gray hymnal. Sometimes a young person professes her faith, but then she falls away for a time. Leaves the church. Loses her way. Wanders off to the far country. Denies her Lord. But later in adulthood, sometimes years and years later, she comes to herself and returns home to God’s people. When that happens we will sometimes do a re-affirmation of faith, another public ceremony where this person is re-instated. The wayward soul will stand up in front of the congregation, answer three questions and we will welcome her home. It’s a service of healing. It allows her to re-establish her place in the community.

This passage is like Peter’s service of re-admission. We all know Peter’s wandering story. On the day before Jesus was crucified, Peter denied him three times. Peter denied that he followed Jesus, denied that he was ever with him. “I don’t even know the man!” he said. Now Jesus comes to Peter in a way specifically designed to address his guilt and reinstate him. He denied Jesus three times, and so now, in a symmetrical response, Jesus asks him three times, “Do you love me?” and Peter gets a chance to re-affirm his faith. Peter is fully re-integrated into the life and mission of the community.

It’s not just the 3 questions that are parallel with Peter’s 3 denials; there are other parallels too. Where was Peter when he was first called by Jesus? What was he doing? He was fishing, just like here. And when Jesus first called Peter, what did he say to him? “Follow me!” What are the last words that Jesus says to Peter in our passage? “Follow me.”

Some people have said Jesus is hard on Peter in this passage. And in a way, I suppose he is. Asking someone even once: “Do you love me” is a serious confrontation. That’s not a question we ask another person easily. That’s a weighty question. It’s no wonder Peter was hurt by the third question. Any pictures we might have of Jesus as an easy going soul who likes to pat people on the back and tell them that they’re wonderful goes out the window with a story like this. Jesus doesn’t meet sin with a smile and a “hey, don’t worry about it!” Jesus is definitely putting a firm hand on Peter’s shoulder and looking him in the eye. There’s no cheap grace here.

But there is grace. Ultimately Peter is better off for the tough grace of this confrontation. What if Jesus had just ignored the denial? What if Jesus had served the disciples breakfast, given them all a hug, and just pretended the whole denial thing never happened? In the short term, Peter might have been relieved, but in the long term failing to address the problem would have left doubts in Peter’s mind and in the minds of the rest of the community. Peter would have found himself thinking about his old sin and wondering if he was still acceptable to God or if his denial was unforgiveable. The disciples would have found themselves doubting Peter: “Well, Peter seems committed, but you remember what happened on the night Jesus died don’t you?”

“Peter! Do you love me!” Jesus’ confrontation may be painful, but it puts an end to those lingering questions. Cheap grace produces cheap community where troubles go unmentioned, where sins go unconfessed, and where trust is low. Jesus’ grace actually changes people and strengthens communities.

The second thing that Jesus does for Peter in these questions is he changes Peter’s love language. Let’s go back into Peter’s biography again and think about Peter’s life thus far. Before the crucifixion, how did Peter express his discipleship? What sort of things did Peter do to show Jesus that he loved him? Peter liked to express his love for Jesus with grand gestures. Peter was a showman.

Just think for a minute and you’ll see what I mean. Jesus comes walking on the water and all the other disciples are in the boat with their mouths open at what they’re seeing. But Peter says, “Lord if it really is you, let me come to you on the water!!!” He’s not content with ordinary faith; he wants to walk on the water!! A grand gesture. And later Jesus is talking to his disciples and he tells them, “I’m going to be handed over to the soldiers and when it happens, you will all abandon me.” Peter says, “Not I Lord! Even though all the others leave you I will never leave you!!” No ordinary faith; the grand gesture! And then on the mountain of transfiguration, he’s not content with seeing the vision of Jesus and Moses and Elijah, he says, “Lord let us build you a shrine!” And on the night when Jesus is betrayed, Peter is the one who pulls out the sword and starts swinging. “Out of my way everyone! I will save Jesus!”

We know nothing about Peter’s relationship with his wife, but can’t you just imagine how he courted her? I don’t think it was low key courtship. I’m thinking armfuls of roses, and breathless declarations of undying love, and elaborately planned romantic evenings. That’s who Peter was. A man of grand proclamations and big gestures. That’s how he expressed his love. That was his love language.

Do you see how Jesus is teaching him a different love language here? You love me Peter. OK. But enough with the big gestures and passionate declarations. Here’s what I want you to do: Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. I don’t want you to give a tearful testimony in the next worship service; I want you to change diapers in the nursery. I don’t want you to start a great revival in my name; I want you to take care of your aging mother. I don’t need you to profess your undying love; I need you to take care of the orphan who lives across the road from you and the widow who lives down the street. Peter’s instinct has been to impress Jesus with big gestures of affection aimed at Jesus. Jesus wants to teach him small acts of care aimed at others.

That’s a message aimed at Peter, but it’s something we can all learn from. There’s a place for passionate expressions of love and praise to God. Of course there is. That’s what our worship is, I suppose. At LaGrave we all love a grand worship gesture: Our building is a grand gesture. And we love it when the choir performs a big number that leaves us breathless. We love it when the sopranos sing a soaring descant during the last stanza of the opening hymn. Larry lays down a big postlude and we all applaud. That’s all good stuff and it’s all an expression of our love for God.

But if you want to see love for Jesus expressed in the language Jesus calls for here, there are other places, maybe better places to look. Watch the volunteers who work hard to bless our neighbors at our foot spa. Sit in the library at Congress School with the mentors during Kids Hope. Watch the children’s’ worship teachers setting up for Sunday morning. Go with one of our PCA’s on a visit to our home-bound members. That’s where you’ll see sheep being fed and lambs being tended.

So Jesus asks this question as a way to re-instate Peter and he asks it as a way to change Peter’s love language. But there is one more sense in which this question is asked. This sense of the question is also the most basic. And this sense of the question isn’t just something for Peter, this sense of the question is something asked of all of us. Jesus is asking Peter and us: what’s really in your heart? Do you really love me? “I know you’ve said it a million times Peter, but honestly, do you really love me?”

It’s a fair question. Peter said he loved Jesus, but when the chips were down, when his life was on the line, when the choice seemed to be loyalty to Jesus or saving his skin, what did Peter choose? Do you really love me Peter?

This sense of the question comes through most clearly the first time Jesus asks it. Did you notice the strange way it’s phrased? “Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?” “More than these?” What

“these” is Jesus referring to? Think about where they are. They are in a beautiful spot. They’re on the beach in the morning. The sun is rising over the lake and the shadows are long and a morning mist is over the lake. They’re sitting around a charcoal fire that’s crackling away pleasantly. They’ve just had a good meal of fish from their record catch. Peter’s surrounded by his best friends and fishing buddies and everyone is feeling pleasantly tired and fulfilled after a long night’s work. This is a good place. If this was one of those old Old Milwaukee commercials they’d all crack a beer and say to each other: “Guys, it doesn’t get any better than this.”

In the middle of the best life has to offer Jesus says to Peter: “Do you love me more than these? Do you love me more than this life and its pleasures? You remember Peter, all those times I talked about losing your life for my sake? You remember all those times I talked about denying yourself and picking up your cross and following me and you nodded your head and said Amen when I said it? Did you mean that? Is your heart in this Peter?” It’s a powerful question. A life and death question.

It’s a question that we all face every day and that we will face in a particularly clear way someday. We are relatively healthy now. Healthy enough that this morning we got up and fastened our own belt and came to this place of our own will and volition. But someday that will change. One day our bodies will weaken and we will lose our independence and we will have to stretch out our hand and someone else will lead us where we do not want to go. One day the doctor will tell us: “Well, you’ve got 3 months left, maybe 6 at the most.” On that day we will face Jesus’ question in a strong and direct way: “So... do you love me? I know you’ve come to church and you’ve sung all those hymns, but has love for me been at the center of all that? Or have you done all that because you didn’t want to disappoint your parents, or because it was kind of what people do in the Midwest, or because you like the social aspect, or because your work was all tied up in the church apparatus. Has church been a strategy for securing your place in society?” Someday, circumstances will put you in Peter’s place: sitting in a quiet place while he looks you straight in the eyes, while he looks you straight in the hearts and says, “So has your heart been in all this?”

And what will you say to Him? You will say what Peter said of course: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you!” What else can you say? But will your heart be as sure as your answer? I think most of us will not be so sure of our heart. How can we be! Our love is a fickle thing. Even in our best relationships, our love comes and goes and ebbs and flows. Even with the people we love most in this world we talk a good game about giving ourselves for them and sacrificing ourselves for them, but all it takes is one argument over some small silly thing, over a disagreement about whose turn it is to do the dishes, and we’re yelling at them and we’re in full defense mode, justifying ourselves, accusing them, protecting ourselves, attacking them. It doesn’t take very much at all for us to give up love for self-protection.

So maybe the most honest answer to Jesus’ question is the first thing that comes out of Peter’s mouth after Jesus asks him for the third time: “Lord you know everything” You know the truth of my heart. You know when I’m on fire for you, and when I feel nothing. You know when my faith is strong, and when my doubts rise up. You know when I’m following boldly in your footsteps and when I’m barely hanging on. You know the whole of my heart.

I don’t know what was really in Peter’s heart that day on the beach. I don’t know the true strength of his love. But I do know the full strength of the love of the one who sat across the fire from him asking the hard questions. That love is warm, steady, piercing, rigorous, eternal. Whatever the failings of Peter’s heart, Jesus has shown him the full extent of his love. Jesus has suffered for them. Jesus has put up with their failings. Jesus died for them, and now that he has risen, he has come down to the lakeside to find them. Jesus has sat them down at the fire and fed them with bread and fish in this beautiful place. Eager to see them, eager to heal them, eager to make them new.

“Do you love me?” That hard question isn’t asked by someone ready to whack us for all our failures; it’s asked by the risen Christ. That hard question is asked by one whose every action says: I love you more than you can imagine.” May that great love give you the strength for another week of following him, feeding his sheep and tending his lambs.

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