

**John 21: 15 - 19**  
**Do You Love Me?**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
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They've been together now for over 50 years. They have had a good life but age and illness are slowing them down. Most evenings are spent watching TV, reading, or listening to good music. But on this evening she is restless and a little distracted. "What's wrong?" he asks. "Nothing" she lies. They turn their attention to the story once again. But when the commercial comes she turns and says as clearly as she can, "Do you love me?" He's quiet for a minute or two and then he looks her in the eye and he says, "I married you didn't I?"

Today is Mother's Day and the Hallmark people and merchandisers of every stripe have been urging us to "let mom know how much you love her". So we let a card or a gift speak for us hoping she'll know we do love her even if we have trouble getting the words out. But that street runs both ways and I certainly have met a lot of people who would have given anything to hear a mother or a father say, "I love you". The actions were important but the words were missing. And without the words we can't be sure what the gift is actually saying.

In our text for today we aren't dealing with parents and children or with partners. It is a story about Jesus and the disciple who in a very public way rejected him. It is the final recorded words exchanged between Jesus and this foremost of the disciples. It is a story of forgiveness and restoration and new responsibility. But more than anything it is a story of love.

Peter hadn't recognized Jesus standing on the shore until John pointed him out. When he knew it was Jesus he jumped into the lake and swam to

shore leaving the others to bring the boat and the catch of fish. So like Peter, impetuous, spontaneous, act first and think later. But once on the shore he accepts the meal Jesus offers and doesn't say a word about the true identity of the fellow cooking fish.

After they have finished eating Jesus finds himself alone with Peter and he asks him a question. "Peter do you love me more than these?" It could mean do you love me more than the other disciples do, or it could mean do you love me more than you love these men who have been your companions for so many years. The interesting thing about Jesus question and Peter's answer is the word each uses for love. Jesus uses the word *agape* which is a self-giving, unconditional love. It is the love Jesus lived and urged on his followers and it is the love that marked the early church. Peter, however, uses the word *phileo* which means friendship. A love that is between equals and is mutually beneficial. Jesus is asking Peter for the purest kind of love and Peter is offering him the most common form of love.

The third time Jesus puts the question to Peter we are told that Peter was miffed. But this time Jesus comes to Peter's level and he uses the word 'phileo'. "Peter, am I your friend?" And Peter out of exasperation says, "You already know that I love you. Why do you keep asking?" And that is one of the puzzling things about this text - why does Jesus ask Peter that question at all, let alone three times? This is the risen Christ and surely he must know what is in Peter's heart. He knows what the level of Peter's loyalty to him is. Most commentators will tell you that Jesus asks the question three times to match the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. But the text never gives us that hint. Does Jesus need to be reassured by Peter before he commissions him as a shepherd? Is his call to ministry connected to his expressed love for Jesus? Is Jesus making Peter squirm a

little?

My suspicion is that Jesus is asking the question because Peter needs to say the words out loud. Maybe he needs to hear himself say, “Yes, Lord, I love you”. As much as we may want to avoid it we know that the words are important. We know that in our human relationships. You may have the feelings but it becomes more real, when you hear your own voice saying the words. Something that is internal and private becomes external and public when the words are spoken. And Peter needed to have his feelings for Jesus be stated publicly in light of the work that was before him.

One of the expositors I read this week said that in the early church worship meant to be confronted with Christ’s penetrating question, ‘do you love me’. Throughout his ministry Jesus preached about the kingdom and he pointed people to a loving God. Jesus never asked that people believe in him the way we interpret that today. He wanted them to believe his words about God and about God’s kingdom. Today we say we believe in Jesus, or we are followers of Jesus, or we are imitators of Jesus. But all of that misses the point. At the heart of faith is a question of love. We ask ourselves and each other ‘what would Jesus do’, but the question of Jesus to each of us is ‘do you love me?’ And are you willing to say so in front of your friends?

After each question Jesus gives Peter a command - feed my lambs and feed my sheep. Peter’s love for Jesus had to go beyond words. It needed to start with words but it couldn’t stop there. Peter has to become the kind of shepherd Jesus was and Jesus had made sure they all understood the role of the good shepherd. And then Jesus says something that sounds strange to us. He gives Peter a glimpse into the future. You used to control your own life but there will come a time when your life will be controlled by others. John tells us that Jesus is talking about Peter’s death. But I think his death

was the result of his living. Once Peter gave himself to love, once he agreed to become a shepherd to those Jesus entrusted to his care his life was not his own. His life was dictated by love. And that led Peter on paths he probably would never have willingly chosen. It led him into risk and danger and loss and arrest and eventually to a martyr's death.

What Jesus offers Peter in these verses is nothing less than a fresh start. Jesus says nothing about that terrible night in the courtyard of the high priest's palace. He forgives Peter without Peter ever asking for forgiveness. Jesus restores Peter to his place as a disciple. Jesus accepts the love Peter can offer at the moment but he offers Peter grace in the certain knowledge that Peter will grow to love as Jesus loved. Peter will move in his journey of faith from phileo to agape. And much of that will happen as he tends the sheep and lambs of his pasture.

We may not have Peter's personality but we all have 'old business' that has to be taken care of in our relationship with Jesus. Jesus comes to us with that penetrating question because he wants us to move beyond an internal and personal feeling to an external reality. Jesus wants us to give our lives to love. And so in love Jesus forgives whatever we have done without waiting for us to ask for forgiveness. Jesus restores each of us to the position of disciple. And Jesus accepts the amount and kind of love we can give at the moment. And then the risen Christ gives us work to do knowing that in the doing of the work we will grow into a deeper love for him and for the sheep of the pasture we tend.

Our text ends with Jesus saying words Peter has heard before, "Follow me". In the beginning those words meant to leave his boat and nets and go with Jesus throughout Galilee and to Jerusalem. The words meant to go where Jesus went, make preparations for him, be his friend and companion,

do ministry with him. Now the words took on new meaning for Peter. Now the words were about living his life in the way he had seen Jesus live. Now the words meant that he had to follow where love would lead him. Now the words meant that his actions had to reflect the same love Jesus had demonstrated.

Peter's life as a disciple began and ended with these words, "follow me". It is where every disciple begins and ends the journey of faith.

Let us pray.