

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Do You Love Me?

John 21:15-19

"Do you love me?" What a searching question from our risen Lord. It would be one thing for him to stand before the group of disciples as a whole and ask this question. Each one could sit there and contemplate their answer. But to have Jesus take you aside and put the question to you very directly and personally. That takes Jesus' question to an even deeper level. And that's what it was like for Peter.

Note that Jesus' approach isn't a cool, detached interrogation about discipleship. It comes in the context of a meal, a meal which Jesus himself initiates, and to which he invites his disciples. A shared meal is a sign of love and fellowship. It's where bonds can be formed, stories can be told, and memories can be shared. But sometimes these memories can be hard to revisit. Maybe this is what Jesus has in mind the first time he asks Peter his probing question: "Do you truly love me more than these?"

When Jesus says "these," he's probably referring to the other disciples. According to the other three Gospels, Peter had boasted that though all the others would fall away, he would not. He would remain completely loyal and faithful and obedient to Jesus, all the way to the end (Matt. 26:33; Mark 14:29; Luke 22:33). According to John's Gospel, Peter had even told our Lord, "I will lay down my life for you" (13:37). But Jesus knew better. He knew Peter fully and deeply. He predicted Peter's failure and denials. So at this stage of their relationship, after the resurrection itself, maybe Jesus is still having to work on any residual pride or boasting that Peter may carry in his heart. "Do you truly love me more than these?"

Jesus' purpose isn't to humiliate his lead disciple. He hasn't come to reject Peter but to restore him. He hasn't come to rebuke him but to rehabilitate him. He hasn't come to reprimand him but to reinstate him. What Peter gets from Jesus isn't a tongue-lashing but a call. A call to discipleship and a commission to go forward in the work of Jesus. Here at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, his word to Peter is the same as it was at the beginning: "Follow me!" In this case, follow me forward into the continuing work of making the love of God known to the world.

And notice that the foundation for this discipleship, the ground of our participation in Jesus' work, is love. Jesus doesn't ask, "Peter, do you feel like you have the courage and the determination to be part of my mission?" He doesn't ask, "Peter, do you believe that your theological training has equipped you for the work of the kingdom?" He doesn't ask, "Peter, is your family supportive of your participation in my ministry?" Instead, Jesus asks, "Peter, do you love me?"

This isn't a kind of love that Peter has to initiate and generate on his own. It's a love that's responding to having already been loved. I think of what the writer of 1 John says: "We love because he first loved us" (4:19). God's initiative in loving us, in the midst of our sinfulness, is the grace that makes possible our love toward God. Jesus' self-giving on the cross, his own death, is what calls forth and creates our love, our dying to self, by which we give ourselves to him and to one another. It's not as if love is a new subject that Jesus

raises and emphasizes after he has been raised from the dead. The whole story that has unfolded in John's Gospel is about God's love for the world, revealed in the gift of his Son, a love that summons and forms a community of believers who embody the self-emptying love of God.

Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has compared this movement to the interaction between a mother and her infant child. He says, "After a mother has smiled at her child for many days and weeks, she finally receives her child's smile in response. She has awakened love in the heart of her child, and as the child awakens to love, it awakens to knowledge." As one person has summarized it, "We are loved into loving."¹ That's what Jesus is doing with Peter. He's continuing to love him, now on this side of the resurrection, especially in the face of Peter's denials, in order to form Peter's love, a love that will take the shape of discipleship, following Jesus into the future.

Pastor Stuart Briscoe once told the following story about the drawing power of love:

I was in Edinburgh about a year ago speaking at Charlotte Chapel, and a delightful young lady gave her testimony. She had come back from Kabul, Afghanistan, where she was a missionary nurse. She said how she was really enjoying the work she was doing there, and then she'd met a young man and fallen in love. He'd asked her to marry him, but she had said, "I made a commitment to my church back home to serve on the mission field. If I were to marry you, that might change everything. So before I can give you an answer, I need to talk with the leaders of the church." And so that was why she was home. She'd flown home all the way from Afghanistan to talk to the leaders of the church.

As I was looking at the congregation, I noticed a fellow sitting in the front row who had the weirdest look on his face. So when she was through and sat down next to me, I said, "Who is that fellow? Do you know him?" She said, "That's the young man." I said, "I thought he was in Kabul." She said, "He was. He heard I was flying back to Scotland to talk to the leaders of the church, so he said he wanted to talk to them as well. So he jumped on the next plane."

You can always tell lovers: they don't give up. They "come after," as a lover comes after the beloved. And that's the picture that Jesus gives: "If you're going to come after me, it's because you love me because I first loved you, and there's something about me that draws you irresistibly to me." Are you a disciple of Jesus Christ?²

Being a disciple of Jesus requires not only a beginning, a starting point in love for the Lord, but also a deepening of that love, a refinement of that love, a forming of that love, across time and circumstances and experiences. The Peter whom Jesus questions during their breakfast on the beach is the same as but also different from the Peter who had first responded to Jesus' summons at the outset of Christ's ministry. There at the beginning, the first thing Jesus did was take Peter, who at that time was Simon, and give him a new name meaning "rock," pointing to his future role in the church. So from the start, Jesus has known Peter fully, and loved him fully. But Peter had, and still has, much growing to do in what it means to be known and loved by the Lord. Peter is still living out his answer to the first question Jesus asked some potential followers at the beginning of John's Gospel. Jesus wheeled around on them and said, "What do you want?" (1:38).

According to James K. A. Smith, this question is buried under almost every other question Jesus asks each of us, including the question, "Do you love me?" That's because, as Smith puts it, "Jesus' command to follow him is a command to align our loves and longings with his—to want to what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all—a vision encapsulated by the shorthand 'the kingdom of God.'"³ This is what's at stake in our answer to Jesus' question, "Do you love me?"

Again, as for Peter, so for you, your love for Jesus has to get deepened and refined and formed. After all, your love for him is the source from which flow your actions and behavior, which is exactly where Jesus takes Peter each time he answers the question. After each profession of love, Jesus responds with something for Peter to do. Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep. Words of love must be matched by a life of love. Love talked must also be love walked.

In fact, you can gain insight into what you love by paying attention to what you actually do. Your daily habits, attitudes, and actions reveal what you love most. This is why there's such spiritual danger in having your love get disordered and misdirected. Your love may be deep and heartfelt, and may come from the core of your being, but it may also be love for the wrong thing, something you're treating as ultimate other than the Lord. It can be love for things other than Jesus, things that don't know you and love you the way that Jesus knows you and loves you. Things you may desire or want that aren't really aligned with what Jesus desires and wants.

Author Madeleine L'Engle tells of hearing a story about a Hasidic rabbi who was known for his piety and holiness. She says,

He was unexpectedly confronted one day by one of his devoted youthful disciples. In a burst of feeling, the young disciple exclaimed, "My master, I love you!" The ancient teacher looked up from his books and asked his fervent disciple, "Do you know what hurts me, my son?"

The young man was puzzled. Composing himself, he stuttered, "I don't understand your question, Rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much you mean to me, and you confuse me with irrelevant questions." "My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant," rejoined the rabbi. "For if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?"⁴

Truly loving Jesus involves not only discerning what Jesus wants and desires, but also what Jesus doesn't want and doesn't desire. What hurts Jesus and brings him sorrow. What offends against his will and his way for you. This too is part of knowing Jesus deeply and aligning your heart with his heart. Three times he asks Peter if he loves him. As many have suggested, this may be intended to correspond to Peter's threefold denial of Jesus. But it can also be a reminder that Jesus has to put his searching question to us repeatedly in life, so that we examine the character and quality of our love for him. We need to regularly recalibrate our devotion to Jesus and our desire for the things he desires.

This type of love for Jesus, constantly being formed and refined and deepened, is captured in the following poetic prayer from the 17th century:

My God, I love Thee. Not because I hope for heav'n thereby, Nor yet because who love Thee not must die eternally. Thou, O my Jesus, Thou didst me upon the cross embrace; For me didst bear the nails and spear, and manifold disgrace. Why, then why, O blessed Jesus Christ, should I not love thee well? Not for the hope of winning heav'n, or of escaping hell; Not with the hope of gaining aught, not seeking a reward; But as Thyself hast loved me, O everloving Lord! E'en so I love Thee, And will love, and in Thy praise will sing; Solely because Thou art my God, And my Eternal King.⁵

So again on this day, in this gathering, Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" We answer with our lips and our lives.

¹ Balthasar is quoted in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016) Kindle edition.

² Stuart Briscoe, "Ordinary Folks Make Great Disciple." Preaching Today, Tape No. 47.

³ Smith, *You Are What You Love*.

⁴ Madeleine L'Engle, in *Walking on Water. Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, No. 14.

⁵ Author unknown. *Leadership*, Vol. 2, No. 3.