

“Do You Love Me?”

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 4, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
The Third Sunday of Eastertide
Text: John 21:15-19

I have often thought that “love” must be the most over-used word there is. Or perhaps a better word would be overworked. We expect a lot of this little four letter word. We use it to describe everything from how we feel about another person to how much we like a meal we are eating or a new outfit we have splurged on. In fact, we overuse it so much that it’s meaning becomes cloudy, even less meaningful, depending on the situation. For example, we know that to say you love your mother is definitely not the same kind of love as loving your spouse. Similarly, loving your new living room paint color is not the same at all as loving your parent. And yet, as we just look at the words, that’s how it sounds! That’s crazy! How can this one little word carry so much nuance within those four little letters?

Part of the weight this word is asked to carry comes from the fact that it can be used as either a noun or a verb. You can have great love as a foundational piece of your life – like the love of your family. You can also exercise the emotion of love in action when the depth of your love for someone or something is expressed through some act intended to make clear your love for this other person. Mother’s Day which is coming up next Sunday is such an occasion when folks express their love for their mothers, or for someone like a mother to them, through all sorts of actions – like going out to lunch together or bringing flowers or candy or some other gift.

So any way you think about it, love is intended to be an expression of deep emotion which translates into action. Such is the case with the exchange we witness in today’s scripture reading from John’s Gospel. This is the last of Jesus’ resurrection appearances described in John and it is a curious one indeed. The appearance begins with Jesus appearing on the beach while Simon Peter and the other disciples are out in their boats fishing. Jesus calls out to the disciples when he perceives that they have not been catching any fish.

He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and then they catch so many fish they can barely get them to shore. This is when Peter recognizes Jesus and jumps into the water to get to him as quickly as possible. Jesus ends up feeding them all breakfast. This is when an odd exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus takes place.

After breakfast, Jesus asks Simon Peter, “do you love me more than these?” He immediately answers Jesus saying, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you” to which Jesus responds, “feed my lambs.” Okay. I’m sure Peter is a little confused by this response since they are fishing and there are no sheep in sight. Still, he takes this in stride, more or less shrugging it off and then Jesus asks again, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Again, he answered, “You know that I love you.” Jesus responds, “Feed my sheep.” Now, Simon Peter is getting a tad cranky, but he lets it pass until Jesus again, a few minutes later asks him again, “do you love me?” Now Peter is hurt that Jesus keeps asking him this. He responds, “Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.” And how does Jesus respond this time? “Feed my sheep.”

Okay, let’s stop there for a moment. Three times Jesus asks Simon Peter the same question – “do you love me?” Each time Simon Peter gives the same answer – “Lord, you know that I love you.” Three times. We, like Peter, have to wonder why is Jesus asking him three times about Simon Peter’s love for Jesus. Excellent question. I invite you to think back to the stories of Holy Week and to one in particular concerning Jesus and Simon Peter. Hint: It involved a question asked three times and answered three times with the same answer. Second hint: It also involved a rooster crowing. Yes, it was Peter who, after Jesus was arrested, was asked three different times by three different people if he knew Jesus and three times, he said no. All this happened after Jesus had told him that he would, in fact, deny him three times and Peter told him, “No way!” Then he did. Three times.

So, here we see the Risen Christ asking Peter once again if he loves him. Peter gets exasperated because he seems to have conveniently forgotten about the denying Jesus three times situation. Clearly, he assumes all has been forgiven him by Jesus. It’s not like

when Peter first learned that Jesus had risen from the tomb, he immediately started worrying about Jesus still being angry or sad about the whole “I don’t know him” thing. And, honestly, we have no reason to think Jesus was angry with him about this. Jesus understood how terrified everyone was when he was arrested and ended up being crucified. I don’t think he was angry with Peter. But I do think Jesus asking this same question three times was intentional and important, just for an entirely different reason. He wanted to know if Peter was still too scared to do what Jesus was counting on him to do – step into the leadership role Jesus envisioned for him. Jesus knew that just having leadership qualities, just knowing Jesus was counting on him to do this, would not be enough. What Jesus was asking of him would be difficult, more difficult than anything Peter could possibly imagine. Jesus also knew that the only way Peter would be able to fulfill this role God had placed in front of him would be if he could draw on his love of God as embodied in Jesus as his source of strength. Only love for God as manifested in Jesus could make this new life, this new role, do-able for Peter. Jesus had to know if Peter loved him as he claimed to, that his professions of faith were more than just words. Because in the past they hadn’t been.

We could of course ask how Jesus could possibly know if they were more than just words this time. As we talked about earlier, people say “I love you” all the time without really meaning it, without really understanding what it entails. Peter had already said he would never deny Jesus and he hadn’t been able to do that. How could Jesus know Peter meant it this time? Simple. He couldn’t. But that didn’t stop Jesus from asking because Jesus, in spite of everything that had already happened between them, still had faith in Peter. Jesus believed in Peter. Jesus loved Peter and he wanted Peter to enliven his declarations of love for Jesus with action. That’s why Jesus answered Peter’s declaration of love each time with a call to action: “Feed my lambs;” “Tend my sheep;” and then “Feed my sheep.” Feed the lambs, tend the sheep, feed the sheep. And who usually does all this sheep care-taking? The shepherd of course. Jesus is asking Peter to take over

as shepherd of this flock Jesus has created. Jesus is asking Peter to put his actions where his words are.

But Jesus being Jesus, he doesn't stop there. He accepts Peter at his word, that he will do as Jesus asks and then he explains the consequences for Peter of doing it. Peter would eventually find himself, when he is much older, at the mercy of someone else who will take him "where he doesn't want to go." This is Jesus telling Peter as gently as possible that he is going to one day pay the ultimate price for loving Jesus as he does – just as Jesus did. It's worth noting that we don't know how Peter responds to this since the next words Jesus has for Peter are simply "follow me." So, did Peter pick up on this nuance in Jesus' comments to him? We don't know. We do know that Peter did fulfill his love for Jesus just as he said he would. And, we know that he gave his life for Jesus during the persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero a few decades later.

So, now that we've reflected on how Peter answered Jesus' repeated questioning of how much Peter loved Jesus, it's more than appropriate for us to consider our answer to this same question posed by Jesus: "Do you love me?" Dear ones, this is no fluff question. This is a real question, posed to us every day, all the time. We just usually don't recognize it as easily as we might think we would. Another way to think about this question would be to ask yourself if someone observed you as you go through your days and your weeks, would they be able to tell, just by watching how you live your life, that you are a Christian, a follower of the living Christ? Would your actions reveal the servant love Jesus taught the disciples? Would Jesus see your days overflowing with acts of kindness and compassion to friends and strangers alike? Would the words coming out of our mouth reveal a foundation of love in your life ... or perhaps not. Some of our brothers and sisters in the evangelical churches would speak about this aspect of confessing your faith through action as being "convicted" in your faith. In other words, your actions and words make it very clear to everyone that you are indeed a follower of Christ.

Well, if you are anything like me, the honest answer to this question – and it's important to be honest with God and with yourself

– the honest answer to this question would be “no, not all the time.” Sometimes *I* am not my best self, my Jesus self. Honestly, there are times – especially when I’m driving home, inching my way along through bridgemageddon, that my words, directed at other drivers, are not Christ-like. I admit it. I’m not proud of it, but I admit it. And sometimes when I see my neighbor’s Trump flag proudly displayed – still – on her house, I have the occasional unkind thought. And when I see someone driving a Tesla past me, I really have unkind thoughts toward Elon Musk. Very unkind thoughts toward Elon Musk. I also on occasion have unkind thoughts about my one neighbor who takes 3-4 days to put their trash bins back next to their house and NEVER picks up the trash that doesn’t quite make it into the truck – we all have THAT neighbor.

So, dear ones, I am not perfect. You are not perfect. That’s perfectly okay because Jesus does not expect perfect from us. Jesus has never expected perfect from us. We put that whole notion of perfection on ourselves. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan theologian and mystic reminds us, “We come to God much more by doing things wrong than by doing things right. God absolutely leveled the human playing field by using our sins and failures to bring us to divine union.”¹ We come to God much more when we do the wrong thing instead of when we do the right thing! How surprising is that! But, dear ones, it is absolutely true. It is our imperfections in how we engage in life each day that make us human, and more beloved of God, if that’s possible. This is because the action of recognizing our own faults and imperfections, the things about ourselves we would most like to improve, it is that action in ourselves that pulls us back to God, away from those feelings of being confident that we “get” this whole being a Christian thing. We’re doing it!! Except we’re not. Not really. We all have faults. We all have things that make us crazy and impatient and even unkind at those moments when we have just had it. Had it with the nastiness, with the blatant meanness and unkindness that sometimes feels all too real, all too close these days.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Yes, and ...*, ©1997, Franciscan Media, p. 295

Let's be honest with ourselves, dear ones. There are some moments when a stranger would have a difficult time believing any of us are followers of Jesus because our ego and our anger just gets in the way. Because it does.

Dear ones, take heart that it is in these very moments that we are able to find ourselves closest to God, and to Jesus. When we are suddenly brought up short by our actions – I can't believe I just said that, did that, thought – that is when Jesus is tapping you on the shoulder and whispering into your ear, "Do you love me?" It's a real question. And Jesus provides a real answer when we say yes – Feed my lambs, Tend my sheep, Feed my sheep – and finally, "Follow me." These moments when we are most aware of how we are not showing our love for Jesus are the very moments when he is able to come close to us with that gentle reminder. We are loved unconditionally. We are called into service always. We are needed to be God's hands and feet to make love tangible in a world where love is in far too short supply.

"Do you love me," Jesus asks us every day. All we have to do is listen for the question in all the way it presents itself every day and then do whatever we need in that moment to feed, tend and follow. The truth is that often that is not much to do – a smile and a kind word to a harried mom or dad, patience with the server at the restaurant when the kitchen is backed up, gratitude expressed for kindnesses we receive from others. I know it really doesn't seem like much but always remember that in that moment – to which God has brought you – it can be everything to that other person. What you do, what you say, really does make a difference. Every day. Amen