Do You Love Me?

John 21:15-19 Kimby Young

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Today we will conclude the sermon series on the resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ. This is the last Sunday of the Easter season – as next week we turn to the Ascension of Jesus. Today’s scripture passage from this last chapter of John continues the story of the resurrection appearance we read a few weeks ago – when Peter and several other disciples decided to go fishing – to go back to the fishing profession they once knew. The story began with Jesus telling them how to catch a great haul of fish, and continued with Jesus calling the disciples again to ministry, as they shared breakfast on the beach. Today we pick up the story again as Jesus speaks to Peter – and in so doing speaks to all of us who would be disciples.

These are Jesus last words to the disciples and John’s last words to his readers. John has spent 20 chapters telling us to live as Jesus lived, to love as Jesus loved, and he sums it all up in this exchange with the disciple Peter. You remember Peter just a couple of chapters before had stood in the courtyard outside Jesus’ trial and had denied Jesus three times. In a moment of fear, Peter had betrayed himself as much as he betrayed Jesus. The exchange between Peter and Jesus begins with forgiveness and redemption. Jesus knew Peter felt guilty. Jesus knew Peter didn’t know what to do next. Jesus knew Peter loved him and wanted to serve him, And Jesus knew that Peter had it in himself to be one of the great leaders of the church – if Peter could just get out of his own way, if Peter could just remember what Jesus had taught him.

So after breakfast, after some time of just being together, Jesus offered these words. “Peter, do you love me?” Imagine. Imagine how Peter felt. Here was his chance to confess his faith in Jesus, to witness to his belief, to tell Jesus how much he loved him. Here was his chance to make amends for his failure and to pledge his commitment to serving Jesus in the world. Imagine how he felt. Imagine how you would feel. “Yes Jesus, yes, you know I love you.” Three times Jesus asked it, and three times Peter affirmed his love and faithfulness - wiping out that three time denial before the cross and resurrection. Jesus knew what Peter needed to forgive himself, and Jesus gave it to him freely. Do you love me? Do you love me? My beloved disciple, my friend, you who will carry on God’s work in the world, do you love me?

Yes, I love you. Yes, Peter says. YES! And yes we affirm right alongside that faltering, faithful disciple Peter. Yes, Lord. Yes, you know that I love you.

And Jesus response - three times, just three words, and each with a slightly different nuance. What does it mean? Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. What is Jesus telling us about our mission as Christians, our call to ministry? Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

It is my suspicion that if each of you took those 9 words - those 3 sets of 3 - and listened to them as call from Christ - we would each hear something different. Some of you might hear the call “feed” and know that you are drawn to caring for the poor and hungry. And some of you might hear the word “feed” and think of an entirely different kind of nourishment - food for the soul, nourishment for the heart, empowerment and energy for those who are hungry for the presence of God. Some of you might hear the call “lambs” and know that you must care for the children, teach the children, empower the children. Some of you might hear “lambs” and think of those who are new to believing, but not necessarily young in age. Some of you might be called to “Tend” - and what might that mean - to care for, to provide for, to protect, to guide, to heal wounds, to offer security, to make a home. Remember the shepherd and all that the shepherd does for those under the shepherd’s care. And furthermore, are you the lamb or are you the shepherd, or are you both? At times you are called to tend and feed others. At times perhaps you are the one who needs to stop and receive the care. This commission in John is HUGE. It involves not only everything we do in church, but everything every one of us does in life. And at different times in your life, you might hear this call in different ways. The call progresses. The call from God changes. It does not remain the same throughout your life. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

If we were to take this call seriously and individually - this could be an absolutely overwhelming task. The good news is, I don’t think John meant this to be an individual commission. Even though it is spoken to Peter, I think it is meant for all Christians. Yes, every individual Christian is called to participate, but I believe Jesus here was talking to the community of believers as a whole - collectively - this is the mission for all the church. The entire gospel of John is written to a community of believers, not to individuals. A community who were trying to figure out how to live in the world as Christians, how to serve Christ and live in God’s love. Just as we are trying to figure out how to be Christ’s church here in Gardner – how to feed and tend and care.

The key is you are not to try to do it all alone. We must stick together, work together, love the world and witness to Christ TOGETHER. Because while you might be able to do part of that alone, only together are we able to be the church in the world and live as faithfully as Christ calls us to live. Together, disciples of Christ. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Only together can we reach all the needs and be all that God intends for us to be.

So let us listen as a community. Let us listen for God’s call for First Presbyterian Church of Gardner - this year in this time and place. How are we being called collectively to express our love of Christ? Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

Our church is poised on the brink of possibility and perhaps change. We’ve come through some hard times and we are now in a position to reach out and grow and serve in greater ways. We have been given so much, and God has made us able to respond generously and joyfully. Further, Our world is in a position we have never been in before. The world is changing. Gardner is changing. There is much to fear. There is much to be excited about. How are we called to feed and tend and care in the world?

We are called collectively and You are called individually today to some part of this challenge - to feed or to tend or to care for God’s people in some specific way. The opportunities abound - for service, for hope, for dreaming, for doing. Just like Peter sitting at the water’s edge, waiting and listening for what Jesus wants us to do next. Just like the community of John listening for God’s Word as they built the first century church. Here we sit. Here we wait. Here we wonder. Here we are called.

Listen. And you’ll hear the voice.

Christian. Disciple. Friend. Follower. Do you love me?

Yes, Lord, you know that we love you.

Beloved Child of God, do you love me?

Yes, Lord, you know that we love you.

Friends and members of First Presbyterian church, do you love me?

Yes, Lord, you know that we love you.

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

Jesus says, Follow me!