Do You Love Me?

 John 21:15-19 Kimby Young

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Today’s scripture passage from this last chapter of John is another story of an appearance of Jesus after the resurrection. Peter and several other disciples decided to go back to the fishing profession they once knew. Jesus meets them on the beach and calls them back to ministry. He tries to explain their new mission in the world when Jesus is no longer physically with them. 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. 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 or the Word 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. This tending can be given for the elderly, the young, the needy, the well off, those inside the church, those outside the church.

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, John did not mean this to be an individual commission. Even though it is spoken to Peter, it is meant for all Christians together. 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. And for our church specifically. 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 – at this time, in this place - how to feed and tend and care.

The key is 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 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.

Our church is poised on the brink of possibility and perhaps change. We have been given so much, we have been loved so wonderfully by God, and God has made us able to respond generously and joyfully. How are we called to feed and tend and care in the world?

Jesus says, 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!

John 21:15-19

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this Jesus said to him, “Follow me.”