

Do You Love Me?

John 21:15-17

Turn to John 21, the last chapter of the Gospel of John. Three times Jesus asked Peter if Peter loved him. Why did Jesus do that? By the third time, Peter was not enjoying this. Peter didn't know why Jesus kept asking the same question. Did Jesus not believe him? But Jesus was doing some important things with these questions, things that were good for Peter. Let's read the story.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

This story takes place after Jesus rose from the dead. It's a warm story. Seven of the disciples decided to go fishing. It was Peter's idea. They fished all night but caught nothing. Very early in the morning someone on the shore said they should put their nets in on the other side of the boat. They did this, and caught many large fish. 153. John counted.

Then they realized the person on the shore was Jesus, and Jesus had a fire going on the shore and he had breakfast already made, bread and fish. After fishing all night, what could be better than a warm fire and a hot breakfast? Jesus had it ready. So they had shore breakfast with Jesus. This story happens at the end of that shore breakfast. So it begins, "When they had finished eating."

Two Words for Love

In Greek, the story goes back and forth between two different words for "love," *agapō* and *filō*. This has been preached that way, with *agapō* being a superior godly love, and *filō* a lesser friendship love, or something like that. The English Bibles translate both of these as "love," and that is the right thing to do.

Translating them both as "love" is right because John's Gospel uses these two words interchangeably. They can both be godly love, and both can be a lesser love. Usually *agapō* is a godly love, but not always. In John 3 we read that people **love** darkness rather than light, *agapō*. That's not a godly love. In John 12, the Pharisees **loved** the glory of men more than the glory of God, *agapō*. That's not a godly love either.

And in John 5, the Father **loves** the Son, *filō*. There is no more godly love than that. In John 16, Jesus says, "The Father himself **loves** you because you **love** me, *filō* both times. When John talks about the beloved disciple, twice "beloved" is *agapō*, and once it is *filō*. They both mean "love."

In our text, Jesus uses two different words for being a shepherd, “feed” and “tend.” And he uses two different words for his people, “lambs” and “sheep.” But he’s not making a clear distinction between “feed” and “tend,” or between “lambs” and “sheep,” and it’s the same with the two words for “love.”

What the NT means by “love” does not come from any special Greek word, it comes from the story of what God the Father did for us, not sparing his Son but giving him up for us all; and from the story of what Jesus did for us, laying down his life for the sheep. That’s how we know what “love” is, from those stories, and there is no word in any language that means what those stories mean. We know what “love” from the stories.

Why Ask Peter Three Times?

Jesus asked Peter three times because Peter denied Jesus three times. Jesus was bringing Peter back in. We could not overstate what a serious thing Peter had done, denying Jesus repeatedly to save his own life. Earlier, Jesus said that whoever was ashamed of him in this evil generation, Jesus would be ashamed of that person when Jesus came with the Father’s holy angels. (Mark 8)

“Ashamed” is not feeling awkward when we speak of Jesus. Ashamed is what Peter did, refusing to say he belonged to Jesus. So when Jesus returns, Jesus will refuse to say that person belongs to him. Peter had done the one thing Jesus had said must not happen. In 2 Timothy 2, Paul wrote, “if we deny him, he will deny us.”

Peter had denied Jesus three times. It’s true that Peter immediately regretted what he’d done, but still, he had done it. And then Jesus was condemned and crucified. Peter surely understands that he has given away all right to be viewed as a disciple of Jesus. So Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loved him.

“Do you love me more than these?” That was the first question. Peter had said, “Even though everyone falls away, I will never fall away.” So Jesus is saying, “Peter, do you really love me more than these disciples love me?” Jesus is reminding Peter of his self-confidence, and in a sense Jesus is putting Peter in his place. Peter can no longer say he will do better than the others, so he does not. He just says, perhaps miserably, “Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus asked if Peter Loved Him.

Jesus could have asked, “Peter, will you stay with me?” Or: “Peter, will you die for me?” But he didn’t ask those things, because Peter can’t really say “yes” after what he’d done.

Jesus asked, “Peter, do you love me?” Jesus asks Peter a question that he knows Peter can answer with “Yes.” Peter might be afraid to say he will never fail again. But: does he love Jesus? Oh yes, Peter knows the answer to that, which Jesus knows.

Each time Jesus asks Peter, he uses Peter's full name: "Simon, son of John," three times. There is something formal about this conversation. Jesus is not just finding out about Peter's love, Jesus is almost commissioning him again.

Imagine Jesus coming to you, and naming you with your full name, first name and middle name and last name, and then asking you if you love him. You know something important is happening.

Peter Can Show that He Loves Jesus

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. For Jesus, Peter is not only still a disciple, he is to be a leader of the Lord's people, a shepherd of the Lord's people. Jesus calls Peter to be a pastor.

This is much like what Jesus said to Peter in Luke 22, when Jesus predicted Peter's denials. Jesus said, "Peter, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed that your faith will not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." Strengthen your brothers. There also, Jesus aims Peter at his other followers.

Great failure to live in the Lord's ways can turn into great service for the Lord. That does not always happen, but it is a real possibility. That was certainly Peter's story, and we have Peter's story so we will learn this. The failure is every bit as bad as we fear it is. But Jesus still said to Peter, "feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep."

I cannot talk about this story, without speaking of myself, because more than any other Scripture, this conversation with Peter has been my own call from the Lord to this church. In the early years, it felt painfully awkward. I already loved to study the Bible and bring that to the Lord's people. But Jesus asked Peter to shepherd the flock, and that was different, at least for me.

I told the Lord: "I'm just a sheep, and you know it. You want me to act like a shepherd? You want a sheep to walk on his hind legs? How will that work? A sheep will wear a cloak? Hold on to a staff? Sheep don't even have fingers. Is this what you are asking?" "Yes," he said, "that's pretty much it." Okay. But I tell you, people, whatever a natural is, I was not that. For the most part it is not awkward like that anymore, but it was at the start.

On the other hand, there was a kindness in this, because if I would do this, the Lord would know that I loved him. That's the best, it carried me then, and it still does.

Two Great Commands

Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" The *new* command is to love one another, but that's not the *first* command. The *first* command is always to love God, or in this case, to love the Lord. Our lives with each other flows out of our love for the Lord. We love him, and he aims us at one another.

Peter had done the worst thing possible, and he needed a way to show love and loyalty to Jesus. Jesus knew that Peter needed something as significant as his failure had been, something as important in the right direction as Peter's denials had been in the wrong direction. How will Peter *now* show his allegiance and devotion to the Lord. Much later, Peter will be executed because of Christ, but he needs something *now*.

Will it be his great role in preaching the gospel to the lost? No. What will Jesus ask of him? Jesus told Peter to take care of the other sheep, to watch over the Lord's other followers. "Peter, take care of my people, feed them and tend them, guard them and watch over them."

Peter will have many chances to regret his triple denial of Jesus. But from now on, he will always have this follow up conversation to fall back on. Peter has an ongoing way to show that he loves Jesus very much, a way that Jesus gave him specifically to overturn his failure.

The Other Disciples Need to Hear This

The other disciples need to hear that Jesus still wants Peter to be a shepherd of the sheep. Some months before this, Jesus asked the disciples, "who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." And Jesus said that Peter was blessed, and he said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." We know from Acts that in the early years of the church, Peter was the central preacher and central leader. Peter was the rock that got the church going.

But this story in John is before the stories in Acts. These disciples heard Jesus say, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." But since Jesus said that, Peter denied the Lord three times. They understood that this was a moment of weakness in Peter, and that Jesus was accepting Peter as one of the disciples.

But still, they must have wondered, "Will the Lord change his mind about Peter being at the center of things, the rock on which the Lord begins his church? Will the Lord change his mind about Peter, and choose someone else?" Remember, after the Last Supper, these men were sitting around arguing with each other about who was greatest. They thought about these things.

The other disciples at this breakfast need to hear that three times Jesus told Peter to be a shepherd of the sheep. They need to be able to put to rest an understandable doubt about Peter. This was good for them.

When Peter said that Jesus was the Christ, in Matthew 16, Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of John, for the Father revealed this to you." And now, when Jesus asks Peter about his love, he uses "Simon son of John" all three times. Except for when Jesus first called Peter, these are the only times Jesus called Peter by his full name, "Simon, son of John." Perhaps, just perhaps, Jesus meant to be confirming what he said in Matthew 16 about Peter being the rock.

Under pressure, Peter denied the Lord three times. In the teaching of Jesus, that was about the worst thing a follower could do. And then at the end of Acts 1, after Jesus ascended, when the 120 believers chose a replacement for Judas, Peter led the meeting. How did that happen, how did Peter go so quickly from being a denier to a leader?

Of this we can be sure: that would not have happened, Peter would not have been the leader from the beginning of Acts, unless Jesus had somehow made clear to the other apostles that Peter was to have that role. The others understood that to be the Lord's choice.

Again, Where did Jesus Aim Peter?

What I hope you get here is that after Peter's dismal failure to live up to the Lord's standards and even to live up to his own standards, Jesus asked Peter for something that would prove his love for Jesus, show his loyalty and dedication. Jesus did not point Peter to anything in the lost and needy world, or to anything private. Jesus pointed Peter at his other followers.

This is much like what we saw in John 13-15. "If you love me, keep my commands. And this is my command, that you love one another as I have loved you."

This little conversation with Peter is at the end of John, and that is not accidental. This is not just about Jesus and Peter, this is the last call of the Gospel of John. We are not all called to be shepherds, but we all love this Lord, and he leads us all toward his lambs and sheep.

For every one of us, there are a hundred things we cannot do for the other lambs and sheep. Others can do those things, we just can't, not right now anyway. Never mind the one hundred things others do that you cannot do. Forget them.

You and I *are* doing things for the lambs and the sheep, and we *are* doing these things because we love the Lord. Take some personal inventory. What do you do for his other lambs and sheep because you love the Lord? Put these at the center of your love for Jesus. And we need to know that when we do these things, he feels loved! Take some joy in that. He does.

PRAYER: Lord, do we love you? Yes we do. Point us to your lambs and sheep. Thank you for the ways you've given us to show our love for you by serving them. Thank you for how you've already walked us into this. Keep leading us in the right path. And Lord, thank you for your kindness to Peter. Thank you that his great failure did not mean he was ruled out of serving you and showing great love for you. His story helps us and encourages us. Thank you for praying that his faith would not fail. Do that for us as well. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.