

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
April 18, 2010

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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John 21:1-19

He said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" . . . (Peter) said to him, "Lord you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

(John 21:17-18 N.R.S.V.)

Do You Love Me?

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

Two young lovers were talking on the phone. He said, "I love you so much I would swim across shark infested waters to get to you. I would climb the highest mountain to get a wild rose to place in your hair. I would cross the burning desert to get you a drink of cool water."

"Oh, George," she gushed, "That is so sweet! Are you coming over to see me tonight?"

"Probably not," he admitted, "It looks like it might rain."

The proof of our love is not in flowery speeches, nor is it in warm fuzzy feelings, the proof of our love is in our actions. It has always been that way.

In our lesson from John 21 Jesus challenges the disciples, especially Peter, to live out the love that he says he has. In some ways this is Peter's chance to redeem himself. While he was warming himself at a charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter three times denied that he knew Jesus. He had said that he was willing to die for the master. But when push came to shove, Peter failed.

If you remember the story, Jesus was inside being interrogated by the high priest. These people weren't kidding around, someone was going to die before this was over, you could feel it in the air. And Peter was scared. So when different bystanders commented idly, "Hey aren't you one of Jesus' followers?," Peter denied it.

Now he is beside another charcoal fire. This time Jesus is cooking breakfast for them. And Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Each time Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And Jesus replies, "Then feed my sheep."

In other words, Jesus says, don't just say you love me. He says, live it out. In particular, this command is not only to Peter, it is to the church. It is Jesus' charge to the church. "Feed my sheep." It is related to the command that Jesus gives the disciples at the end of Matthew. "Go therefore and

make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

The command is not only to the church but also to us as individuals. If we truly love our Lord we will show it by passing on the faith to the next generation. We will show our love by teaching others about Christ, about salvation, about discipleship.

I want you to notice that Jesus doesn't say anything about generating warm, fuzzy feelings toward others. He says show your love for me by teaching others, and he gave a particular emphasis to teaching the young. “Feed my lambs.”

Many people in our society, especially many men, have a mistaken idea about what the church is about, and what Christianity is about. I had one man say to me, “I don't really do church. My wife does that for my family.”

The idea seemed to be that what we do in church is somehow unmanly. Nothing could be further from the truth. I really appreciate the efforts of the Promise Keepers Association in this area. The Promise Keepers are reminding men that we show our love by keeping our promises. It takes courage, conviction, and effort to keep our promises. In love we keep the promises that we made to our wife when we got married, to God when we joined the church, and to our children as we care for them. Being a Promise Keeper is a very manly thing to do, it is also a very loving thing to do.

In our text for today, Jesus is blunt. If you love me, feed my sheep. If we love Jesus, we will want to be involved in the work of the church, especially in the teaching and making of disciples, because that is how we feed the sheep of our Lord. But somehow that message has been lost.

One pastor tells about talking to a young man at a rock concert. The young man was a self proclaimed “Jesus freak.” “It is all about Jesus,” he said.

“So you really love Jesus?” asked the Pastor.

“Love him? I would die for him!” said the young man.

“I see,” said the pastor, “Where do you go to church?”

“Oh, I don't go to church. Too boring!”

I found that very interesting. He was willing to die for Jesus, but he was not willing to be bored for him. Am I stretching the point?

Look, preachers and worship leaders need to do everything we can to make worship as exciting and as engaging as we can. But sometimes it is going to be a bit boring. It just is. Do you love the Lord enough to participate in church anyway?

I'm reminded of when I used to play basketball in high school. Some of the players would complain about coming to practice. All of the exercise was boring. And it was. So what, that was no excuse to skip practice. Because everybody knew that without the practice, we could not play our best.

Sometimes worship and Bible Study can be boring. Instead of letting that be your excuse for dropping out, will you love Jesus enough to work through that, and to be involved yourself in feeding the Lord's sheep? I want you to notice that Jesus never said to Peter. If you love me, you will make sure you are getting fed. He said, if you love me, you will feed my sheep.

Let me push this just a bit more. One of the major criticisms of the modern church is that what we do is no longer relevant. There is some truth to that criticism, since the church has a bad habit of holding on to traditions even when they are no longer helpful. Sometimes we do things simply because we have always done things that way.

Still the greater truth is that this criticism of relevance can easily be but another excuse to let people off the hook. It is true that we need to do everything we can to make the church a place where people expect to encounter the risen Lord. At the same time, there is a great deal of information that needs to be passed on, and that information can sometimes seem rather dry. Learning theology and proper faith behavior can be tough going.

I was really helped in this area by a little piece from C.S. Lewis. Lewis writes about talking to an old, hard bitten army officer. The officer said, "I believe in God. I have encountered him when I was out in the desert by myself. And that is exactly why I have no use for all of your neat little teachings on Christianity. I have encountered the real thing."

Lewis admits that likely the officer did have a real experience of God out in the desert. But then he adds that doesn't make the teachings of Christianity useless. In comparison, he says, a map of the Atlantic Ocean does not compare with the experience of actually standing on the beach watching the waves roll in. Standing on the beach you experience the real thing, while the map is only a bit of colored paper.

On the other hand, he goes on, the map though less real itself is based on the very real experiences of thousands of people who have not only stood on the beach, but have also sailed to various parts of the ocean. As long as all you want to do is stand on the beach and watch the waves, that will always be more interesting than a map. However if you want to get to sail across the ocean from England to America, you had better have a map.

Sometimes the teaching of Christianity, the helping people to get a sound theological understanding for their faith is dry going. But it is necessary and helpful for those who want to fully live their faith. The question is not just about whether we love Jesus enough to push through some of that dry stuff for ourselves. The question becomes, "Do we love Jesus enough to keep feeding the sheep when all they want to do is baa about the feed being dry?"

I once knew a rather talented Sunday School teacher who quit teaching because he overheard one of his teenagers say that he was boring. In actual fact, that particular teenager would likely have said that no matter who was teaching. Every great teacher has been called boring at one time or another.

There are far worse things. The great teachers are not defeated by that. They ask God's help to do better and they press on.

How much do we love Jesus?

Jesus said if you love me, show it, feed my sheep. That is a large part of what we do as a church. It is also what we do as parents. Today Robert and Lindsey are bringing their son, Anderson to be baptized. They are joyfully claiming the promises of God for their son, and they are also promising that they will see that Anderson is spiritually fed. And we will promise as a congregation to help them fulfill that promise. We will do so because we love the Lord and because we love them, and because we love Anderson.

Jesus said, "Do you love me." "Yes, Lord, you know that we do!" Then, "Feed my lambs."

Let us think on these things.

Amen.