



# *Love in the Present World*

*John 21:15-25*

1. What does it mean for us to love Jesus? How can we live out that love in our present world?
2. The sermon will end with all of us, me included, reaffirming our love for Jesus.

Last week we heard about the risen Jesus meeting with most of the disciples on the shore of the sea of Galilee, described in the first part of John 21. We reflected on what the miracle of the fish and the net can teach us about what all of Jesus' followers are called to do. This week we are finishing up John 21 – the last chapter of John's gospel.

Remember last week, when Peter jumped in the water and swam to shore when he realized that it was Jesus standing on the shore and calling out to them? We didn't get to hear what Jesus and Peter said to each other, while the rest of the disciples were bringing the boat to shore, and towing the fish behind them. It must have been a private conversation, not intended for the other disciples to hear. Well, this week, we do get to hear conversation between Jesus and Peter – a conversation that makes Jesus' call, and Peter's role, clear to everyone.

SLIDES 2-XX

Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from John, chapter 21, vv. 15-25.

<sup>15</sup> 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.”

<sup>16</sup> Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” <sup>19</sup> Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

<sup>20</sup> Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is going to betray you?”) <sup>21</sup> When Peter saw him, he asked, “Lord, what about him?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” <sup>23</sup> Because of this, the rumor spread among the believers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?”

<sup>24</sup> This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.

<sup>25</sup> Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

Here ends the reading of God’s holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

So here’s a question: How many times did Simon Peter deny Jesus on the night of Jesus’ arrest?

So why do you think Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, whether he loves him? In front of the other disciples? Sure, it’s to reinstate Peter as the leader. When Peter denied Jesus, he lost his right to

lead the others. So he had to be reinstated while the risen Jesus was still on earth to do it. There was an organizational necessity to transfer leadership.

And: There was also a lot more to Jesus' questions than just leadership transfer. The first question Jesus asked was, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" 'Truly love me' – in the original Greek, the word is a variant of agape, which is a special kind of love. Agape is the love that God has for us, as in, "For God so LOVED the world that he gave his one and only Son." By the power of the Holy Spirit, the love that God has for us can also be the love we have for God. And, by the power of the Holy Spirit, agape can also be the love we have for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus is asking Peter if the love he feels is THAT kind of love.

And: Jesus is also asking Peter if he loves him "more than these". What does that mean? Does Jesus mean, "Peter, do you love me more than these other disciples do?" Probably not. Because, how would Peter know how much or how little the other disciples also love Jesus? How could he accurately compare himself with the others? Well, he can't. And besides, Jesus knew them all far better than they knew themselves, anyway!

So when Jesus says, "more than these", he means, "more than your friends, your boat, your previous life - all of it". He means, "Do you love me more than anything else?" And Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

And Jesus replies, "Feed my lambs." Take care of my lambs, Peter. They are just babies in the faith, and they need someone to feed them and take care of them. I'm telling you to do that, out of love for me.

Jesus asks a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?" Peter answers again, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And he asks a third time: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?". Peter doesn't quite get that he's being publicly forgiven for his three denials. So he feels hurt that Jesus asked him AGAIN. And he says, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Which is quite true. Jesus does know all things. Which is why he is repeating the question for the sake of ALL the disciples, as well as for Peter. The other disciples need to be reassured too.

#### SLIDE OF PICTURE WITH SHEEP

Peter's new life as head of the church isn't going to be easy. Sheep need more care than we might think. They need shelter with at least 3 sides; air circulation; shade; protection; a large pasture with edible plants; fresh water; dry ground; proper care and trimming of their hoofs at least once a year; flea and tick prevention; deworming; assistance at lambing time; and shearing at least once a year whether you want the wool or not. Jesus' people are not literally sheep; but like sheep, we do require a lot of care.

And in addition to his pastoral duties of taking care of Jesus' sheep, Peter will also face opposition. Jesus warns him about that, when he says, "When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." To put Jesus' words a little

more bluntly: “You will die by crucifixion.” And then he says, “Follow me.” Peter must have loved Jesus very much, to have followed him anyway.

That’s what love for Jesus meant back then – following him and obeying him. And love FOR Jesus was made possible by the love OF Jesus. All the disciples had felt Jesus’ love for them, as something so overwhelming that they could not ignore it. They’d heard Jesus telling them how much he loved them, and how much God loved them through him. They’d seen Jesus go to the cross out of love for them and for everyone. Because they had heard and seen and felt Jesus’ love for them, they could love Jesus enough to follow him anywhere. Because they knew the love OF Jesus, they were willing to obey him in everything – whatever he asked. Because Jesus’ love flowed into them, his love could also flow out from them.

What does love for Jesus mean now, for us, today, in this present world? Well, one thing that’s different, is that we here at West Valley don’t have to worry about being beaten or executed for being a Christian, like Jesus’ first disciples did. As Americans, we are used to having freedom of religion. That wasn’t the case anywhere in Jesus’ day; and still is not the case in many other countries even today.

Like Iran, for example. Our ECO denomination just sent out an email welcoming the Rev. Mehrdad Sajadi as a Christian pastor in the Persian Diaspora Partnerships. He was born in Iran, raised as a Muslim, and came to faith while still in Iran. He was serving as a non-ordained underground church leader when the Iranian police came and arrested him. He was sent to prison. For months, he shared his cell with 70 other men; the guards, plus most of the inmates, persecuted him terribly. He said that he prayed, “Why, God, did you allow this to happen? Why are you silent with me in this time?” During this dark time of persecution, what kept him going was a Bible which was disguised as a Quran that he had brought into his cell. Eventually some of the other prisoners became Christians too. Today he serves Persian men and women living in diaspora in Munich, Germany. He says, “I help refugees adjust to their new way of living, answer their difficult questions, pray with them, and serve their emotional and practical needs.” In Germany, he can share his faith openly, which he couldn’t do in Iran; and many Iranian refugees are becoming Christians as a result. And as Americans, we also can share our faith openly. That isn’t going to get us arrested or sent to prison.

There are many differences between Jesus’ world and our present world. But one thing that’s the same is the way our love for Jesus is made possible. 2000 years ago, Jesus’ love for his disciples made it possible for them to love him, obey him and follow him. That has not changed one bit. Jesus loves each and every one of us, so much! It doesn’t matter if our backgrounds are different! Maybe you grew up in a Christian household, and you’ve always known how much Jesus loves you. Or maybe, like me, you didn’t grow up in a Christian household, and you learned about Jesus in other ways. In my case, God worked through dreams, study, prayer, and the preaching I did for Unitarians, to introduce me to Jesus. But it doesn’t matter how or when we learned about Jesus; it only matters that we did. And once we belong to Jesus, his love pours into us, more and more, day by day – when we read Scripture, or when we talk about Jesus with other believers, or when we worship, or when we pray. We become saturated with Jesus’ love. And it just oozes out of us.

Jesus' love for us is active. Jesus' love calls forth our love in response. That's what we saw in Peter and the other disciples in today's passage. That's what we see today in our brothers and sisters who are reaching out to others in Jesus' name, like Mehrdad Sajadi. And that's also what we see when we look around in this church. Take a minute. Look around. Who do you see? We see people who organize Operation Shoebox every year. We see people who care enough about safety that they spend hours putting in a new staircase to the sanctuary attic. We see people who work on the tech teams so that others can worship, both in the sanctuary and online. We see people who teach Sunday School and Bible studies, drive people to church, maintain the puzzle exchange, welcome people who come for the symphony, feed the hungry, and visit the sick and lonely. We see people who can be annoying sometimes, but we're willing to work with them anyway. We see people who are willing to take big risks for the sake of younger people who may have never even heard of Jesus. We see people who do love Jesus, and are doing their best to obey him and follow him, in response to his love for them.

Jesus does love you. Each and every one of you. He gave his life for you, and rose from the dead for you, and reigns in heaven for you, and prays for you. Do you love Jesus in return?

Do you love Jesus? Then feed his lambs. Do you love Jesus? Then feed his sheep. Do you love Jesus? Then take care of his sheep. And follow him. Let's pray.

Lord our God, we are here. We are here because you love us and have drawn us to yourself. We are here because you have redeemed us and you delight in us. What would you have us do in response? May our voices speak your praise; may our actions show forth your love to everyone around us; and may our lives conform to the life of Jesus our Savior. For it is in his name that we pray. Amen.