

“Feed My Sheep”  
Based on John 21:1-19  
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Cape May Presbyterian Church  
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“Do you love me?” Jesus asks Peter the question three times. It’s clearly painful for Peter to have to keep answering, painful for him to be asked three times, as though there might be some doubt, as though Jesus doesn’t entirely believe him. And each time, when Peter answers yes, Jesus tells him, essentially, that’s not good enough. Do you love me, he asks Peter and when Peter answers yes, Jesus essentially tells him--prove it. Feed my sheep.

The next ten minutes could be a sermon about what Jesus means when he says, “Feed my sheep.” Clearly, he is talking to us as well as the wayward disciple, Peter. It’s our job, to feed his sheep, his lambs. Literally to feed—through our support of the food closet, Family Promise, Lazarus House, and Branches, among others. Literally to feed in the cooking of a million hot dogs and quarts of soup, and dozens of cookies, brownies, cheesecakes, biscotti, quiche, and either streudel or streusel no one was quite sure which, to be sold for the work of the church, and in the carting of the leftover packages of uncooked hot dogs to Lazarus House to be put in the grocery bags of hungry people. Literally to feed in the cooking of casseroles and soup and cookies for the deacons’ supply, to give to whoever needs not to have to worry about a meal or two today. Feeding the sheep very often means literally feeding people. And of course, it also means feeding the heart and mind and soul—with fellowship and warmth, with sympathy and music and art, with prayer shawls and phone calls and God willing, with hugs. This *isn’t* a sermon about what it means to feed my sheep, because I think you already know.

This is a sermon about why the question, “do you love me?” is followed by the command, “feed my sheep.” Love, Jesus is saying, is not love if it is not expressed. If that seems wrong to you, just imagine loving a baby without ever feeding or smiling at, talking nonsense to or even holding that child—you cannot imagine it, because love for an infant means care, it means action, it is expressed in diaper changes and lullabies and spoonfuls of pureed sweet potatoes—and if it is not so expressed, it doesn’t rise to the level of love.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Between services, one of our choir members reminded me of these Oscar Hammerstein lyrics, from *The Sound of Music*: “A bell is no bell till you ring it,/A song is no song till you sing it,/And love in your heart/Wasn’t put there to stay/Love isn’t love/Till you give it away.” Couldn’t have said it better!

Loving Jesus is like that too. As the apostle Paul reminds us, “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”. Love of Jesus is known in what it does for the neighbor, the stranger, the grieving, the lost. In fact, love isn’t only *known* in these things; it *happens* in these things. Love for Jesus is both a deep, spiritual focus and a lot of loving, compassionate, action.

I’m leading our intro to Presbyterianism this morning, so maybe that’s why I want to be clear that I’m not talking about salvation through works. It might seem to go against our good Presbyterian grain, to have to prove our love to Jesus in deeds. Aren’t we saved by God’s grace alone? Absolutely! We are not earning anything in loving action. God gives forgiveness, mercy, and embrace *freely*, exactly as God wills and not according to any system of merits and demerits. What we’re talking about it not how we get to be loved. It’s about how we love in return.

Jesus asks Peter repeatedly, “do you love me?” To the point where we’re told Peter is hurt to be asked. But as many Bible readers have noted, Peter also *denied* Jesus repeatedly. Three times, to be specific, the same number of times Jesus asks his piercing question, do you love me? And the same number of times Jesus tells Peter what he must do: feed my sheep.

Part of the reason, it seems, that Jesus asks Peter to prove his love, to do something, to feed his sheep, is because of what Peter has *failed* to in the past. In the past when Peter didn’t entirely get it, when he genuinely wasn’t ready or able to give up his life in order to save it. In the moments when Peter was busy denying Jesus he was very clearly choosing, rather, to save his own life, no matter the cost to his soul.

I’m not sure that Jesus is asking Peter to atone for his past sins. Though maybe that would not be such a bad thing, because it would mean that we are called to actively love more, because of the moments in our past when we have failed to love. It would mean that we are called to love more in proportion to our failures to love in the past. But again, we do not earn God’s forgiveness; we don’t have to. We are forgiven, when we ask to be forgiven. When we confess, when we see the ways in which we have denied who Jesus is, what Jesus calls us to do, when we articulate our own unloving actions, then God freely forgives. We don’t do good to make up for having done wrong. But we also don’t do good with a smug sense of what fabulously good people we are.

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Despite the oddly perfect presence of the anonymous “beloved disciple” in John’s gospel, Peter remains the ultimate disciple, the one we identify with, the one who seems to represent all the disciples, including us. It’s his picture next to “disciple” in the dictionary. And for Peter, there is this sense that he must work not to atone, but to restore the tears in his broken relationship with the Lord. He does not go out to preach and heal because he is super-disciple, gifted with the holy spirit at Pentecost. He is gifted because he knows what has been forgiven. He is dedicated to the gospel’s message of love because he knows what it is to forget that message, to live for himself, and he is heeding Jesus’ call not to go back there.

It's important to keep in mind that as followers of Jesus we do not give and do good because we are so whole and full of goodness that we overflow. That way of thinking reinforces an us and them mentality—we are whole, they are broken, we have, they lack; we are blessed, they are deprived. There is a disconnection with our neighbors in that way of thinking; it isn’t healthy for us, and it can be downright humiliating for those we serve. Compassion, if we go down that road, is replaced by pity—and no one has ever been lifted up or made whole by pity.

We give and do good to help heal the world’s brokenness because we remember our own experiences of brokenness. The Bible consistently uses this logic. Over and over in the Old Testament scripture reminds us that we are not to abuse the alien among us, that we are to treat the immigrant with dignity and not with fear or disgust, precisely because we remember what it is to be that alien.

Bob Marley was maybe the wisest pothead of all time, probably the only pothead I’ll ever quote from the pulpit. Bob Marley once said, “The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just got to find the ones worth suffering for.” The converse is true—we have to *become* the people who are worth suffering for. Knowing that we have hurt others—as individuals, and as a congregation and a community—knowing that we have broken trust and denied in our own words and actions who Jesus really is, we have to prove ourselves still worthy of the trust of those who need a friend.

Like Peter, like other imperfect beings, we will fail to live up to expectations, we will break promises. Like Peter, we will turn away at moments when we are profoundly needed. But we commit to actively loving Jesus today, to feeding the sheep, and to becoming people whom our neighbors can trust, despite our mistakes, to keep doing the active work of love.