

Sermon Series: Questions God Asks

Do You Love Me? – Jason Byassee
John 21:15-19

Boone UMC
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There is an old Methodist preacher joke pastors tell at moving time. “I’ll make all of you happy. Some when I come and some when I go.” Here’s a better joke. A parishioner is crying when the pastor is leaving. He says hey, “It’ll be ok; the bishop will send someone better than me.” And she says “That’s what they said last time!” It was hard news to deliver this week. So many of you I owed a personal word on this; I did get to tell some of you personally, and I felt like I was going around punching people that I love in the face. I just couldn’t keep doing it and had to stop. You’ve already been kind and gracious in response—thank you.

Forgive me if you’re a guest this week, we’re in Methodist land, I announced this week via letter and email that I’m leaving. In Methodism, bishops send preachers to where we serve, and Bishop Goodpaster appointed me to teach at Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia, Canada, and someone else will start here as Senior Minister July 1. We’ll have no long drawn out search process, no interim, things here don’t shut down till the next person comes. That’s magical in a way, it’s also really hard. I’d wanted to defy our old four year pattern and stay a long time, but in the strange logic of these things, we feel called elsewhere. It doesn’t really make sense financially or in terms of how well things are going here, it’s just where we feel led. The man who hired me in Vancouver also came from a vibrant church, his in Montreal, 1500 members, 75 joining in a year, and when he was hired the board said “Come teach us how to do that.” Boone Methodist, you’ve taught me things I want to help teach others. What hurts is how much I’ve grown to love you, and you’ve grown, despite my many flaws, to love me.

The story I’m about to read to you is about love. It’s part of our Lent and Easter series on Questions God Asks. You’ll notice the question for today in the text. Jesus remembers Peter’s three-time denial beside a charcoal fire the night of his trial. And look what Jesus does. Builds a little charcoal fire. Asks Peter *three times* if Peter loves him. He doesn’t just forgive Peter’s sin with a magic wand. He sets out a way for Peter’s sin to be rolled back up, atoned for, things done right this time. One thing good counseling can teach you is how to spot a trigger emotionally. Oh yeah, when this sort of thing happens, I tend to freak out this way. But wait, I’m an adult, I don’t have to react like a kid, I can react better. Imagine how Peter freaked out when he saw the fire, heard the three-time question, no wonder he’s hurt. But Jesus shows him hey, you can react not with betrayal, but with love. Let us stand and sing and turn and listen.

John 21:15-19

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread . . .
15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John do you

love me more than these?” He said, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” 16 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.” 17 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.” 18 Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and 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.” 19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God). After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, thanks be to God.

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? It’s a strange question Jesus asks. Rodney Duke, our terrific bible scholar, points out that Jesus asks Peter if he loves him three times but only the first time does he include “more than these.” This is one of those verses much fought over in church history, because it suggests Peter is in charge *more* than the other disciples, “more than these.” It’s the sort of verse that supports having a pope, so Catholics underline it, Protestants try to dodge it. We Protestants have said Jesus means Simon do you love me more than these. . . pieces of fishing equipment sitting here? But Jesus does seem to be asking Peter if he loves more than the others love. There is an order to love.

So we can ask ourselves, do we love Jesus more than we love anything else?

I shudder sometimes to think you can tell what someone loves by what we spend their money and attention on. It’s a cliché but still worth asking, if we were arrested for being Christian would there be enough evidence to convict? What in our lives shows our love for Jesus is greater than our other loves? I worry y’all will remember my love for Duke basketball more than my love for Jesus. Ouch. Let’s get away from that shall we and say something less convicting for me: CS Lewis argued that there are four words for love in the New Testament. They each depict something different.¹ *Storge* is the sort of love you have for an inanimate object or a dog. It’s the least important (sorry dog lovers) and should apply to, say, sports teams or teenage crushes. I remember in graduate school a friend talking about a third friend who was even more nerdy even than the rest of us. She said “I love him, with an undying never-ending love.” She should have patted him on the head. That’s *storge*. *Philia* is the sort of love we have for friends. A friend is half of your own soul, Jesus calls *us* friends. He calls our enemies friends too, but that’s another sermon. *Eros* is romantic love, erotic love, it’s a potent cocktail; it can make you stupid or more human. I met a widower once who was in his 90s and had been married 70 years. He said, “I met

¹ 1. *Storge*-affection 2. *Philia*-friendship 3. *Eros*-intimacy 4. *Agape*-Christlike sacrificial love.

that woman when she was 16, and I loved her every day.” When I tell that story to women they swoon—that’s real romantic love, eros the way God intends, full of faithfulness and beauty. Finally there’s *agape*. This is disinterested love, where we love without counting the cost with the love Christ has for each of us. Look here—love isn’t just a feeling. What Hollywood and our culture depict is usually sentimentality or lust, feelings or hormones. But no, love is a choice. Sure, feelings are powerful, *and* they have to be harnessed for Jesus. Love can be ranked. Lewis says *agape* is the most important. Scholars are less sure these are so tidily divided, and I think friendship and erotic love are also important for describing our love for Jesus. He calls us friends, his bride is the church. Here’s the point: love has degrees in it, rank higher or lower, lesser and more intense. And our greatest love, our most intense, the one we walk in front of the train for, do something foolish for, throw all our creativity into, should be for Jesus. Do you love him more than anything else?

And here’s how we show love. Jesus tells us three times. Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep. Peter is hurt when he’s asked three times if he loves. It takes a while for Jesus’ creativity to dawn on all of us. Peter loves more than these others because he’s been forgiven more than these others. Christianity is not a contest of perfection. It’s a love contest. The ones forgiven most, love the most. People think faith is about being nice, pious, religious. Nope. It’s about forgiveness, which is hard as nails.² In 1939 Dorothy Sayers wrote this:

Whenever an average Christian is presented in a novel or a play, he is pretty sure to be practicing one or all of the Seven Deadly Virtues. . . Respectability, childishness, mental timidity, dullness, sentimentality, censoriousness, and depression of spirits.¹

Isn’t that how we’re thought of? Isn’t that sometimes how we are? As if Jesus died and rose so we could be judgmental? What if we showed the world instead who we are by how ferociously we love? We’ve had as our emphasis in leadership this year loving one another. I had hoped to work on getting our committees more efficient—we spend too much time in too many meetings and I worry we wear y’all out. One of you said “gave up on efficiency and went with love instead eh?” Sure enough, it’s hard to streamline complicated structures. But here’s the thing, would you church, rather have efficient leadership or loving? We should still get more efficient . . . N.T. Wright tells this story about what Jesus is doing with Peter. The Wrights had a friend over who clumsily cleaned up after dinner even when asked not to. As he banged around the table he accidentally smashed a precious crystal pitcher. The Wrights insisted it was ok, but they were heartbroken, it’d been in their family and was valuable and they loved it (*storge* love). The man fell over himself apologizing and left. Sometime later they had an idea. They invited him back over. And when dinner was done, they handed him a sponge. He looked at them. They smiled. They were giving him another chance. Saying we know there was hurt, and we trust you again.

We love you. So too, Jesus with us. Think of your most tender hurt. Your place that is most sore. Jesus wants to restore you right there. With a chance to feed, tend, and feed.

Jesus concludes this way:

³“When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and 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.”

This could mean simply when we're young we can get around relatively easily, but when we're old we struggle. I love watching y'all who have a harder time get to church, in wheelchairs, with canes or walkers. You show your love for God by the difficulty you press through. But Jesus may mean something more. “Stretch out your hands” is a technical term for crucifixion.⁴ According to tradition Peter was crucified upside down. He insisted he wasn't worthy to be crucified the way Jesus was. This is moving really. He isn't even worthy to be murdered as Jesus was. Yet he *was* killed like Jesus was. This was true of 11 of the 12 disciples who died violently far from Jerusalem presenting the gospel in love to new people. Our Last Supper play portrays so beautifully. The disciples presented Jesus again, differently this time, in their own bodies. And so should we. Our lives are also repetitions of Jesus' life. Differently this time, but the same life—*his*—over again.⁵ One spiritual writer says this: “There are no dittos in souls.” None. We are each singular, and so each of us presents Jesus all over again in our flesh. By how we walk, and talk, love and die and rise. ⁶CS Lewis said this, “One prayer God never answers is ‘encore’.” God always works uniquely in the shape of a cross and a resurrection. But never quite the exact same way twice.

Here's the thing as we think about love and God. God never loses anything good in his creation. Everything good in this creation God keeps, treasures, multiplies, makes perfect and better than we can imagine. When we love, genuinely love, that's never lost. I can promise you that. The temptation when love hurts is to bail and not risk loving again because it hurts too much. Some of you told me in your sadness over John leaving in 2011 you hesitated to get to know me. I get that. I suspect some of you will feel that with whoever follows me. Don't do it. Love even though it's risky. It's supposed to hurt. Jesus' cross is what love is. And here's the promise: resurrection. God loses none of the love we give. God treasures it, tends it, nurtures it, multiplies it, blesses it, breaks it, gives it away, far away. God loses none of it.

It was great fun having Leighton Ford here last week. Next week we have another terrific guest, Roger Scholtz, maybe the best Methodist preacher in South Africa. Among the highlights was Leighton saying this to us Christians:⁷ you can't sit both in the witness stand and the judgment

⁴ http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/03/Caravaggio-Crucifixion_of_Peter.jpg

⁵ Attributed to Baron von Hugel.

⁷ “You can't sit both in the witness stand and the judgment seat at the same time,” Leighton Ford

seat at the same time. Many times Christians act like the judge, this thing is evil! I condemn you! But our seat is in the witness stand. Only God judges. We say “Here’s what I’ve seen. Here’s what I think is true.” Another jewel was Leighton’s observation that our mission field is often the people we sit at table with. The little people in the car seats in the back seat. The elderly person who we spoon soup into their mouths. Our most important missional moments are those that require the most tender love. And people are difficult up close, we’re not always easy to love. Up close there are bodily fluids and short tempers and smells. We can be our worst selves in that vice of intimacy. And that’s our mission field, the place to be like Jesus, to encourage others to be like Jesus. Thomas Merton, monk of the last century, preaching on the great commission, said hey, Christianity is a mystery. We monks go into all the world baptizing, teaching as Jesus commands, but we do it by going nowhere, living right here at the monastery. That’s the mystery. Going and telling and being a missionary isn’t about frequent flyer miles. It’s about the heart. Loving like Jesus does right where we are. Whether you’re a monk, a stay at home mom, in the nursing home, or working yourself to the bone, Jesus’ command is to love ferociously *right where we are*. Think of the place where you most *don’t* want to love. Faculty meeting. Ugh. Budget conversations. Mercy. With the person whose head is on the pillow beside yours...or the person in the mirror. Love right where you are. It’ll change the world for the better.

And it’ll hurt. One thing I’ve noticed this week is that it’s good that it hurts that I’m going. It means I’ve loved, and you’ve loved, it’s far better than tennis clapping. Some of you have been Methodist a long time and know this is common. I had hoped to break that expectation, ministers *are* staying in place longer. But you’re not surprised. Others have come recently and you are surprised, even hurt. Some folks who’d just come when John left said, oh, *that’s* how Methodists do things? I’m out of here. Some never even visited when I got here or only came back once or twice. This is *why* Methodists move preachers, because the church is the community, not the preacher. Here’s what I want to encourage you to do friends. Love. When it’s hard. That is, *right now*. Because that’s when it matters. Stay close to one another. Serve one another, feed sheep and lambs. Look out for those who might wander off and keep them close. And keep reaching out to those outside us, especially the most vulnerable.

I confess that what we’re doing as a family doesn’t make the most sense to me. The church hasn’t been stronger in my time here than right now. John Thomas, wise former chancellor of Appalachian and leader here, said he thinks of changing jobs like being on the trapeze—let go when you’re on the upswing, if you let go on the down bad things happen. I confess to being nervous and afraid. But as someone wise said about calling, “Fear teaches what you must do.” Love includes trust. And I trust Boone Methodist you’re going to keep on the upswing. And here’s how to do it. By *loving like Jesus*. “Loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ.” That’s who we’ve been not just 150 years, but since God started fixing the mess we made in the Garden of Eden. And God will take every ounce of love we ever offer, gather it up, blow life into it, multiply it, break it, and give it away for those who don’t have enough.

Jesus asks each of us, do you love me? Do you? Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Our best life is to do just that always. Amen.

ⁱ Grateful to Beth Felker Jones for this.