

Questions God Asks: Do You Love Me?

Third Sunday of Easter; April 19 2015; Dave Rowe on sship & Grant Dean mish min
Boone Methodist; Jason Byassee

There's an old Methodist preacher joke 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 said "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 or on the phone, and I felt like I was going around punching people I love in the face. One of you said you'll be alright, and be ready to start criticizing the next preacher.

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 they'll serve, and Bishop Goodpaster will appoint me to teach at Vancouver School of Theology 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 that and stay a long time and 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 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." What hurts is how much I've grown to love you, and you've grown despite my many flaws to love me.

This story is about love and service. 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 the night of his trial by a charcoal fire. 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 his sin to be rolled back up, atoned for, done right this time. And this is the leader of the ancient church! One thing good counseling can teach you is how to spot a trigger. 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 felt when he saw the fire, heard the three-time question, no wonder he's annoyed. 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

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." 20 Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?" 21 When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" 22 Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" 23 So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?"

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, pointed out last Wednesday that Jesus asks Peter if he loves him three times but only one of those times does he include "more than these." This is one of those verses you'll be surprised to learn much fought over in church history. Because it suggests Peter is in charge more than the other disciples, "more than these."¹ 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 Simon do you love me more than these. . . pieces of fishing equipment sitting here? But no Jesus does seem to be asking Peter if he loves more than the others love, to be asserting a sort of ordering of love among the disciples.

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 they spend their money 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 sometimes worry as a minister y'all will remember my love for Duke basketball more than my love for Jesus. Ouch. We're all complicated creatures. Let's get away from that shall we and say something more professorial: CS Lewis argued that there are four words for love in the New Testament. They each depict something different.² *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. I remember in graduate school a friend talking about one of us who was more nerdy than the others. 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 another half of your own soul, Jesus calls us friends. He calls our enemies friends too, but that's another matter. *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 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. 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 depicts is usually sentimentality or lust. No, love is a choice. The feelings are powerful, and they have to be harnessed for Jesus. And love can be ranked. Lewis argues *agape* is the most important. Scholars are less sure these are so tidily divided, and I would argue friendship and erotic love are important for describing our love for Jesus. Here's the point: love has degrees in it, 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.

And here's how we show love. Jesus tells us three times. Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep. Peter's hurt when he's asked three times. 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. People think faith is about being nice, pious, religious. Nope. It's about forgiveness.³ 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

¹ <http://hist2615.wikispaces.com/file/view/Pope-Innocent-III.jpg/253796970/334x381/Pope-Innocent-III.jpg>

² Put these up one by one as I mention and leave them up please so by the end we have all 4 on screen: 1. *Storge*-affection 2. *Philia*-friendship 3. *Eros*-intimacy 4. *Agape*-Christlike sacrificial love.

³ Sayers quote on screen please

Isn't that how we're portrayed? Isn't that sometimes how we are? What if we showed the world instead who we are by how ferociously we love? We've had among our emphasis in our 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 . . . NT Wright tells this story about what Jesus is doing with Peter. The Wrights had a friend over who clumsily insisted on cleaning up after dinner even when asked not to. As he prodded around the table he smashed a precious vase. The Wrights insisted it was ok but they were heartbroken, it'd been in their family. 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 towel. 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 sorest place. Jesus wants to restore you right there.

Jesus concludes this way:

⁴when 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 as we please but when we're old we struggle. I love watching y'all who have a harder time get to church, in wheelchairs, with canes. You show your love for God by the difficulty you press through. But it may mean something more. “Stretch out your hands” is a technical term for crucifixion.⁵ 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 killed 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, as our Last Supper play portrays so beautifully. They presented Jesus again, differently this time, in their own flesh. And so should we. Our lives are also repetitions of Jesus' life. Differently this time, but the same life, over again.⁶ 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.⁷ CS Lewis said this, “One prayer God never answers is ‘encore’.” God always works marvelously. In a cross and resurrection shape. But never the same way twice.

Here's the thing as we think about love and God. God never loses anything of his creation. Everything good in this creation God keeps, treasures, multiplies, makes perfect and better than we can imagine. When we love right that's never lost. I promise you. Everything that's lost will be found. Everything.

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 is Leighton saying this to his fellow evangelicals:⁸ you can't sit both in the witness stand and the judgment seat at the same time. Many times Christians act like the judge, this thing is evil! I condemn you! But we sit in the witness stand. Here's what I've seen. It's God's job to judge, not ours. Another that one of you shared with me was his 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 hardest moments are those that

⁴ 21:18 on screen plz

⁵ http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/03/Caravaggio-Crucifixion_of_Peter.jpg

⁶ Quote on screen plz attributed to Baron von Hugel.

⁷ This too

⁸ “You can't sit both in the witness stand and the judgment seat at the same time,” Leighton Ford

require the most tender love. People are difficult up close, we're not always beautiful. 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, but we do it by going nowhere, from right here at the monastery. Going and telling and being a missionary isn't about frequent flyer miles. It might be 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. Faculty meeting. Ugh. Budget conversations. Mercy. With the person in 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 to hurt 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'd hoped to break that expectation, ministers are staying in place longer. But you're not surprised. Others have come recently and you are surprised, heart broken. Some folks who'd just come when John left said, oh, that's how Methodists do things? I'm out of here. Some never visited when I got here or only came back once or twice. 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.

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 App and leader here, said he thinks of changing jobs like trapeze artists—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. And he 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. Feed my lambs. And our best life is to do just that always. Amen.

ⁱ Grateful to Beth Felker Jones for this.