



Sermon, Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

“Do You Love Me?” by Pastor Paul

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 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 to him, “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 to 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.”

Introduction: From Fear and Despair to Hope and Expectation

Today is Easter Day. Let us greet each other with “**Happy Easter**”. Today's text from the Gospel of John, is about Jesus appearing to seven disciples, including Peter, after the resurrection. It contains a conversation between Jesus and Peter. How did Peter and Jesus' other disciples, who fled in fear before Jesus' death on the cross, become bold apostles? What exactly happened to them? What does it mean for Christians to move from discipleship to apostleship, from learning to practice?

We can read from the Book of Acts that those Jesus followers boldly proclaimed the Gospel of the resurrected Christ to a multitude of people including a newly converted Gentile family and even to their persecutors. Of course, there was the day of Pentecost when they received the Holy Spirit just as Jesus promised before his ascension back to heaven. With God's Spirit of wisdom and power, they could join God's mission of transforming the world by proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and by doing great wonders and signs among the people. However, before that day of baptism by the Spirit, what did really happen to change their fear and despair into hope and expectation? Today's text gives us deep inspiration on this question.

Body: Story of recovery and healing

Today, we read the story of Jesus and Peter from the Gospel of John. It is a part of the epilogue or appendix of the Book as the author already concluded the gospel story with the purpose of his writing in the previous chapter. “**These are written,**” the apostle says, “**so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name**” (John 20:31). It probably was the same purpose for all gospel writers; by reading the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God and have life, a new and everlasting life, in his name. The resurrection of Jesus is already narrated, and the resurrected Jesus already appeared to the disciples with his message of peace and his command to receive the Holy Spirit. Then what does it matter for us to read today's story from the epilogue of the Book?

Many people would think that this story is not that important as it is just a part of an epilogue. It is a supplement after the most important event of resurrection. However, we may consider this epilogue differently. The gospel writer or his followers must have added this set of epilogues for some reason. I believe this short



story of Jesus and Peter explains the most dramatic change in the disciple's heart and mind and life. Before the disciples of Jesus began the church by proclaiming the good news of the risen Lord, before they received the Holy Spirit of wisdom and power for such a mission of transformation, they experienced the greatest change in their lives by encountering Jesus again. I think today's story of the resurrected Christ and Peter is the best example for that change.

Some English translations of the Bible have added a subtitle for today's passage as **"Peter's Restoration"** or **"Jesus Reinstates Peter."** It is a story of restoration, and at the very core of this story, we have Jesus' question of love; **"Do you love me?"** Our love for Jesus can be the key to our restoration and change for a new life. Jesus keeps asking Peter, **"Do you love me?"** At this point, we may ask a question; **"What is this love that Jesus is talking about?"**

What is your definition of love? Love is probably the most abused word in different relationships even in the church. Many people say love for different objects and occasions, but they do not give much thought to what love is and what love does to them and to others. What is love? What does love do? If you study the original Greek language for the New Testament, you can see that those writers sometimes used different words for the same concept. As we are about to discuss love from today's passage, we need to remind ourselves of two Greek words for love: *philia* and *agape*. ***Philia* stands for brotherly love or friendship, while *agape* is used for charitable or self-giving love.** Although it was the least common word for love in the Hellenistic world, *agape* was the principal and most commendable love for the New Testament writers as they mainly used it to designate the unmerited love of God for us. Both Jesus and Peter say love in today's passage. **Which love that they are talking about?**

We have repeated questions and answers here. Jesus asks, **"Do you love me?"** Then Peter answers, **"You know that I love you."** Jesus keeps asking the same question three times. The gospel writer says that Peter felt hurt when Jesus asked the third time. We may need to know what made Peter hurt. Who was Peter?

Jesus earlier gave his disciples **the new commandment of love** before he was going through the passion and death. **"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another"** (John 13:34b). Then it was Peter who answered, **"Lord, where are you going? ... I will lay down my life for you"** (John 13:36-37). Jesus said it was not Peter's time to follow him, but rather he predicted that Peter would deny him three times. As Jesus said, Peter denied him for three times while Jesus was questioned by the high priest before the crucifixion. He did so as he thought that he would get caught and killed just like his teacher. Now, the teacher is standing before him again and asks if this disciple loves him. When Jesus asks this same question three times it might have been to remind Peter of his three times of denial. That should make him hurt.

Now, let us go a little deeper into their conversation. We already talked about different love words that the New Testament writers used. Of course, the actual conversation between Jesus and Peter should be made in Aramaic not in Greek. **But I want to believe that the gospel writer used different Greek words here for a specific reason.** Jesus asks Peter for the first and second times using *agape*, **"Simon, son of John, do you love me (*agapas me*)?"** He might be asking if Peter loves him as much as he loves Peter, to the point that he sacrificed himself. Peter answers for the first- and second times using *philia*, **"Yes, Lord; you know (you see or perceive / *su oidas*) that I love you (*philo se*)."** Although he answered yes, Peter might feel a little hesitant. Peter loves Jesus, but he also admits that it is just his friendship for his teacher. **He cannot love Jesus just as Jesus did for him.**

Do you remember the new commandment? It still is not time for Peter to love just as Jesus loved him. And now, Jesus asks for the third time changing the word for *agape* to *philia*, **"Simon, son of John, do you love me (*phileis me*)?"** This third question of Jesus sounds like this to me, **"Well, you keep answering that your love is friendship. Do you really love me even as a friend?"** Peter felt hurt at this third question. What would you answer if you were Peter? Peter ashamedly gives the same answer to Jesus, **"You know (you come to know [by experience] or understand / *su ginoskeis*) that I love you [as a friend]."**



Peter might have collapsed with a mixed feeling: the feeling of fear, sorrow, and shame. How does Jesus answer him back? Jesus could rebuke Peter for his lack of faith and courage. Jesus could just ask, “Why did you deny me?” or “Why did you run away?” **However, Jesus keeps inviting Peter to join his *agape* love; “Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep.”** Jesus entrusts Peter with his own flock calling Peter for the greatest love that he already showed on the cross.

Jesus once taught again his disciples with his [new] commandment, **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12-14).** The word for love in this teaching is *agape*. It is the greatest love that Jesus already achieved by laying down his life for his disciples, for his friends. It is the greatest love that transforms a relationship. It is the greatest love that restores the hearts of the fallen and broken. It is the best way for us to love Jesus by loving one another and others selflessly.

Jesus then foretells Peter’s death by which he would glorify God. **“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” (v.18).** The tradition of the church tells us that Peter was martyred by crucifixion at Rome, but he was hanging upside down as he felt unworthy of dying in the same manner as his teacher.

Before Jesus gave his disciples the new commandment, he first showed it by washing their feet. John narrates that **“He [Jesus] loved (*egapesen*) them [his own disciples] to the end” (John 13:1).** When he washed their feet, Jesus told Peter, **“You do not know (*ouk oidas*) now what I am doing, but later you will understand (*gnose*)” (John 13:7).** As the one who knows and understands Peter’s mere friendship, the Lord is about to call this disciple again with a mission of love. Now, it is time for Peter to understand that love of the Lord.

After all this conversation, Jesus calls Peter, **“Follow me.”** Now it is time for this disciple to follow his teacher, understanding the greatest love according to the Lord’s new commandment. It is the first calling of the resurrected Jesus for his dispirited disciple to be a bold apostle. I believe Peter gladly followed the risen Lord with new hope, new strength, new life, and new love, even to the point of his own death on the cross. **How would you answer when Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” What would you do when Jesus calls, “Follow me”?**

Conclusion: Are you ready to follow Jesus in this call of love?

Now let’s summarize today’s message. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! With our faith in the crucified Lord, we have been transformed in our relationship to God and in our own selves by the charitable, self-less love of Christ. We have already experienced justification and new birth through God’s saving grace in Christ.

Now, the resurrected Lord calls us to follow by understanding his greatest love, to love and tend his own beloved just as he has done for all and each of us. Just as he did for Peter, this risen Lord sends us out into the world again with the mission of *agape* love, with his new commandment.

Now, it is time for us to understand the mind of Christ.

Now, it is time for us to follow him.

Now, it is time for us to grow further from our discipleship to our apostleship, from being justified believers to being sanctified workers.

We will go and make more disciples with our teaching and sharing of Christ-like love. Then the world will begin to see its transformation by that love. My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, **do you understand this? How do you truly love the risen Lord? Are you ready to follow him in this call of love?** I hope and pray that your answer is, **“Yes!” Amen.**

