

Sixth Sunday of Easter – 2023

Acts 17:16-31

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Do you love me? Jesus asked Simon the question and it was unexpected. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15). Peter may have been preoccupied with something else, not looking directly at Jesus, but when the question hit Peter’s ears he most assuredly turned his gaze entirely to the risen Lord. I suspect that Peter was pleased to be given the opportunity to affirm his love for Christ the King. “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (John 21:15). Then Jesus coupled Peter’s love with something. Jesus coupled Peter’s love with how the Lord wanted it expressed. “Feed my lambs” (John 21:15). Jesus asked Peter a second time: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:16). It was an open door for Peter to be emphatic, for Peter to say the words more forcefully, full of conviction, full of the ardor of faith. Can you picture Simon leveling his voice, turning his shoulders toward Jesus, clearing everything else from his mind as he says: “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (John 21:16). Tend my sheep. Jesus asked Peter a third time: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:17). And Simon was hurt.

Why? Why was Peter pained? What grieved Simon as Jesus probed Simon’s heart? Peter had failed. Everyone knew it. Jesus predicted it. Three times Simon denied that he even knew His Lord, denied that He followed Christ, denied that He owed everything that he is and has to the One that he *knew* was the Son of God. When Peter answered Jesus’ final question, how did the words come out of his mouth? I don’t know. I suspect that humility, sincerity, and a genuine devotion were written all over him: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” (John 21:17). Feed my sheep. Do you know what Jesus doesn’t do in this interaction? He doesn’t call Peter’s love into question. Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you. Have you ever said those words? Have you ever said those words after you have failed Him? “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Do you believe that love is a reality that finds expression? Do you believe that love is a dynamic that cannot be suppressed, that it *will*, that it *must* find expression?

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Is it true? Is it a promise or a threat? How do you feel when you live contrary to Christ’s commands? How do you like it when lust or pride or self-pity or greed or vindictiveness or sloth or gluttony or selfishness takes control of a situation, takes control of days and weeks? How do you like it when sin takes control of your actions and your reactions? It happens, you know – to me, to you. You know how it feels. When your shallowness overtakes you; when darkness haunts your spirit; when emptiness comes either by invitation or uninvited; when Christ’s commands become secondary and your sinful nature becomes primary; you know how that feels. It feels wretched. Why do you suppose that God loves you? Does God love you because you are so brilliant and beautiful and bodacious? You’ve been washed in Christ’s blood and made holy (Revelation 7:14). A garment of astounding glory is your royal vestment (Galatians 3:27). Absolution is spoken over you every week; Christ’s absolution (John 20:23). And we run back to our filthy rags... the good that I want to do, I don’t do. The evil I don’t want to do, this I keep doing. What a wretched man I am (Romans 7:19, 24).

How did Peter feel, after he denied the Lord three times? How did Peter feel after the rooster crowed and the weight of his failure sank into His heart? Had Simon betrayed Christ's love? Yes, he had. After the cock crowed, Peter wept bitterly (Luke 22:62). When Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, did Jesus already know the answer? Was Jesus confident in Peter's love? Where did that love come from – the love that Peter had for Christ? You have received something that you could never earn. Your Creator has extended to you the marvel of His love, the astounding gift of His forgiveness. Those two are inextricably intertwined. His love is a marvel because He gives it to the unlovely, the ungrateful, the bedraggled and the bent. Not a partial love, this, His self-giving. Fully, unreservedly, happily – God sends His love into your life. Acceptance; His love embraces you precisely as you are. “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Christ's love is unique. Christ's love is the dynamic that has been unleashed in your life. Christ's love has changed you.

Jesus said this: “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master” (Matthew 10:24-25). He said that about you. The Lord of heaven and earth said those words about you. That's what He wants – for you to be like Him. Love is what does it. His love, His forgiveness, His mercy, His grace, His blood, His death and His resurrection – that is what makes you like Him. God's love doesn't return empty but it accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent. And what is the purpose for which it was sent? To claim you as His own, to save you from death and hell, to draw you into the kingdom of our Father. As a Christian, you are being conformed to the image of God's Son (Romans 8:29). How? How are you made like the transcendent Son of God? By Him loving you. Love has drawn you here, to this Divine Service. Here the Lord of the cross serves you. Here the Lord of the cross reinforces His love in your life. Here you are reminded of who you genuinely are, who Christ has made you to be, and how the love in your life is to be expressed.

The Spirit of Truth; Jesus said that He would give us the Spirit of Truth. The Holy Spirit leads you into all truth (John 16:13). Christianity is the Truth. You become familiar with the truth here. The world is on a walk-about away from the truth. There is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). In the year 1569 Martin Luther wrote this: “superstition, idolatry, and hypocrisy have ample wages but truth goes a-begging” (Table Talk). Tertullian was an early church father, from the second century (c. 155-220AD). He said this: “Truth does not blush.” Christ is full of grace and truth. Christianity is the truth. Do you believe this? Are you embarrassed by such a black and white statement? Here is the truth: Jesus said “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). Orphans; alone, without protection, vulnerable; God will not leave any of us orphaned. You have been adopted by grace, by blood, by the action of your Elder Brother. You have been adopted into the family of our Father. A price had to be paid. Your sin excluded you from paradise just as it did Adam and Eve. A price had to be paid. Orphaned; the true Son of God was orphaned on the Holy Cross.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Love acts. Love intervenes. Love saves. Love gives. Love suffers and love dies. When you had nothing to offer, when you were empty and lost and forlorn and helpless – Christ took your sin and died for you. Hearing this, wouldn't you be ecstatic if the Lord called your name and asked you directly: Do you love

Me? To be able to tell Him, to declare, to profess, to announce and certify your great and astounding love for your Savior, wouldn't you be overjoyed to tell Him? Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

We are being made into the likeness of our Lord. His love makes us like Him. He alone kept the commandments (Romans 10:4). Christians express their love for Jesus by keeping His. "The greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 23:11). That is His commandment. Forgive your brother 70 times 7 times (Matthew 18:21). That is His commandment. "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:36). That is His commandment. "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). That is His commandment. "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Christ's commandments are anchored in His love. Christ's commandments are anchored in His life. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). That love is so very alive among us. To Him be glory forever and ever.