



## Relationship Semantics

*TEXT*  
*John 21:15–17*

April 26, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

When I was younger, I once dated someone even though I liked someone else. That's probably nothing particularly unique in the grand scheme of dating in high school — which doesn't mean it is necessarily a good idea.

One of the reasons it isn't a good idea is because there came a day when the girl I was dating found out that I liked someone else. And that brought up, let's say, an *interesting* conversation between the two of us.

I shared a bit about this story with the middle school students a few weeks ago, and I have to say again — in my memory — this girl handled things with a maturity beyond her years. She confronted me about it, but was not unfair in that confrontation in any way. But there was a critical question in the course of that conversation: Are we dating because you don't want to date anyone else, or are you waiting *until* you can date someone else?

In other words, I think she was saying she was dating me because she wanted to date *me* over anyone else.

I don't remember exactly what I said, but we weren't dat-

ing anymore when that conversation ended. It was an awkward conversation. I was called to task for something that I had done. And you better believe I changed my approach to relationships from that moment on.

This morning, we encounter another awkward conversation, this time between Peter and Jesus. Now no awkward conversation comes without some back story, so I want to remind us of some important moments between Peter and Jesus as it relates to this particular walk on the beach.

In Luke, Peter tells Jesus that he is prepared to go with Jesus to prison or even to death. (Luke 22:33)

In Mark, and very similarly in Matthew, when they are in the garden shortly before Jesus is arrested, Jesus tells the disciples that they will scatter and desert him, to which Peter replies in verse 29, "Even though all become deserters, I will not." (Mark 14:26–29)

Both of these happen in the aftermath of the Lord's Supper, or the Passover meal which we commemorate with Communion. The important thing here is that Peter is making these *really* confident statements sometime after dinner on Thursday night.

In both Mark and Matthew, we don't even get to a new chapter before we find this happening early Friday morning:

True to Jesus' prediction, the disciples scatter, and all of Peter's certainty turns out to be overconfident. (Mark 14:66–72)

Shortly after that, Jesus is crucified, the tomb is found empty, and the resurrected Jesus appears to people. Immediately before today's verses, we meet seven disciples doing exactly what they were doing before Jesus invited them to follow him: They were out fishing. Jesus helps them find some fish, they come back in and find Jesus on the beach, and at *this* point, Jesus invites Peter to take a walk with him.

Now if you are Peter, your mind might be going back to some things you have said in the past — namely, some of the big talk you had about never ever leaving Jesus and then totally undoing all that talk. And then Jesus asks Peter, "So ... do you love me?"

Theologians debate what is happening in this conversation; and this is where we have to look past the English translations because we lose a dynamic in the English version.

As we read this, it looks like Jesus is just asking the same question three times: “Do you love me, do you love me, do you love me?”

And it looks like Peter is just repeating an affirmative to Jesus three times. Peter’s response over and over is that “Yes, you know that I love you.”

What we miss is that Jesus and Peter are using different words. Jesus is asking more specifically, “Do you *agape* me?” and Peter is responding, specifically, “You know that I *philo* you.”

One of the things about John’s gospel is that words are carefully chosen — there simply is not an idle word in that gospel. John is a keen writer and uses his words intentionally and specifically. And when we come across this, I just don’t think it is accidental. No, the difference is intentional.

*Philo* is a word that should ring some familiar bells. It comes up in names like Philadelphia, or ending a word with *phile*. *Philo* denotes a fondness for certain things. And in the Greek, it means having an affectionate regard in friendship. You *philo* someone in a friendly way; you *philo* those you know and like and who like you in return.

But Jesus, the first two times he asks Peter, “Do you love me?” uses a different word: *agape*. *Agape* is the word used for how the Good Samaritan treats the wounded man on the road. *Agape* is unconditional; it loves not just friends, but enemies — and carries with it a sense of active

compassion. It is God’s perfect love, which is always in motion.

Suddenly this conversation is more like this: Jesus is asking if Peter loves him, and Peter is saying, “Hey, you know I really like you and think you are awesome.”

And Jesus, says again, “Do you love me; do you *agape* me?”

Peter says, “You know I really like you and think you are awesome.”

I want to note that this text is doing a lot of things, and we can’t ignore that Peter has denied Jesus three times. And I don’t think it is coincidence that here Jesus is giving him three chances to express his love for Jesus.

But I also think what we see here is Jesus saying, “Do you love me *this* much?” And Peter might be feeling a little reticent to be quite as boastful about his love. He is humbled and isn’t quite ready to make that same boast again. And you know what? Jesus meets Peter where Peter is.

The third question finds Jesus using *philo*. You aren’t ready to say you *agape* me? OK, but you do *philo* me?

We can start there. Let’s start with that agreement, and let’s move on from there. Simply put, I think Jesus is willing to meet us where we are, just like he was willing to meet Peter where he was.

Sometimes I think we get the impression Jesus is only willing to walk with us once we get ourselves to a certain degree of holiness — or that we put pressure on ourselves, thinking we can’t do good work for Christ because our lives are a mess, or

feel like a mess. And I think it’s important to tend to health in our lives, but it is important to know Jesus does not demand for us to operate at his level before he will have a conversation with us.

That is tremendously comforting to me — because when I’m willing to really look at what is going on in my life, there is always going to be a mess somewhere. And if I’m not careful, I can let shame over that mess prevent me from feeling like I am loved by Christ.

I think Peter knows what that felt like. I think he knew it the moment Jesus asked him to take a walk. It might have even been one of the reasons he was out there on that beach going back to fishing rather than continuing Jesus’ ministry. He might have been swimming in the hard truth that maybe he didn’t love Jesus as much as he thought he did, or didn’t love Jesus as much as Jesus deserved, or as much as Peter wished he could have given. Or maybe he was wondering if he even *loved* Jesus at all. And, my friends, all of us know what swimming in those waters feels like.

Into that moment, Jesus appears and asks the question Peter knows he can’t answer with the same word Jesus uses. And I think Jesus *totally* gets it.

You aren’t ready for *agape*? I hear you saying *philo* . . . I’ll meet you at *philo*. And even then, I want you to feed my sheep.

And this brings up the second important point. If the first point is that Jesus is willing to meet us where we are, the second point is that no matter where it is that

Jesus meets us, he desires us to do good work in his name.

No matter where you are, Jesus is willing to get right there with you; but in meeting you there, Jesus also wants you to do whatever it is you are capable of doing. That is true of every single person in this room. No matter where you are in your faith journey, Christ desires that you would seek out what it is you can do ... and do it.

Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't feel like what you could contribute was valued?

There was one year when, for New Year's, I went with some friends to their cabin on the north shore of Lake Superior — a place well-known for its warm, sunny New Year's Eve celebrations, right? I don't remember who first suggested the idea; it all sounded so good at the beginning. But as we began to make some of the plans, it became clear that this was something pretty intense.

We would have to cross-country ski to the cabin; I've never cross-country skied before. So I asked for a pair of skis for Christmas — about three days before we left. We then met up in Wisconsin at the family's house who owned the cabin. My friend's dad briefed us on some safety issues. He handed out four-inch nails to all of us, telling us we should put one in each of our pockets. We would have to cross frozen rivers and lakes, and if anyone fell in, others couldn't help us because they would risk also falling in. We would have to pull the nails out of our pockets

and stab them into the ice to pull ourselves out.

At this point, I'm just thinking, "Well, if that happens, I'm just going to die. So that's pretty much my plan."

Once we were on the train to the cabin, I asked where we would get out. Apparently, the train would stop at mile-marker 88, which is in the middle of nowhere, and we would get out there.

Sure enough, the train stopped, and they threw our gear off the train — which promptly disappeared completely under several feet of snow. We were next. We jumped out, and I was up to my waist in snow. I was literally in too deep.

You know others perceive you aren't going to contribute much to the adventure when they are asking if they can carry things for you, if they can make your pack lighter. It's like asking, "Hey, is there any way we can prevent you from slowing us down?"

A lot of times, the messages we get from our society tell us that. It makes us feel we are not as valuable as others — age, gender, skin color, lack of education. We sometimes feel like our contribution isn't worthy; or even worse, that our imperfections mean our contributions aren't valuable.

My friends, the good news is that our Savior has not only come to meet us exactly where we are, but in meeting us there, assures us we also have valuable work to do. Each one of us has something we can contribute, and Christ is telling us to seek out what that

might be — because there are those who are in desperate need of our care; there are those who need to know the love of God; there are those for whom life has been far more difficult than we have had to deal with.

And in that moment, we can offer them what we have — whatever that might be. And we offer it not because we will stand when all others fall away, but because in the aftermath of us ourselves falling away, Christ has come to us. He has come to us to meet us there and to tell us that no matter where we are, we can be about the business of caring for one another; we can be about the business of feeding his lambs and tending his sheep.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: [www.villagepres.org/sermons](http://www.villagepres.org/sermons).