



What Does Love Look Like?

TEXT
John 21:15-19

November 10, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Peter sat by a charcoal fire on which Jesus cooked breakfast. There was a lot in the air. The last time we read about Peter being by a fire, his mouth was filled with words of denial. *You've got the wrong man; I don't know him.* Neither of them brought it up, but you know they both carried that moment at this breakfast on the beach.

Then Jesus pushed the reset button. "Peter," he asked, "do you love me?"

"Yes. You know I do." Jesus not only knew that; he also knew that Peter needed a chance to say it out loud. Jesus wants to talk about what matters.

Three times he asks, "Do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Three times Peter responds. This is their story now. Not one of denial, but one of love. And this is a love that not only forgives, but also calls. Jesus looks to this broken disciple and says, "I'm counting on you to take care of the church: feed my sheep."

This is what love looks like.

Sometimes when we are clearest that we are a mess, that

we haven't figured everything out, Jesus says, "I'm counting on you." Not because you are perfect, but because you are loved. "Feed my sheep." When he speaks of his sheep, he is talking about the church. Take care of the church. And the thing the sheep hunger for the most is love.

It had to catch Peter off guard a bit. Don't you think he expected Jesus to need to process his failure by the courtyard fire? Instead, Jesus says, "I want us to remember that we love each other and let that shape what happens next."

"Peter, I know you messed up, but I'm still counting on you to take care of the church." Love like that always catches us a bit by surprise.

I was visiting with Jean more than a year after the death of her husband. We sat in her kitchen drinking coffee. She said, "Tom, Bud and I were married for 53 years. I can't remember not being married. There is nothing that I do now that seems complete. He was a part of everything. He sat right there where you are sitting to read his paper. He played the radio while he was shaving every morning, played it too loudly; I told him to turn it

down. After the news we would turn off the TV, and he would ask about my day — even if neither one of us had left the house."

"He loved you," I said.

With amazement in her voice, she said, "He did, didn't he? I know a million reasons why he shouldn't have loved me, but he did. That's amazing."

What surprised me was after 53 years, it still hit her as a surprise. I have known love to catch me by surprise as well. We come to worship and hear again that the God who created the universe, the God who knows your every moment, the good, the shameful, the beautiful and broken ... this God loves us by name. If that doesn't catch you by surprise at least a little bit, you aren't paying attention.

I think about this every time we have baptism. They have no idea how much they are loved. Their parents love them when it's easy; love them when it's hard; and will love them when their kids get old enough to be embarrassed by that love. But someday, the kids realize it was love that carried them through.

I think that's why Jesus says, "Feed my sheep." If I understand it, he is saying the

first work of the church is to love one another.

Love is the currency of the church. Oh, I know we mess it up sometimes. I'm not saying we love better than someone else. It's not that. I'm saying that time and again, Jesus said that to love each other is our calling.

I think this matters for lots of reasons, but let me remind you of one. We live in a lonely culture. Most of us are surrounded by people all the time, but being with people is not the same thing as connecting with people. Folks are lonely.

Moss Hart was a playwright who died in the early 1960s. In his autobiography, he told of a moment of his childhood. He grew up in what he described as a "drab tenement in the Bronx." It was Christmas Eve, and he was 10 years old. His father took him to 149th Street, where there were lines of vendors with pushcarts full of toys. They went over to each cart, and Hart pointed out all the toys that he liked. But when his father asked the price, it was always too much, and they moved on quietly to the next cart. As they neared the end, Moss heard his father's hand jingle a few coins in his pocket and realized the situation. A few coins were what he had, and Christmas was too expensive.

Years later, he recounted his feelings that night: "As I looked up at him, I saw a look of despair and disappointment in his eyes that brought me closer to him than I had ever

been in my life. I wanted to throw my arms around him and say, "It doesn't matter. ... I understand. ... This is better than [anything in these carts]. ... I love you!"

"But instead we stood shivering beside each other for a moment — then turned away from the last two pushcarts and started silently back home. ... I didn't even take his hand on the way home nor did he take mine. ... We were two lonely people struggling to reach each other."¹

We live in a lonely culture. I don't need a scientist to tell me that, but I remember reading about John Cacioppo, the author of a book called *Loneliness*. In it, he notes that those who experience chronic loneliness have elevated levels of epinephrine in their blood; it's a stress hormone. And white blood cell counts are altered. He writes, "When we are lonely, our whole body is lonely."²

I hope, I pray to God that Village is an antidote to that. In everything we do, we are mindful that we do it together. This is not just a place to have a spiritual experience, as important as that is, but it is a place to be a community.

Yesterday we had a Session retreat as our new officers were welcomed. We invited them to reflect a bit on the church, why they are here and why they have agreed to serve you as our leaders.

One of our new elders said, "My sister told me when I went to college that I needed to find the people where I could be at

home, be welcomed as I was. I needed to find a place where I belong." She said, "Village has become that place for me now." She said, "You have welcomed me, loved me, stood by me and showed me that I belong. You are my home." We all need that.

That's why when we baptize a child, we make promises. Do you remember? We promise to be the church, not just to teach them about God, but to be the people who show them that they are loved by God and by us. That's why we have Brooke Latas and Zach Walker at Mission and Clare Stern at Antioch — because our children and youth are growing up in a lonely, sometimes harsh-spirited world, and they need a place that will love them and welcome them and show them they belong.

That's why your officers make promises to care for you in times of joy and sorrow. That's why we call not just one, but two pastors to do nothing but pastoral care, to love us when we need it most. Because Jesus looked at Peter and said, "I need you to remember our love for one another and let that love determine what happens next. I need you to feed my sheep, and you know what they hunger for most: love."

Can I be a little personal with you, even more so than usual? I have seen how your love can change a life.

The Presbyterian Women have invited our daughter Sarah to speak at the Advent Gathering. I remember a couple years ago she was examined

by Presbytery. Three different times she was asked, “Being the daughter of your father must be a blessing and a burden; why do you want to be a pastor?” Presbytery can be a place of truth-telling.

The third time she said, “Other members of my family have been called by God to this work, and just as God called them, God has called me. I want to do this because I love the church.” That’s what she said. I thought, I can’t remember the last time I heard someone say they loved the church on the floor of Presbytery.

A month later, I stood next to her as she broke bread and poured the cup for the first time. And then I stood by her as she whispered, “The body of Christ broken for you ... Cindy.” Cindy always made sure to call Sarah by name and light up when she saw her. She gave her a gift card to I-tunes on her birthday.

“The body of Christ, broken for you, Laura; broken for you, Nancy; broken for you, George; the body of Christ broken for you, Carol.” That’s her mother. Sarah has grown up listening to me talk about Jesus, but if she has ever seen him, it has most likely been in Carol. She called your names, one by one, and it was one of the holiest moments of my life because I knew when she stood on the floor of Presbytery and said, “I love the church,” it was you she was talking about. It was you who loved her into ministry.

Love is the currency of the church, not because we are bet-

ter at it than someone else. It’s not that. It’s because we have been loved. And sometimes it’s clearest when we know we don’t have it all together, when we are a mess ourselves. Sometimes it’s then that the word is clearest ... I’m counting on you to remember my love for you, and your love for me, and let that shape what happens next.

Christ says, “Feed my sheep,” and you know what they hunger for most, don’t you?

¹Robert Raines, *Creative Brooding* (1966), p. 35

²“Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, May, 2012

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 website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.