

Loving With Jesus

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Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church

Sunday, April 22, 2007; Bryn Mawr, PA

John 21:1-19

“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

Movement 1 – What are we supposed to be doing?

What are we doing? Why are we here? What is the purpose of this gathering? What are we doing? Why are we here?

Have you ever found yourself asking these kinds of questions? Have you ever found yourself wondering and speculating? Maybe it was during a meeting that you agreed to attend in a moment of weakness. Maybe it was during a work retreat, and just before you take part in the “trust fall,” falling backwards hoping that someone will catch you, you find yourself asking “why am I here.” Maybe it is in the middle of reading a novel like *War and Peace*, halfway through you look at all the pages you still have to read, and how far you have come and you wonder, “What am I doing?”

Think of it as climbing a mountain. When you start, you are full of energy; you are pushing and so excited that you almost feel as if you can run to the top. But five hours later, and an elevation change of 3,000 feet you are tired, sweaty, your lungs ach, your legs have lost their feeling, and you are sick of looking only at trees and rocks. It is the moment when you collapse on a large rock, lying on your back and looking at the trees above you, to tired to reach for your water, to tired to try to look at a map, to even sit up, and you wonder, what am I doing here. Why are you here?

It is that point when the novelty has worn off, when the excitement has become predictable, and you question why you are here. We can reach this point of dullness with our church life. Maybe when you first joined the church it was exciting. Maybe it was exciting when you first gave your life to the Lord. Maybe it was exciting when you decided to become a part of a worshipping community, but after a while things got predictable, things got tired, things got old, and you began to wonder what you are doing here. You find yourself falling into a rut that does not promise much change in the future. You began to wonder what one is supposed to do in the church, you begin to wonder why belong to a church; you begin to wonder about the purpose of gathering with a church.

In your wondering, you know that you are supposed to do something and often times we find ourselves busy for the sake of being busy. You know that you are supposed to be involved in one way or another, but how and what. Have you ever heard of the Abilene Paradox? It is a story about a family in Texas that decides to drive 45 minutes to Abilene for a buffet. Yet no one in the family wants to go, yet everyone assumes that everyone else wants to go. So a car full of polite and grumpy people ride 45 minutes, eat crummy food, and then ride back thinking that everyone else is enjoying the experience.

It is at the point when you know you are supposed to be doing something, and you think that there must be something more, but you don't know what to do. So in an effort to do something, often churches engage in activities or programs that no one is really excited about, but that many people do because they think everyone else wants to do it. It is the Abilene Paradox. It is in the moment of stuffing Teddy bears with notes about Jesus, it is in the moment of choosing the fruit arraignments for the next dinner, it is in the moment of deciding what color you want the carpet to be that you stop and say, “This isn't what I expected I would be doing

when I said yes to Christ. This isn't what I expected to be doing when I joined the church. What am I doing here?"

I wonder if the disciples were experiencing similar feelings. They had seen Christ twice before behind locked doors. They had the Holy Spirit breathed upon them, they have heard powerful words from Christ, and yet we find them seemingly floundering, wondering and without direction. Maybe they were wondering, "What now, what do I do." Maybe they were still trying to understand all of the events of the resurrection. They knew that they were supposed to do something, but weren't really sure what. So when Simon Peter says, "I am going fishing," maybe the rest agreed to go because at least it was something to do. Maybe no one really wanted to go, but assumed that everyone else wanted to go, and not wanting to offend everyone else they piled into the boat. Maybe, as they were casting out their nets and pulling them back in, empty, they found themselves wondering, "What am I doing here?" After all, this couldn't be what Christ had intended for them to do. This couldn't be Christ's great plan for his followers. But what else could they do? What else were they supposed to do? So maybe, not wanting to fish, they all found themselves fishing, while all the time wishing they could do something more.

What are you doing here? Why are you here? What is the purpose of your being here? We can find ourselves asking these questions as we find ourselves in the church, climbing up a spiritual mountain, but seeming to go nowhere. We find ourselves asking these questions as we find ourselves choosing the color of the hymnals, and the brand of water to serve at fellowship times. We find ourselves asking these questions when things seem pointless, exhausting, and mundane. What are we doing here? Why are we here?

Movement 2 – Jesus' High Standard

In the midst of the wondering, the ambivalence and the floundering, Jesus appears once more to the disciples. In the midst of our own ambivalence and wondering, Jesus appears to us, he calls us back to him and to the focus of our ministry. Jesus calls us to return to our original place of passion, he calls us back to our hope and our love. Jesus calls us back to the focus of our community and of our faith.

He appears to the disciples a third time. This is different than the appearances in the locked room. Here, Jesus appears and reveals himself, in a similar way that he revealed himself in the wedding at Cana. Just as at that wedding, Jesus appears to the disciples and then commands the disciples to perform an action. The people in the wedding needed wine, the disciples needed fish, and just as he commanded the servants of the house at the wedding to perform an action Christ tells the disciples to cast their nets once more on the other side of the boat. In each action, Christ's glory is revealed, in each sign, we can see who Christ truly is and we are again brought to be with him.

Remember that mountain I described. Imagine you are climbing that mountain. You started the climb with excitement and anticipation of the glorious promise that was expected at the summit, but now you are huffing and puffing, and exhausted. Now you are wondering why you were climbing this damn mountain in the first place, when off in the distance, you can see Jesus. Off in the distance, towards the summit, you can see Jesus above us and it is as if we are waking up again. Jesus reveals himself to us, and it is as if we are opening our eyes anew, and you can see, you are reminded why you are here. It is because of Christ that the disciples still stay together. We remember that it is because of Christ that we gather together in this community. It is because of Christ that we climb this mountain, trying to get closer and closer to the divine. Our passion and our ministry start with Christ.

And Christ calls Peter and calls us to the level of ministry, to the level of relationship that he desires. Christ does not leave us in a state of bliss, staring and gazing at our Lord. Christ engages us and pulls us even closer to him.

Christ says to Peter, “Do you love me?” He starts with a question not a command. He starts by pulling Peter into his relationship, maybe wondering where Peter is, maybe hoping that Peter can offer the love that Jesus desires. Some commentators suggest that Jesus is giving Peter the opportunity to turn from his three denials. Some suggest that Jesus is asking Peter to claim him as Lord three times to make up for his three denials, and that may be a large part of his question. Maybe Jesus wants to bring Peter back to his side, and does so with his redeeming questions that give Peter the chance to reaffirm his commitment to Christ.

Yet I think there is more, because the question goes deeper than what we can hear. This may seem to be a harmless question that should be easy to answer, but the words hold more power and depth than the English can show. Jesus asks, “Do you love me,” but means an *agape* kind of love (note: one commentator suggests that the difference between *agape* and *phila* is negligible, yet others would suggest otherwise). Jesus is referring to a holy love, a divine, sacrificing love. He is setting the bar high with his question. He is not asking if Peter loves him, in the same way that he loves food, or a television show. Jesus is asking Peter if he is devoted to him, if he is committed to him. He is asking a difficult question of Peter, calling him to a high level of relationship and of ministry.

Can you hear Jesus calling you as well? Can you look up the mountain and hear him saying to you, come up here? He is calling you to be at the summit, to be at the peak of the mountain. He is asking if you love him to the point that you will go to the summit Jesus is asking if you love him unconditionally, in a divine way. Do you love Jesus? Are you committed to Jesus in the same way that Jesus is committed to you?

The bar is set high with Jesus’ call and question. Like a coach asking a minor league pitcher to be the starter for game one in the World Series. Like a teacher giving his or her class of third graders books that are intended for twelfth grade and asking the class to read. In his question, the bar of expectation is set high; the expectations are demanding.

Jesus is calling us back to the focus of our ministry, and engages us with expectations that are challenging, demanding and difficult. Jesus is calling us to live and to share a divine love, a holy love, and a love that can only be experienced and lived from the top of the mountain. Remember that it is Jesus who gave us our passion, but we cannot rest on our profession of faith. Jesus will not let us rest by just proclaiming him as Lord. He instead asks for our love in a holy and profound way. It is a difficult calling and a difficult challenge to our lives and our ministry. Jesus is again revealed to us, yet in this revelation we see and experience more than we have before.

Movement 3 – Just Out of our Reach

But can we return Christ’s love? Can we return the perfect, the divine love that Christ offers to us? We cannot be perfect, we cannot be holy and we cannot be divine. So can we say “yes?” Can we return Christ’s love?

When Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, Peter replies, “Yes Lord; you know that I love you.” Yet just like the question, the answer holds more than what we can see or hear. Just like the question, the English does not reveal to us the complexity of Peter’s answer. Peter says, yes, but says “I love you” with a *phila* love, a love between brothers, a platonic love that has its boundaries and limitations (see note in previous movement about the translation of these two

words). Peter is saying, “I love you, Lord, but not in a divine, selfless, sacrificing way.” Peter is saying, “I love you as I can love a brother, or a sister. I love you in a way that I can imagine and conceive.” I don’t love you in a holy, sacrificing way. I don’t love you with the perfection that you ask. Peter is not returning Christ’s love but is responding with a love that he can imagine.

It is as if Jesus is handing Peter a Rolex and Peter gives Jesus a sundial. Or if Jesus cooks a meal for Peter of lobster, steak and decadent desserts, and Peter takes Christ to McDonalds. They are both offering something, but not at the same level. Peter is not meeting Christ’s call, but is falling short and staying out of reach.

Imagine yourself on that mountain, and you hear Christ calling you from the summit. You look up and see him and he says, “Come up here.” You want to run up the mountain to be with Christ. You want to say, “I am with you, Christ,” but your lungs burn, your legs ache, and you can’t find the strength to make it right up the mountain. You try, but you can’t seem to be with Christ in his glory. You can’t seem to reach that same level that Christ calls you to reach. You run up the mountain, but you then criticize someone and slip. You run up the mountain, but then you start to live a life of greed and you slip. You try to run up the mountain, but then you begin to fear for your life, your family and your own sense of security – you stop trusting God and you slip. We all are human, we all have our faults, and we know that we cannot love in the same way that Christ loves. We know that we cannot live in the same way that Christ lives. So you shout up to Christ, I am here, as close as I can be with you, but this is as far as I can go.

We all slip in our lives. We all fall short, and fall just out of reach of the love and the glory of Christ. We try to lift ourselves up to be with the Lord. We try to do better, but it seems so difficult, it seems so daunting to love as Christ loves.

It reminds me of a scene in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. It reminds me of the scene when Luke Skywalker is on Degobah, and is training with Yoda to be a Jedi Knight. Yoda challenges Luke to lift his X-Wing (his spaceship) out of a swamp using the Force. Luke tries, but says he can’t do it; it is too heavy and too hard. Perhaps we feel the same way when we try to return Christ’s love. Perhaps we feel that it is too heavy and too hard. Yoda calls Luke to a higher level of control and training, but Luke cannot respond. Can we always be ready to sacrifice? Can we always be ready to give ourselves? Can we live a life that leads to suffering because of our love for Christ? Can we be a church that truly is devoted to Christ and only to Christ? Can we let go of our desires for possessions, of our selfishness, of our fears and our fallen-ness? Can we truly and fully love Christ as we are loved? It is hard, it is difficult, and it feels as if it is just outside our reach. We cannot return Christ’s love.

Movement 4 – Christ Comes Down to Us

So Christ comes to be where we are. Christ comes down to our level; Christ comes to our place, our situation, our context. Christ comes to be where we are.

When Jesus is talking to Peter the first and the second time, he asks, “Do you ‘agape’ love me?” and each time Peter responds by saying, “you know I ‘phila’ love you.” Peter cannot return the love that Jesus offers. Perhaps Jesus saw that Peter was not yet ready to reach up to the divine love that Jesus offers. Perhaps Jesus saw Peter’s difficulty, so in response, Jesus asks a third time but with a different word. “Peter, do you ‘phila’ love me.” Perhaps the conversation would sound like this:

Simon son of John, do you love me with a divine, sacrificing, and holy love?

Yes Lord; you know that I love you as I love a brother.

Simon son of John, do you love me in such a way that you would give your life for me?

Yes Lord; you know that I love you in such a way that I will follow you and listen to you, but I don't know if I can die for you.

Simon son of John, do you love me as a brother, as a friend and as a sibling?

Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.

Do you hear the change in this conversation? Do you hear the shift in Jesus' questions? Jesus brings the level down to Peter. Jesus goes to where Peter is, to where Peter can be, and meets Peter there.

Come back to the mountain we are climbing. We are struggling to reach the summit and be with Christ, and we cannot make it. But in the moment when we are ready to give up, and in the moment when we are faced with despair because it seems that we just cannot reach the summit where Christ is calling us, we look and we see Christ coming down the mountain to us. We see Christ coming to be at our side. We cannot return the love that Christ offers us, but Christ comes to our level, to receive the love that we can share.

Maybe, at this moment we realize the nature of Christ's love. This isn't a love that demands payment. This isn't a love that is just offered for us to taste and wish we could fully experience. This is a love that is relational. Christ is calling us to a relational love, but not one where we are always cowering under the profound power of the Lord. We are not called to a love where we are always struggling for equality. We are called to a relational love. In coming to our level, Christ makes it possible for us to return his love in a way that we can. We can't love Christ in a perfect way, but we still can love Christ in our way.

Christ asks us if we love him, and the answer we give is where we start in our relationship with the Lord. We do not have to be perfect, we do not have to be holy, we only have to be honest and know that Christ will be with us.

I know people who say they are embarrassed with what they give to the Lord. They claim that they don't have the gifts or the resources to give in a great way that others may give. Yet Christ starts with your gifts, Christ starts with what you have, with what you can do, and meets you there. You are not condemned, you are not judged, and instead Christ meets you where you are and offers you love.

Christ comes to be where we are. With all of our challenges, with all of our shortcomings and with all of our difficulties, Christ comes to be where we are.

Movement 5 – Following Jesus out of Love

Yet we do not stop there. Not only does Christ reveal himself to us, not only does Christ call us into his love, and meets us where we are, Christ sends us out from where we are. Christ gives us a command, Christ calls us to go and do. Christ sends us out from where we are to spread the love that we have and the love that we experience. Remember the question I started with? What are you doing here, why are you here? Christ starts by asking us if we love him. Christ starts by reminding us of our passion which originally called us and drew us to him and to the church. Christ asks us if we love him, and then comes and tells us how to live out our love for him. We are called to feed his sheep and tend to his lambs. This is how we respond to Christ's love, by doing Christ love and showing it to others.

Jesus is giving this command to Peter after each time he asks about Peter's love as if to emphasize how one is called to respond to Jesus' love. It is Jesus' answer to each of Peter's. Peter says, "You know that I love you," and Jesus says, "feed my sheep." Jesus is saying, if you love me, show it. This is the relational love of Jesus; it is a love that pulls us not only to be in

relationship with Christ, but also to be in relationship with others, to show others the love we have for Jesus.

Jesus is asking Peter to take care of the least, and the marginalized of the world. Jesus is asking Peter to take care of all those who are the children of the Lord. It is as if Jesus is telling Peter this is the way to show his love, by loving and caring for others. Jesus is calling Peter to no longer turn to fishing, to no longer turn to himself, but from now on to look to others. Jesus is calling Peter to live and show his love of the Lord by showing it to others. Jesus is calling Peter to be in relationship with others in response to his own love of Jesus.

In the same way, we are called to show Jesus' love to others. Jesus meets us where we are on the mountain and tells us that through serving others we continue to climb up the mountain. It is as if Jesus is showing us a different path to walk. It is as if Jesus is showing us a different way to walk. It is a path the meanders by other people who need to experience the love of Christ. It is a path that goes by those who need to be cared for. It is a path that ultimately leads to Christ. It is a path that goes by the weeping, the hurting, and the wounded. As we go by them we realize that we are called to take care of the hungry, the poor, and the sick. We are called to try to help the unemployed, to try to help the underemployed and the working poor. We are called to serve and to help and to show Christ's love.

Our mission trip to Mississippi is a way for this church to show Christ's love. We are going to help individuals who have lost their homes and their lives. We are going to help individuals who are not receiving much help from government agencies. We are going to try to show Christ's love to others. Some of us are going to do the work; some of us will be supporting the work with our resources and our prayers.

The whole church is responding to the love of Christ with this mission trip, with our involvement with homeless programs, by offering a place for individuals to pray in times of distress and by welcoming people to experience the presence of God in worship no matter what. When we take care of each other, and when we take care of the stranger, we are responding to Christ's call.

Christ's love is relational. It is relational as we receive and it is relational as we offer. One cannot keep Christ's love in a private way. One cannot only accept Christ's love and not live out any response, for that would not show Christ's love. One receives and one offers the power and the peace of Christ's love. From where we are, with our gifts and with our actions, we are called and we are led by Christ to the glory of God.

Movement 6 – Cast your Nets

Can we love Christ by following Christ? Can we love Christ by going where Christ goes, by trying to walk in Christ's footsteps? Can we share the love of Christ by following Christ?

This is an active love; this is a compelling love that cannot be practiced just by sitting down. This is a love that calls us to stand up and do, and be and live in the way that Christ calls us to live. We cannot return Christ's love in the way that he gives it, we cannot be perfect in our love, but we can still walk with Christ, and go where Christ calls us to go and respond to the love that Christ gives us. Can we love Christ by following Christ?

Look at the disciples in the beginning of the passage. Jesus comes to where they are, in the boat, fishing. They have been working in the dark; they have been trying and not succeeding. Yet, when they come into the light and Christ tells them to cast their nets, amazing things happen. When then listen to Christ, when they follow Christ's call, then they can perform things which are beyond their own capabilities.

Christ comes to us, and finds us in the darkness, trying but not succeeding. We are trying but our ministry is not bearing any fruit. Yet Christ comes down from the mountain to be at our level, and tells us to cast our nets, he tells us to reach out one more time, and our nets will be full.

When you return Christ's love, when you share Christ's love, do it as Jesus leads you and calls you to share. Don't get involved in a homeless ministry if Jesus isn't calling you there. Don't get involved with the elderly if Jesus isn't calling you there. Don't work with children if Jesus isn't calling you there. Instead listen to Jesus and follow him. Follow him to where he may be leading you. Follow him and be ready to return Christ's love by loving others.

If Jesus leads you to work for peace, follow him.

If Jesus leads you to listen to the downhearted, follow him.

If Jesus leads you to create a safe place for worship, follow him.

If Jesus leads you to feed the hungry, follow him.

If Jesus leads you to offer compassion to the sick, follow him.

If Jesus leads you to call others to the grace and the glory of the Lord, follow him.

You want to know what to do here in the church? Do you want to know why you are here? You are here because this is where you can offer your own love to Christ. This is where your love for Jesus can become real, incarnate and tangible. It is in this community that you hear Christ asking, "Do you love me?" You want to know how you can respond to Jesus question that will transcend any love you can offer. Follow Jesus into the cave and caverns of the world. Follow Jesus into the wounds and the weaknesses of the world. Follow Jesus and let Jesus lead you.

We are called to love with Jesus. We are called to live with Jesus. We are called to follow Jesus. Let all that we do, all that we say and all that we are love, live, and follow Jesus.

AMEN