

### **John 21:15-23**

*“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.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ 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. He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved 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. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.’ (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Peter turned and saw following them the disciple whom Jesus loved, who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, ‘Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?’ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about this man?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!’”*

I read a story while back about a husband who kept a list of 25 things he believed a wife needed to do in order to be a good wife. Every day he would take out his list and check off the things she had completed that day. Cooking meals on time –check! Cleaning – check! Caring for the children – check! At the end of the day, he would let her know how she scored – 23 out of 25, or 21 out of 25, etc. This happened almost every day and as a result this woman was utterly miserable. She was miserable because she did not marry a checklist. She felt these things were important but she had higher hopes for her marriage. She married for love, or so she thought.

After many years her husband died. This woman felt like a giant weight had been lifted off of her. No more checklists to live by. She had been doing what she felt a wife should do and hated every minute of it. A number of years after her husband's death she met and fell in love. This new man had no lists. He told her all he wanted was to love her. He wanted nothing more than her to wake every morning and go to sleep every evening knowing she was loved.

One day while cleaning this woman found one of the old lists her first husband had her live by. Looking at this list she began to giggle when she realized that everything on that list, all 25 items were being done every day and they were being done effortlessly in this her second marriage. Everything she hated doing for her first husband she was doing for her second husband and loving it. The difference was love. He current husband just loved her, and as a result she wanted to do for him, because of the love she had for him.

For some of us who have weathered the hurts of broken relationships, saying, “I love you,” for the first time again is one of the most frightening things we will ever do. Saying “I love you” out loud is an important milestone in any relationship whether you are:

- whispering it to your sweetheart,
- promising it to a new child,
- admitting it to an estranged parent,
- offering it to a lonely friend,
- revealing it to a rival sibling.
- speaking these words to God

Saying “I love you” once is never enough. It is just the beginning. We must say “I love you” over and over again; we must hear those words “I love you” over and over again before we begin to trust the reality of those words and before we can feel the weight of the love which lies behind them. But more than saying them, in order to give credence to those words we must live them.

In today’s gospel text, Jesus asks Peter three separate times, “*Do you love me?*” In part, we can understand this as the author’s way of canceling out each one of Peter’s shameful denials of Jesus on the night He was arrested and betrayed, but Jesus’ persistence demonstrates more than a scorekeeping of rights and wrongs. Jesus ties each of Peter’s confessions of love for Him to a repeated command “*Care for my sheep.*”

What took Peter three times to get and what takes all of us a lifetime to practice is Jesus’ question about “loving” and His command about “feeding.” Peter didn’t understand immediately the implications of what it means to love Christ. Truly loving Christ means feeding His sheep; it means loving, protecting, caring for all those whom Christ loves not just handing them a plate of food. It goes far beyond that.

Jesus says in this morning's passage three times, "*Peter do you love me? Then feed my lambs;*" "*Peter do you love me? Then tend my sheep;*" "*Peter do you love me? Then feed my sheep.*" Loving Christ and tending Christ's flock is one and the same thing. They are synonymous you cannot truly do one and not the other.

A husband and wife were arguing and they were really going at it. So the wife made a suggestion that they stop arguing and write down all their complaints on a piece of paper and then show their complaints to each other, which she felt would show how they felt towards each other. They each sat down with a piece of paper and pen and began to write.

They both wrote quickly for a while. The husband would write, then pause, and look at his wife and then he would start writing again. The wife would write some, then pause look up at her husband, and then write some more. The husband wrote, paused to look up with what appeared to be an even angrier face, then write some more. The wife she did the same.

This went on for a little while when the wife put her pen down, but her husband kept writing. He would write, pause look at her with an angry look, and then write some more. Just when she thought he was about to finish he wrote some more.

By this time this wife was becoming furious because she covered only one side of her paper, and her husband was about to finish the back side of his. Every time he would stop and look at her he seemed to be fired up all the more and he would start back to writing. By this time the wife was clenching her fists and tears of anger were welling up in her eyes. Finally he finished and they exchanged their papers and looked at the complaints each had towards the other.

As soon as he gave her his paper and she looked at it, she felt awful, she felt terrible. She wanted nothing more at that moment than to take back her paper. For when she read his paper, in spite of his anger, in spite of his pain, he had written on every line, covering both sides of the paper “I Love You, I Love You, I Love You. I’m ticked off at you, but I Love You, I’m angry at you but I Love You.” “I don’t want to be here doing this, but I Love You.”

When you and I love one another like that, that kind of love can cover a multitude of sins and/or faults. The love confessed and the love expressed can take many different forms and not all of them are pleasant. For every loving moment spent cuddling a new baby, there are an awful lot of equally loving, but not so lovely, moments spent changing smelly diapers. Loving a spouse is planning a romantic candlelight dinner for two and going to the movies with her, when you would rather go to and/or stay home to watch a ball game (or vice versa). A loving friend can give you a comfortable place for coffee and conversation, but being a loving friend also means being there for him/her at 2 a.m. when you are needed. Tending His sheep and loving Christ is sometimes messy, inconvenient, upsetting and uncomfortable. It takes more than just good intentions to make the kind of loving commitment Jesus was trying to get Peter to admit to it takes habits.

The English language has just one word for "Love." But the Greeks had four words each meaning "Love." There was "*Eros*," which is sexual love; there is "*Storge*," which is brotherly/sisterly love; there is "*Phila*," which is general love of/for things; and then there is "*Agape*," which is unconditional no holds barred total unashamed selfless love. When Jesus

asked Peter “*Do You Love Me?*” Jesus asked “*Do you Agape Me?*” But when Peter replied he said “*Yes Lord I Phila You.*” Jesus was asking Peter if he loved Him with an unconditional no holds barred total unashamed selfless love, and Peter was talking about general love, like the love of ice cream. Big difference, don’t you think.

Developing love as a pattern of living takes commitment to the three “R’s” and it’s not “Reading, Riteing, and Rithmatic.” The three “R’s” are: Repetition, Ritual and Reinforcement.

Repetition: Jesus repeated His question to Peter three times not out of doubt or because of Peter’s denseness, but in order to strengthen the power of His words. With each “*Do you agape me,*” or “*Do you love Me,*” the meaning and inferences behind this question seeped more deeply into Peter's heart. We must be careful of vain repetition as being simply rote.

There is a phrase children use to describe something committed to memory through repetition, they say we “learn it by heart.” All those prayers, those actions, those responses to life that we “learn by heart” through constant repetition should become a part of our heart not just our head. “I love you” “Our Father ...” “Praise God” “God bless you.” All these phrases

represent repeated expressions of love and faith in our lives and they are no less powerful for having been repeated so often and for so long because if we have “learned by heart,” then that’s where they should come from our hearts and not just our heads. But it seems often times we carelessly and nonchalantly say “Love ya” and answer with “Me too.” This is not from the heart it’s from the head. It needs to be of the heart.

The second “R” is rituals. Rituals need not be mindless acts; indeed, rituals rightly performed are mindful acts. We all have our personal rising rituals: we get up, brush our teeth, take a shower, walk the dog, make the coffee, read the paper or do some version of this routine. This consistency is comforting and settles our systems before we start off into another busy, hectic day. Have you established similar habits, pattern of faithfulness that serves the same purpose with your relationship to Christ?

We need faith-rituals to give us stability when everything else around us seems to be shifting. All faith rituals need not be as formal as going to church or receiving communion. A habitual ritual might be breathing a prayer of thanksgiving every time you enter into your home. It might be looking for your church’s steeple from the freeway on your morning

commute. It might be praying a prayer of thank you for a parking space. It might be ... you fill in the blank. Every week we sing the same Doxology, every week we recite the same Apostles Creed, and every week it seems they are just repeated from memory and not from the heart no concentration just rote memory. This needs to change.

The third “R” is reinforcement. It’s so hard to stay on a diet when you hit one of those “weight plateaus” where no matter how good you are, how many salads you eat, your scales refuse to budge. We need periodic positive reinforcement to keep the habits of our faith renewed and refreshed.

This is why we need to hear “I love you,” as often as we need to say it.

Practiced faithfully, a habit filled life will create its own reinforcement.

Well-loved and well-tended sheep respond devotedly to their shepherd.

Loving Christ, living a life faithfully tending to Christ’s business, becomes a natural reflex in a life when a habit of letting God and His children know how much you love them. But we must continually ask ourselves; when you say “I Love You” is it “*Phila*” or “*Agape*” love? Is it unconditional no holds barred total unashamed selfless love or is like the love of ice cream? One has no limits; the other is determined by our individual

likes and dislikes. When Landrum United Methodist Church says “I Love You” through our ministries or our speaking are we saying to the world “*We Agape you*” or are we saying “*We Phila you?*” Think about that the next time you come in contact with a stranger.