

Love One Another

John 21

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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We are finally at the end of John's gospel. Anyone remember when we began? The last Sunday of Advent. We began with chapter 1, which says:

"in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came into being with the Word and without the Word not one thing came into being. What has come into being in the Word was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen this glory, ...full of grace and truth.... No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is God, who is close to the God's heart, who has made God known."

Each Sunday, we have read a bit more of John and let these big ideas—Word, truth, life, glory, love—get “fleshed out” in the story. We've finally come to the last chapter of John, chapter 21, an epilogue that brings back some of John's main ideas.

We'll read 21 in two main parts. The first section a resurrection appearance by Jesus. The last few verses are a dialogue between Jesus and Peter that centers at the heart of John's gospel. First, another resurrection appearance:

...Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias.... ²Gathered there were Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” ⁶He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he had taken it off, and jumped into the sea. ⁸But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

⁹When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹²Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

The last time we saw the disciples, where were they? Where are they now? The Sea of Tiberias (also called the Sea of Galilee). They are all back where it all began, where Jesus first met the fishermen Simon Peter and Andrew and the sons of Zebedee. They didn't stay in Jerusalem where they first saw the Risen Christ. They have gone back to pick up their former lives. They are back trying to squeeze out a living among the fish paste monopolists.

Easter changes everything. But it doesn't mean you have to change everything. You don't have to run off to join the circus—although the church may be a kind of circus. You don't have to live in a cave and seek ecstatic experiences. Easter people continue in the life to which we are called. This Risen Christ is where you are. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century German martyr who tried to live a faithful Christian life in the face of the overwhelming evil of Nazi Germany said this:

It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith.... I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God.... That is faith... and that is how one becomes a [human being] and a Christian.

After Easter, the disciples return to fishing. Life goes on. Curiously, these disciples don't even seem to be very good at fishing. The fact that no one considered dropping their nets on the opposite side of the boat makes you wonder if they should try something new like plumbing.

What they do get “right” is that they are together when Christ comes; they haven't separated. They are keeping faithful community. They are “in the boat” together. Christ appears to them all and good things happen. With the Risen Christ there is *abundance*. That idea—the “so muchness” of God, is so important in John: wine at the wedding in Cana, living water spilling over, bread for 5000, abundant life is all around Jesus. Here, there is fish—more than they can handle (but not more than they can count, because some junior disciple had to count the fish and there were 153). See how Christ provides for us abundantly? Christ provides a great catch, but even before they haul it all in, Christ already has fish on the fire and breakfast is ready.

Wherever you are in life, Christ is with you. At home. In your neighborhood. At your work. Wherever you are, Christ is. Where Christ is, there is abundance: love, grace, and breakfast.

Let's continue in this passage to see how Jesus speaks with Peter. The disciples are gathered here around a charcoal fire. Who remembers the last time we saw a charcoal fire in John? Peter was warming himself around a charcoal fire as he was denying Jesus 3 times. Peter, the most famous disciple, the paradigm. Peter is both “rock” and also completely unreliable, which is to say, Peter is like you and me. Peter's unreliability is a major part of the story of Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion. We are supposed to see ourselves in Peter—our best intentions and our profound failures. At the Last Supper, Peter makes bold promises about how he will go anywhere to follow Jesus. Jesus says plainly, “you can't follow me now.” You will fail. But then Jesus says, mysteriously, “later you will.” That “later” is here.

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶A second time [Jesus] said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt 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. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this Jesus said to Peter, “Follow me.”

This is such a powerful exchange. “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Jesus says Peter’s name, the same way he spoke Mary’s name—we are changed when God speaks our name. How many times did Peter deny Jesus? Three times. How many times does Jesus give Peter a chance to repair his denial? Three! Our God is a God of second and third chances. God does not hold your failure against you. Jesus gives Peter the chance to get it right. Christ is always inviting us into faithfulness, asking us again, “Do you love me?”

This is what God does. This is also how we are to be with one another. Forgiveness, rehabilitation, reconciliation, mercy. We will be like Peter. We *will* hurt the people we love. This church and every community must embrace a practice of mending. Apology, contrition, repair, restoration—communion only impossible through these practices.

Jesus doesn’t only forgive Peter. Jesus points him in the direction that all of our lives are to be pointed: love. To love Christ, to “believe in” Christ, is neither a feeling nor an abstract theological proposition. Love is a active service: “if you love me, feed my sheep.”

You want to love God? Seek the best for one another. Meets others where they are. Be generous, be caring. Bring food along. Stay with one who are sick. Sit with ones who are lonely. Take people into your home. Wash their feet. Let them do all these things for you. Mutual love is the goal in John’s gospel.

For many years, I struggled with John. “Love one another,” felt a little a Hallmark card-y to me. I fell in love with the Christian tradition because I think it contains the revolutionary message that love changes the whole world. John doesn’t have Mary’s saying the mighty will be pulled down from their thrones. John’s Jesus’ doesn’t preach, “I have come to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives.” John’s Jesus doesn’t say, “as you have done to the least of these, you have done to me,” or “you can’t serve God and wealth.” John is the least social justice-y gospel. I held that against John. I didn’t think John did enough with the revolutionary nature of love.

I hear John differently now. John doesn’t negate social justice. He never says love won’t change the world. What John does is foreground human intimacy as the place where love and our life with God become real. Love, after all, isn’t an ideology. It’s something shared between particular human bodies. Love is spending time with another person, getting to know another person, letting your life be woven together with the life of another person, and bearing the burdens of another person. The more deeply you love someone, the less capacity you have to love others. You can’t love everyone. You can only love a few: your partner, your children, your grandchildren, a few friends, a few neighbors, people in this church. Love’s radius is small. We love the people we can cook for, whose feet we can wash, whose tears we can dry. The ones who return our love with their own.

The genius of John's gospel is that it is only in these small spaces that we experience love. Only where we know and are known, where we serve and are served, where we hurt and are hurt, where we forgive and are forgiven, do we come to know a love that saves us.

God loves the whole world. We love one another.

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks. "I love you," we say. "Feed my sheep."