

Following Jesus and Love

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Easter

Sermon Text: John 21:15-19



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." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "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." ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ (This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this He said to him, "Follow me."

My son Philipp has Down Syndrome, so he functions completely differently than most people. He understands very little about many things. About other things, he understands more than most people imagine.

One thing that Philipp probably understands better than many is love. He asks people who stand near him, very direct and without any timidity: "Do you love me?" Sometimes, he repeats this question several times until he is content with the answer. When he asks me this, I'm always a little embarrassed, especially when I must tell him for the 5th time, "Yes, Philipp, I love you!"

Peter, the disciple of Jesus, was also embarrassed when Jesus asked him for the third time: "Do you love Me?" Peter was more than embarrassed by this. The situation was extremely uncomfortable for him. To understand this, we must remember some background history. Peter was the main representative of the 12 disciples and when Jesus had announced His death, it was Peter who insistently said: "Though they all fall away because of You, I will never fall away...even if I must die with You!" The story went differently. Amidst imminent danger and in the face of the bloodlust and hate of the people who wanted to kill Jesus, Peter was frozen with fear. Three times he denied knowing Jesus at all. Only when the rooster crowed did Peter suddenly realize, just as Jesus had predicted: "before the rooster crows,

you will deny Me three times!” The words penetrated Peter’s heart. When Jesus then had to die a bitter death on the cross, Peter stayed far away. He had failed! For Peter, this was an absolute low point in his life. He didn’t know himself anymore. Perhaps he didn’t want to know himself anymore. At Jesus’ side, everything was so clear. He thought that he was on the side of good. He thought that he was good. And now, he no longer knew himself. Maybe he didn’t want to know himself anymore. Perhaps you know this situation of Peter’s too. Most people have completed their identity by the age of 30. After that, a human personality doesn’t change very much. And yet, there are always crises or emergencies in life, which reveal a side of your personality that you didn’t know before. Maybe you sometimes feel hate, selfishness, or jealousy and think: I don’t know myself like that. And if you look into a mirror, you think: Who am I really? And what drives me?

After Peter had denied Jesus, he had this feeling. Jesus was risen from the dead for a long time already, everyone spoke about how Jesus conquered death, and they were excited about the great thing that had happened. But Peter wasn’t really happy yet. Every time a rooster crowed, his expression darkened and he became forlorn. He didn’t know what he should do about this feeling of being a traitor. And in this situation, Peter did what he always did. “Let’s go fishing!” he said to his friends. What happened afterwards was an exact repeat of his first encounter with Jesus. The entire night, they tried to catch fish with no success. Then Jesus commanded them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat and they caught more fish than the boat could carry. At this moment, they all knew who they were dealing with – it was Jesus!

Later, they all sat together and grilled fish. Then in this situation, Jesus directly confronted Peter and challenged Peter with this question: “Do you love Me more than these?” We remember what Peter said about himself earlier: “though they all fall away because of You, I will never fall away.” Peter didn’t say that this time. On the contrary, it is Jesus who asks Peter if he loves the Lord more than anyone else. Peter can only answer bluntly: “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You!”

There’s a small linguistic peculiarity here, Greek has different words for love. When you talk about God’s love, the word “agape” is always used. This is the highest form of love and expresses that God gives selflessly of Himself for us without expecting anything in return. This is the same love Jesus had for us when He died for us on the cross. There is another word for the kind of love between friends. That love is expressed with the word “phileo.” What’s interesting about the discussion Jesus has with Peter is that Jesus uses the word “agape” when He asks Peter: “Do you love Me?” So, it’s a very high form of love that Jesus expects from Peter. Peter should give himself unconditionally just as Jesus Himself did. Peter should love like Jesus! Peter knew that he couldn’t do that. So, he answered but instead of using the word for divine love, he used the word “phileo,” expressing friendship: “Yes, Lord; You know that I love you!” That happens twice in a row. It is only for the third time that Jesus uses the word “phileo,” which expresses friendly human love, and only then does Peter become really sad because it’s in this moment that he realizes that he can’t love like Jesus can. He also realizes that he isn’t capable of loving like that. He has no part in Jesus and no part in God. But what he knows is that Jesus has this love! What he does know is that he encountered God through Jesus and so he completely gives up being great himself and only looks to Jesus: “Lord, You know everything; You know that I love You!”

At this point, Peter completely places himself in Jesus’ hand. It is Jesus who knows his story! It is Jesus who also knows his failure! Jesus knows him better than he knows himself. Jesus also knows his deepest thoughts. Jesus even knows the failure and yet, this Jesus stays by Peter’s side! That makes him

happy, and he has an idea of how things could continue with Jesus. From now on, Peter only wants to know himself through Jesus. When he looks into the mirror, he no longer wants to see just Peter by himself, but to see Jesus, Jesus who loves him and knows him. What happens next is amazing. Peter is not rejected by Jesus. Jesus would have had every reason to deny Peter because he had previously denied Jesus. But Jesus didn't do that. On the contrary, He commissioned Peter again. He gives him another chance. Peter is not only to remain a disciple. He should even receive a special assignment and proclaim the Gospel until the end of his life. Peter then is to lay the foundation of the Church. Now what does this story mean for us? For one, it means we no longer have to be embarrassed when it comes to love. It is clear in Peter's commissioning that this assignment is significantly connected with love. Peter is a rock of the Church and this Church is founded on love!

We are not Jesus. We also can't love like Jesus. And yet, Jesus commands us to love. Martin Luther said something like: God's love doesn't search for lovable people, rather God's love creates people who can love! That means that we all can have a part in this love of Jesus. Only one thing should be clear to us – this love does not bypass Jesus. If we understand love as a general moral or human quality, we are stuck with Peter. But we don't want that. We don't want to have a part in Peter, but in Jesus Himself. The last words that Jesus says to Peter are: "Follow me!" Those are also the last words that Jesus says to us: Follow me!" None of us knows where this path will lead, but what we do know is that Jesus has a plan for us. And this plan is nothing but divine love! Amen.