

Loving Jesus

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Preaching on:

John 21:1–19

Ah, love, love, love, love. Anybody here ever been in love? You know what it's like. I want to read you a little bit, a famous piece of scripture this morning, to start out with. "If I could speak in the tongues of mortals and angels but do not have love. I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes, all things, endures all things. And now faith, hope, and love abide these three, and the greatest of these is love."

The Bible teaches us that love is the greatest spiritual attribute that we can achieve within ourselves. The greatest attribute that we can pursue in this world. But I saw a lot of hands go up when you all said that you had been in love. When you were in love, did it all sound like that stuff that Paul was talking about? Just the greatest thing ever? Patient and kind and oh, just smooth sailing all the way? No, absolutely not.

We all know that love is complicated and it can be extraordinarily painful at times. It could cause us to do some crazy things. It can lead to some of the worst examples of bad behavior that you have ever read about in the tabloid pages or the Hollywood gossip rags. I mean, love can really do a number on you. The Bible, as it commends love to us, it's not naive. The Bible knows that love can be difficult. That is exactly why Paul says, "Well, let me give you this long laundry list of the things that do describe love." Love is patient and kind. It is not envious. It is not boastful. Because Paul understands that love is hard and that we don't always get it right?

And so, in the resurrection of Easter, that first Easter, is a wonderful moment. Jesus pops into the disciples. They've gone out fishing and Jesus shows up on the shore. He's telling him, "Hey, fish, over there," and they get a bunch of fish. He says, "Hey, come on in." They all come in and Jesus has a fire going. They sit down and they roast their fish together and they do just the most mundane thing you could ever imagine. This is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. What do they do? They have breakfast together. Isn't that a wonderful thing?

After they're done with breakfast, Jesus starts asking about love. It's a little bit confusing exactly what's going on here. He asks him three times. In the first time Jesus asks Peter, he phrases it like this, "Do you love me more than all these? Do you love me more than all these other people? Do you love me more than these disciples? Am I number one in your life? You got to love me the most. Do you love me the most? Peter says, "Yeah, I do. I love you. You know I love you. I love you that much."

How would you answer that question? I'm not sure that Jesus just is fully satisfied with Peter's answer. Are you? If He was satisfied with his answer, I think He would've just asked him one time and Jesus would've said, "Yo, I love you the most. I love you more than all these other suckers. Forget about all of them. They're nothing to me. You are everything to me. Don't even think about them. I can be done with them in a minute. I'll give up everything. I'm all for you. You, you are number one. You're my number one passion. You're the only one for me." Well, Jesus would've said, "Well, okay. That sounds pretty good." But that is kind of what Peter says. He says, "Yeah, I love you more than all of them." But Jesus keeps asking him.

There was a time where I was exploring Zen Buddhism and it was a conversation partner to me, well, with my Christian faith. I wanted to learn more about another faith tradition radically different from the Abrahamic tradition. And so, I began to learn and to practice and to meet with Zen Buddhists. One of

the things that you do in Zen Buddhism is after you meditate, you might go in and speak with the spiritual master. I would go in and I would sit down. One of the first questions that the spiritual master, the monk or the nun, would ask me is they would point to a bell and they would say, "What is this?" I would say, "Oh good, I got an easy one." I would say, "It's a bell." They would say, "What is this?" I would say, "It's a bell."

They would say, "What is this?" I would say, "It's a bell." And they would say, "I think that's enough for today. Why don't you go back out and meditate tomorrow?" I had not gotten the right answer. It took many months of meditation and listening to talks and participating in the community before eventually I started answering all kinds of things. I was thinking, "Geez, it's a piece of metal that rings. And they would ask me again, "What is it?" I was just coming up with all kinds of philosophical answers and wild answers. They would ask me again and again, "What is it? What is it?"

Finally, one day they asked me, "What is it?" I picked up the little ringer and I rang the bell, and they didn't ask me the question again. Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than everybody?" Peter says, "Yes, I love you more than anybody." Jesus, I don't think is happy with that answer. I don't think it's the right answer. I also don't think that the answer, "No, I love everybody more than you," is the right answer. Neither one of them are good answers. Jesus is pointing us to a higher calling and Jesus doesn't want to say to Peter ... He's resurrected Jesus. He's gentle. He doesn't want to say, "No, you got it wrong, you bonehead. You constantly get it wrong." He just gently redirects him. He says, "Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."

You got to understand poor Peter's perspective here. When the crucifixion happened, Peter denied Jesus three times. Jesus was arrested and tried and crucified. All during that night, Peter said, "I don't know him. I don't know him. I'm not associated with him. I'm not one of his followers. I never saw the guy before in my life." He realizes that he has betrayed Jesus. He's not there for Him. And so now, Jesus is giving him this opportunity for redemption, and Peter is not going to miss out on this opportunity. So when Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Peter says, "Yes, I love you more than anything. More than anything. You are number one. You're my everything. I love you. I love you passionately." He's ready to defend Jesus. He's ready to hold on to Jesus and never let go.

But you know, the interesting thing about Jesus is Jesus never asks us to defend him. Frankly, I don't think that Jesus needs us to defend him. Now, Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Incarnate One, the Logos who was there before the beginning, through whom everything was created. Jesus doesn't need me or you to defend him to the world. The kind of love that Jesus asks us for is not to defend Him or to stand up for Him, but to imitate Him. That's what Jesus asked us for.

It's understandable that Peter gets it wrong. He thinks, "I ran away from Jesus, and at that crucial moment in His life, I didn't defend Him." But what was really wrong is that he didn't imitate him. When he denied Jesus, he wasn't showing his love. Jesus doesn't ask for defenders. He needs people who

can imitate him. And so, when Peter says, "I'm going to love you more than I love anybody else," Jesus says, "Feed my sheep. Imitate me. Put the love that you have for me into action. Put it into action. That's how you love me. And that's what love is. Don't beat people up with me. Imitate me. The love that I have given to you, give it to the world and then you will be my follower."