

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, who knows no bounds and no limits, we underestimate you so often. We call and proclaim you as a great God, but we frequently put you in a box. We believe we are serving you when we, implicitly and without thinking, make our desires your desires. We claim to follow you but make you the authority behind what we want to do ourselves. Forgive us for this unfaithfulness. Open our eyes to see and our ears to hear the amazing message that you proclaim to us, and help us to know what it means to follow you on your terms, not necessarily on the terms that we find comfortable.

Today, we hear the story of Jesus and Peter, with Jesus' ongoing question, "Do you love me?" It seems so easy, God, to tell you we love you back, but with you, we are always called to look for the deeper answers of faithfulness. Sometimes it's hard to love you in action, God, for we are easily complacent. When life is easy, we seek to keep things as they are. When life is more difficult, we ask that things become comfortable once again. You call us to more, holy God. You call us to a life of service and honoring and to love you to the absolute fullest, in comfort and discomfort. You call us to feed your sheep and your lambs as the way to show how we love you. Help us to understand what that calling means, to the very depths of sacrifice and goodness that Christ shows us in his love. We look to you, ever shining example, for the way to be faithful in a complicated world that does not ask much of us. Help us, ongoing companion, as we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying...

SERMON

Ever feel like you're talking two languages? It might be that you're in a discussion, you say something, the other person says something, you go back and forth for five minutes, until you realize you've been saying the same thing all along. In another way, you

might start a conversation with another person, think you're on the same page, and then five minutes later, you realize that you're not really saying the same thing. Language disconnects occur all the time, partly because we haven't necessarily been listening or we have trouble clearly communicating what's on our mind. Even in marriage, between people who have been married for decades, still don't always know exactly what his or her partner is trying to say all the time. Communication is an inexact art. I took a class in college called small group communication. It was full of games and activities that emphasized the complexity of what it means to communicate within a group. One game we played in our group was the video game of Risk. I remember we were doing well; our group had taken over South America and heavily fortified our position, until another group in the class threw all of their forces recklessly into our position and took over our position. We thought we communicated well. We thought we had formed a good plan and were on the fast track to success, but it all came down.

Communication does seem like an easy idea. It seems really simple to just say what's on your mind and think that it's crystal clear. However, that is where the complexity comes in. The other person isn't us, doesn't always know exactly what we're thinking and what our line of thought may be, so when we use a word or a thought, the other person may not exactly understand what you mean. It can be a simple matter of how we define words differently. For instance, depending on where in the United States you go, there's a big difference in ordering a "pop" or a "soda." In some places, if you order a Coke, they will ask "What kind?" for "Coke" there is a general name for soda. It can be a completely different concept when we use certain words. I can say that it's a beautiful day out, but that may not be what you mean by "beautiful day." I think a beautiful day includes a nice

thunderstorm, rain, and maybe a little lightning. I find that exciting and invigorating. I associate it Catherine, I know, thinks entirely the opposite. She had a fit when she reached Denver for the first time and found several days of storms. It gets more complex than these examples. We may have certain emotions, past history, or other attachments with a word, a facial expression, an action, or a deed that the next person may not understand. It can be easy to find a disconnect that prevents us from communicating and understanding well.

What is the disconnect in this story? Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter keeps responding, "Yes, you know that I love you!" And yet, Jesus keeps asking him, "do you love me?" There is obviously something missing in the communication here. Is Jesus just trying to make a point? Is Peter somehow not getting his message across? Or Peter simply missing the grander point? It comes down to what it means to love, and how we respond to this ongoing question of discipleship. Jesus is trying to tell Peter something, but Peter is resting on a different understanding that he just takes for granted. Let's take a look at the calling of Christ, the response of Peter, how we fit in this question, and how we respond in expressing our love and service to Christ.

On the surface, the story seems really difficult, a struggle to understand. It all comes down to a matter of communication. The three questions work as a counterbalance to the three denials of Peter. These questions, as the counterbalance, work to foster discipleship and relationship with Christ against the previous three denials, but there's something deeper going on in Jesus' questions. The very meaning of love is being called into question. What we do not see here in the English but is in the Greek are two of the three forms of love. We really are at a disservice in English. Greek has three words for love, which show the complexity of the concept. On the other hand, we have one word: love. It's used in

English for everything from lust, to passing interest, to fondness, to the great sacrificial care of God. Frankly, to put all those things together into one word is just garbage.

Jesus is indeed giving better expression to the concept. In Greek, Jesus is asking, “Simon, Son of John, do you love me, do you agape me, more than these?” Jesus uses the Greek word “agape” for love. This is truly amazing. Jesus is asking if Peter loves him unconditionally, fully, without bound or condition. Agape is the kind of love that is always used when we discuss God’s love toward us. It is the most all-encompassing, full, and deep love that exists in the Greek language. It does not disappear quickly; its sacrificial nature is best exemplified by Christ’s actions on the cross and the response he gives to the jeers: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” It’s a love that takes lifetimes to fathom; it is the love of God.

Peter’s response seems appropriate, but it’s lacking. He doesn’t use the same kind of love. “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” “Yes, Lord, you know I philo you.” Peter uses a different kind of love, but it’s not necessarily an equivalent form of love. Philo is the love that you have toward a family member, much more of a friendly love. Peter responds to Jesus, “You know I consider you like a brother.” That’s not enough; Christ is calling him to something more.

This story makes us question how we respond to Christ. Christ calls to us constantly, “Do you love me more than these?” What are we going to say? Do we respond like Peter? “Do you love me more than what you were, what you are, what you will be, everything you have and everything you ever will?” Peter responds with this spirit: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. I give you every Sunday morning and the occasional committee meeting.” Or this way: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you. I sing as hard as I

can.” These are just further ways of saying we love Christ with not the same amount of love, and he tells Peter and us that there is more required of discipleship. Christ wants us to look toward the unfathomable, to constantly grasp at what it means to love him and love our neighbor in turn.

The calling is indeed not a simple calling. As one bumper sticker I saw online stated it, “If you love Jesus, seek justice. Any fool can honk.” That is the very essence of this story. Thinking that the bumper sticker “Honk if you love Jesus” is a sign of serious discipleship is incorrect. That is not agape; that’s not even discipleship. It’s more and deeper. Jesus tells Peter that the calling of discipleship will take him where he doesn’t want to go, and will ask of him what he doesn’t want to do. Jesus is saying there is more than a significant responsibility here. He tells Peter, “Feed my sheep.” That is what discipleship means. There are other ways we can envision Christ responding with how to love him. He doesn’t say, “Worship me,” or “Give me all your money and possessions.” It is instead the calling to take care of what Christ cares about most. It is the church. As the old song sings, “The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place; the church is the people.” Jesus calls us to care for the people as his ongoing legacy.

This is another wonderful story of the Risen Christ. The Risen Christ shows us what renewed life means by virtue of the resurrection, but he also continues to teach lessons as he did before. This is yet another lesson about what it means to live into new life. Christ provided new life and forgiveness to the Apostle Peter in his weakness, denying Christ and his discipleship toward Christ in front of others. By his three questions to Peter, he overturns Peter’s three denials. If Christ can provide new life to the one who denied Christ in his greatest time of trial, it gives us hope that new life is always available to us. It tells us

that we can move beyond the easy lessons of cultural Christianity and truly attain the life everlasting that Christ eagerly provides if we dig deeper in relationship with him and come to know his teachings more fully each day. Christ freely gives if we deeply search.

“Do you love me?” Christ asks. He asked Peter, and the answer did not fulfill Christ’s calling. There was an issue in communication, with Peter resting on the wrong understanding. He gave an easy answer, an answer that sounded too comfortable. It was an answer of love that lacked the depth that Jesus presented himself and asked of Peter. We face the same problem today as well. We live in an age of easy discipleship, where coming to church equates to the deep love that Christ calls us to have. The communication of what we are called to do is sometimes lost. What is asked is often not enough. Christ calls more of his people than coming to church. The love Christ calls us to with him and for all our neighbors is a sacrificing love, a love where we can hardly reach its depths. It takes a lifetime to learn, but we aren’t called to understand it all at once. We are called to walk on that journey to start to even figure out what it means. We’ll need to look time and time again at what Jesus said to really get it. As one of my pastor mentors said as he ended his sermons, “It’s just that easy; it’s just that hard.” I can think of few better ways to describe the calling of Jesus. “Love me and follow me.” It’s just that easy; it’s just that hard. Amen and Amen.