

***The Scariest Question of All***  
**Sermon on John 21:1-19, 25 (5/9 & 5/10/15)**  
**Jennifer M. Hallenbeck**

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When I was a little girl, I would occasionally play the “he loves me, he loves me not” game with flowers. I’m sure many of you know the game I’m talking about:

you grab a flower with petals and then, as you think about the person who holds your affection, you pull the first petal off and say, “He loves me”...you pull the next petal off and say, “He loves me not”... “He loves me,” “He loves me not”...etc, etc. until you get to the last petal.

Whichever option you're on with one petal left, is the reality of the situation: if, on the last petal, you're left saying, “He loves me,” it's great news for you! If you're on “He loves me not,” well, you're out of luck. No returned affection. Of course, if you landed on “He loves me not,” you usually just found another flower and tried again right away, hoping the game would go your way that time!

Now. Obviously, a game like that doesn't *really* mean anything when it comes to matters of affection and love. Thank goodness love and affection are about more than random child's play with flower petals!

But love and affection are tricky. Even scary. When I was a little girl with a crush, I played the “He loves me, he loves me not” game because playing that silly game was far easier than actually *asking* the boy I liked if he liked me back.

And, if you got the “wrong” answer when you pulled the last flower petal, you knew it didn't really mean anything. But, if you actually *asked* the boy and then you got an answer you didn't like, well...that's a different story entirely. Much easier to simply pull flower petals. It's far less risky than asking the question for real.

*“Do you love me?”*

This question is perhaps the scariest question of all the questions we can ask. And it gets asked – not once, but three times – in today's Gospel reading from John chapter 21.

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Most of the time we think of this question in terms of romantic relationships – and, when it comes to romantic relationships, this question always produces some anxiety. In fact, very often, the anxiety produced by this question prevents us from even asking it in the first place...or, at the very least, we wait to ask it until we're sure the answer will be a positive one.

*“Do you love me?”*

When couples ask this question of one another, it is significant not simply because they care about the other's feelings for them. Yes, the loving *feelings* are important...but the feelings aren't really the primary source of any anxiety behind the question. Because, behind the question "do you love me" is a whole host of other questions:

"Are you committed to me and me alone?" "Are you willing to have me as a central part of your life and your decision-making?"

*"Do you love me?"*

The question is significant because it's a question not just about *feelings*. Loving feelings are great, yes, but feelings alone wax and wane. True love *is* never – and *can* never be – just about feelings: true love is also about commitment and actions.

Asking the question "Do you love me?" is always about more than just feelings...it's about life – so it's a terrifying, anxiety-producing question for both the one asking and the one being asked. And Jesus asked it of Peter three times in today's Gospel reading.

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In John 21, when Jesus asked Peter "Do you love me," Jesus was not asking within the context of romantic love. But this question is a question that does not only pertain to romantic relationships. And, even if the love in question isn't romantic love, you better believe there can still be much anxiety behind the question.

When Jesus asked Peter "Do you love me?" – though it was not about romance – it *was* about commitment and it *was* about actions.

It was a question about life. And Jesus demanded an answer – not once, but three times.

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One of the things we pastors often spend a fair amount of time doing is visiting folks in the hospital. Like anyone else who goes to visit someone in the hospital, we pastors go to offer comfort...presence; to remind people that, in the midst of sickness, they are not alone.

The things that mark pastoral visits as being somewhat different from many or most other visits is the fact that we will sometimes read from the Bible and we will nearly always pray with the patient. (Though, of course, many faithful, non-pastors also do these things when visiting dear ones in the hospital...)

When we pastors visit you in the hospital, we hope you find our visits to be meaningful reminders of God's presence, and we hope that, in some mysterious way, our prayers bring strength and healing.

Years ago, I visited a woman in the hospital a couple of times who had a loose connection to the church I was serving in South Dakota. We didn't know each other, so I made sure to introduce myself as one of the United Methodist pastors in town.

The first time I visited this woman, she was feeling pretty rough, so we had a very brief conversation and I offered a short prayer. A week, or so, later, I went back to see her and I happened to be at the hospital over the noon hour.

I walked into her room and, as I reintroduced myself, I noticed that she was struggling with her lunch: the mobility in her arms was limited, so she couldn't easily bring her silverware to her mouth; as a result, her face and hospital gown were becoming increasingly soiled as she tried in vain to eat.

Before I could say much, she looked at me somewhat helplessly and asked if I would feed her. I was a bit taken aback by the question, but, I was there and she was struggling. So, I washed my hands... and then I sat down and quietly fed her her lunch.

When she'd had her fill, we chatted for a bit and then I offered to say a prayer. After we'd prayed, she said, "I didn't realize who you were when you came in. I'm so sorry I asked you to help me eat my lunch."

Despite the fact that I'd already visited her once, and despite the fact that I'd reintroduced myself as I'd entered her room on that particular day, it hadn't registered with her that I was a pastor – until, of course, I offered to pray with her. And then she was mortified that she'd asked a pastor to help feed her her lunch. In her mind, that was not part of my job description.

What she didn't know was that, as I helped cut her food and as I fed her, I felt far more useful during that visit than I often feel when I visit folks in the hospital.

The time we pastors spend with you in the hospital is precious time – we know that. Our conversations and our prayers with you *are* useful and important – we know that, too.

But, so often as I watch physical therapists work with you, and as I watch nurses offer you medication and test your vital signs, I wish that *my* visits could offer something a bit more tangible than presence and prayer...as important as both of those things are.

And so, when this woman asked me to feed her her lunch, I welcomed the opportunity to do something that tangible. When she felt embarrassed for having asked a pastor to feed her, I assured her I had been happy to do it.

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See, I there's something in all of us that, when we want to be helpful, wants to do something tangible – something you can touch and taste and see...we want to offer hard evidence that we were there and that we made a positive difference.

We buy household items as gifts to help newly married couples celebrate their life together. We buy clothes and toys to help parents welcome new babies. We offer to make meals for family members and friends who are in crisis.

We bring food to the food pantry to help feed hungry stomachs, we pound nails into drywall to provide for those with inadequate housing, and we donate money to help end deadly diseases around the world.

These things are *tangible* – we can touch and taste and see these things. We give them or we make them or we do them and we know we have left a positive mark on someone else's life.

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“Simon, John of John, do you love me,” Jesus asked Peter. “Yes, Lord, you know I do!” And Jesus said, “Feed my lambs...Take care of my sheep...Feed my sheep.” Feed. Take care of. Feed. There is something about those actions that suggests love. Love you can see and hear and touch.

*“Do you love me?” “Yes, Lord.” “Then feed...take care of...feed.”* It's as if Jesus said to Peter, “Put your love to work.”

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Today's Gospel reading about love – about this scariest question of all – is certainly about much more than loving *feelings*...and I think that's why John closes his Gospel with it.

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In the chapters leading up to today's story, Jesus died, was buried, was raised from the dead, and then appeared to his disciples as proof of his resurrection. For all intents and purposes, the Gospel of John could have ended with the last verses of chapter 20. Today's story in John 21 is really something of an epilogue to the Gospel. //

In order to better make this point, I invite you to grab one of the blue pew Bibles for a moment. Open up to John 20 and 21; we're going to look at the end of chapter 20. You'll find this toward the end of the Bible – help each other out if you notice someone near you struggling to find it! John 20 and 21. (As noted near the Scripture reading in your bulletin, it's on page 1314.)

The last two verses of John chapter 20 – the verses just prior to the start of today's reading – go like this: “Jesus worked many other miracles for his disciples, and not all of them are written in this book. But these are written so that you will put your faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. If you have faith in him, you will have true life.” Sounds like a good ending point, don't you think?

The writer John could easily have stopped there, but there was one more story to tell. There was a final thought with which the writer John wanted to leave his readers.

“If you have faith in [Jesus], you will have true life.” That's the line just prior to today's story from John 21: “If you have faith in [Jesus], you will have true life.” Well, I firmly believe chapter 21 is included at the end of John's Gospel as a way of illustrating what “true life” should look like for those who love Jesus. //

“Simon, John of John, do you love me,” Jesus asked Peter in chapter 21. “Yes, Lord, you know I do!” And Jesus said, “Feed my lambs...Take care of my sheep...Feed my sheep.”

This story – this epilogue to John's Gospel – is about loving feelings that motivate commitment, loving feelings that motivate action...this story is about loving feelings that motivate us to follow and to live faithfully: it's about *belief* in Jesus that leads us to *act*...belief that inspires true life as one who loves Jesus.  
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The story in chapter 21 is about how the resurrected Jesus appeared to several of his disciples after they had had a long, unsuccessful night of fishing. From the shoreline that morning, Jesus told them to let out their net one more time...and, when they did this their catch was so great they could not haul in all of the fish.

When they got back to shore, Jesus had breakfast cooking and they all ate together. After the meal, Jesus and Peter had their conversation with the three scary questions.

“Simon son of John,” Jesus said, “do you love me?” One. “Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs,” Jesus said in response. Then Jesus asked again: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Two. “Yes, Lord; you know I love you,” Peter said. “Take care of my sheep.”

At that point, surely Peter was wondering where the conversation was going. By then, Peter was likely thinking about how, on the night before Jesus was crucified, he'd denied knowing Jesus *three* times.

Perhaps, by that point in the conversation, Peter realized Jesus had now *twice* asked if he loved him. Perhaps, by that point, Peter was hoping against all hope the question would not get asked a third time. Surely Peter wanted to forget all about those three denials.

But...the question did, indeed, come again: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Three. Three denials, three times questioned about his love and commitment. Jesus was calling Peter to account.

"Lord," Peter cried, "You know everything. You know I love you."

"Feed my sheep," Jesus said. But this time he said more: "I tell you for certain that when you were a young man, you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will hold out your hands. Then others will wrap your belt around you and lead you where you don't want to go..."

That bit there may not seem like good news, but it *is* good news. John writes that Jesus said this to Peter as way of "tell[ing] how Peter would die and bring honor to God."

See, history and tradition teach us that Peter, after years of faithful preaching and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, was crucified for the Christian faith.

This may not seem like good news – Jesus pointing out to Peter that he will become a martyr, that he will die painfully for the faith. This may not *seem* like good news, but imagine that you're Peter.

Imagine that your Lord has just called you on the carpet for denying him three times in his hour of greatest need...imagine that your Lord has just three times questioned your love *for* and your commitment *to* him...imagine that heartbreak.

And then imagine your Lord Jesus says to you, "Despite your denial – you do remain faithful to me to the end."

If you were Peter, wouldn't that sound like amazing good news?

By denying Jesus at a most critical time, Peter had seemingly thrown away so much of what Jesus had said and done.

When the resurrected Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, Peter was being called to account – and rightfully so.

But when Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, Peter was also being offered forgiveness...he was being offered the chance to start again...the chance to show by his life that indeed he *does* know Jesus, that indeed he *is* one of his followers.

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This conversation between Jesus and Peter is filled to overflowing with grace and hope – for Peter, surely...but also for you and for me.

Because the question Jesus asked Peter, he also daily asks each and every one of us: “Do you love me?” It's Peter's question, but it's also ours – and Jesus asks us every day to answer it with our *lives*.

“Feed my lambs ... Take care of my sheep ... Feed my sheep.”

With these words, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is calling us to bring tangible signs of his love to a world in need: to friends, to family, to strangers, even to enemies.

*“Do you love me?”*

It's a question of commitment...a question of action. It's a beautiful question for sure...but it's the scariest question of all. And everything we do and say in this life serves to answer it with a “yes” or a “no.”

So...with every thought in our minds, with every word we say, and with every move we make, may the world learn of our love for Jesus Christ – God's beloved Son, raised from the dead to bring life and hope to you, to me, to this wonderful world.

Good news this final weekend of the Easter season...good news always. Thanks be to God. Amen.