

"LOVE TIMES THREE"

John 21:15-19

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Flashback to Holy Week, the night Jesus was arrested, from the 18th chapter of John's Gospel: *"Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple went out and spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. The woman said to Peter, 'Aren't you also one of this man's disciples?' He said, 'I am not.'"*

A bit later the slaves and the police made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing round it and warming themselves, Peter also was standing with them and warming himself. They asked him, 'You are also one of his disciples, aren't you?' He denied it and said, 'I am not.'

One of the slaves of the high priest, asked, 'Didn't I see you in the garden with him?' Again, Peter denied it, 'I don't know him!' and at that moment the rooster crowed." (John 18:15-18, 25-27)

You may remember that not long before this, Jesus had told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed in the early morning. Peter probably argued with him at the time and said, "Never, Jesus! I will die with you!" And I am sure he meant it. But when Jesus was arrested and held prisoner in the home of the high priest, Peter's fear overtook him, and he denied even knowing Jesus. He denied him not once, but three times, and then the rooster crowed signaling the dawning of a new day. At that moment, did Peter remember what Jesus had told him? Did he cry out in shame? Did he feel justified in knowing he did what he had to do to stay safe?

"I don't know him!" How could you ever forget speaking those words? Peter probably played them over and over in his head as Jesus was killed and in the days of silence and grief that followed. Maybe he even thought, "If I had admitted that I was with Jesus maybe I could have somehow saved him."

I wonder how Peter felt the first time he saw the resurrected Jesus on Easter evening behind the locked doors of their room. Was Peter excited to see Jesus or was he terrified? Would Jesus call him out for his denial?

Would Jesus punish him? Would Jesus turn his back on him? Did the other disciples know about his denial?

When Jesus came to see them the evening of the resurrection he said, "Peace be with you," and he blessed them. **All** of them. He didn't say a word about Peter's denial or the fact that all of the men ran away when he was on the cross. He talked about forgiveness. And that is what they needed to hear.

So today we find the disciples back home in Galilee. Last Sunday we heard about a fishing trip that yielded no fish after a long night of back-breaking work. But in the morning, the presence of Jesus on the beach caused 153 fish to be caught in their nets.

Jesus met them on the shore with a fire going, cooking breakfast. John is very clear that it was a **charcoal fire**. Do you make the connection? Certainly, Peter remembered that other charcoal fire. After breakfast Jesus took Peter aside and asked him, "Do you love me more than these?"

Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus replied, "Feed my lambs."

And a second time Jesus asked. "Peter, do you love me?"

And again, Peter answered, "Yes Lord, of course I love you."

Jesus replied, "Tend my sheep."

And then a third time, "Peter do you love me?"

By now Peter was getting a bit annoyed, he had already said yes twice but Jesus just kept asking. He answered, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

And Jesus simply said, "Feed my sheep."

I am actually surprised that at this moment we don't hear a rooster crowing- or a sheep baaing.

"Do you know him? Aren't you one of his men? I am sure you were with him." *No, I don't know him!! No! No!*"

"Peter, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?"

Do you see where this is going? I think Jesus was giving Peter a chance to take it all back; to erase those three denials and enter into a new world of faith and confidence. What an amazing gift!

Jesus was also commissioning Peter. "If you love me, then you have work to do, Peter. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."

This is what the disciples had been waiting for. This was the "so what?" of Easter. Now that Christ has risen what do we do? "Get out there and continue his work."

The last thing Jesus says to Peter is: "Follow me."

The first thing Jesus ever said to Peter was, "Follow me."

The first time Jesus meant it literally. "Come along with me. Walk where I walk, go with me, do what I do." But now, after the resurrection, Jesus wouldn't be walking with them anymore. Now it was up to them to follow him in spirit, to do what he did, to say what he said, and to spread the good news of God's love and mercy.

Once more the transformative power and presence of God makes a difference. Jesus didn't show up on the beach that morning just to cater breakfast for a bunch of tired fishermen. He came with a purpose. The risen Christ came to send

the disciples on their way, to send them out into the world with the good news of the resurrection.

After breakfast, by the charcoal fire, the deny-er becomes the leader. The fearful one becomes the shepherd. Rather than being remembered solely as the one who denied knowing Jesus, Peter is remembered as the pillar of the young church. A frail human being is brought to his feet again, enriched with stories of Jesus, and brought to life and leadership by God's generosity. If it could happen to Peter, it can happen to us. And it does.

Jesus didn't ask Peter. "Do you remember what I taught you? Have you been reading your scriptures? Do you promise to obey my commandments?"

Jesus simply asked, "Do you love me?"

For Jesus, love encompasses everything. It is the basic qualification for living the Christian life. If you love like Jesus, then everything else will fall into place. What does it mean to love Jesus and to love like Jesus? It means this: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Here is the thing about sheep- domestic sheep, anyway-- they need attention. They need someone to keep them safe from their many natural predators and from dangerous grazing areas. They need someone to provide medical care and fresh water. Sheep need someone to watch out for them and to lead them in the right direction. Sometimes they need assistance with giving birth. They need presence, care, commitment.

Jesus knew that his precious young community of believers was facing almost insurmountable odds. They were a persecuted minority in a dangerous time. And they needed strong leadership. The Risen Christ asked Peter to make a commitment based on love. "If you love me then love those whom I love." The whole purpose of Peter's three years of walking with Jesus suddenly made sense- it was all preparation for his life after Jesus rose from the grave. He was blessed so that he would be a blessing to others. He was to be the voice of Jesus for those who would never hear his voice. He was to be the presence of Jesus for those who would never meet Jesus in person.

On the beach in the early morning light, Peter is fed, forgiven, and commissioned to continue the work of Jesus. The night before, in the empty fishing boat, was all

about scarcity, emptiness, and failure. But that morning was filled to overflowing with the abundance of Jesus; an abundance of fish, bread, joy, mercy, and love.

The relationship that was born on that beach three years earlier when Jesus called Peter away from his fishing boat, had come to maturity as Jesus once again told Peter, "Follow me." And he did.

The Risen Christ calls us to do the same- to follow him; to care for his sheep, to love the people whom he loves, which is everyone. When you love someone, you seek the best for them. You offer forgiveness and grace in abundance. You challenge them when necessary. And you do everything you can to help them become the people they were meant to be.

You could say that our job description as Christians is simply this: "Love one another as I love you."

May it be so.

You are loved.

Amen.