

“What Do We Love More Than Jesus?”

John 21: 1-19

Sermon by Jan Edmiston –November 11, 2018

First Presbyterian Church, Concord, NC

They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.”

So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt 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. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

I bring greetings today from the Offices of the Presbytery of Charlotte. I say “from the Offices” because I work in the Presbytery Office but I am not “the Presbytery.” We are the Presbytery of Charlotte together – 98 congregations in seven counties trying to do ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. It’s great to be with you this morning.

Before serving this Presbytery, I worked for the Presbytery of Chicago and I had just started serving the Presbytery of Chicago - about eight years ago - when the Presbyterian Women’s group of a particular congregation asked me to come do the devotional at one of their regular monthly meetings.

We met in the church library – me and a small group of women and I had been asked to do a devotional on the 30th Psalm which goes like this:

To you, O Lord, I cried,
and to the Lord I made supplication:
Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
O Lord, be my helper!’

And after we talked about those verses a bit, I asked the ladies sitting in a circle to tell me about their congregation. I was new and didn’t know anything about them.

What do you love about your church? – I asked.

The first lady said, “*I love the windows. We nine beautiful Tiffany windows in the sanctuary.*”

The second lady said, “*Oh, I was going to say ‘the windows.’*”

The next lady thought for a moment and then said: “*I’d have to say the windows.*”

So I stopped them right there and said, “*I’m definitely going to check out those windows. But tell me about your ministry. What exciting things are going on here? What inspires you? Where do you see the hand of God working?*”

And the next lady thought for a moment and then said, “*I have to say ‘the windows.’*” And on it went: Windows, windows, windows.

And that that was it. All they could talk about was the windows. To be perfectly honest, they were lovely ladies. **But they couldn't articulate why their church existed.** They sure loved the windows though.

After the opening devotional, the ladies commenced in their business meeting. I observed a little friction. We see this sometimes as the people of God. Sometimes there's discomfort. Sometimes there's conflict. I wasn't sure they liked each other much less LOVED each other.

And at the end of the meeting, they asked me to close in prayer. And so I picked up the 30th Psalm to re-read it, but *this time* I exchanged the word LORD and replaced it with WINDOWS:

To you, O windows, I cried,
and to the windows I made supplication:
Hear, O windows, and be gracious to me!
O windows be my helper!

Yikes. Actually that went better than you would imagine. It was the beginning of a conversation that continues to this day in that wonderful congregation about why they exist as a church. (Lo and behold: It's not about the windows.)

These are anxious times throughout our nation and throughout the Church. But that means that **it's also a great time to figure out how God is working.**

As I've traveled throughout our denomination on my way to Charlotte Presbytery, I found what you might imagine:

that our congregations are all different and they are all doing interesting things. And **there are features – of all our churches – that we love.** We might love the windows. Or the steeple. Or the organ. Or the sanctuary. Or the cemetery.

Sometimes we love these features more than we love Jesus.

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Jesus had been gone for over a week when our lesson picks up the story today. He had appeared first to the women, then to Peter and the other disciple, then to the disciples behind locked doors (because they were afraid) and then to Thomas and now – today to “*Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.*”

Life had continued as usual, it seems, and the disciples had returned to fishing. They were night fisherman – better to catch a large haul perhaps – but they caught nothing.

At dawn – when they were about 100 feet off the shore – Jesus appeared to them again, but they didn’t recognize him. You’d think in this third appearance, he would have been recognizable, but – just like today – the disciples of Jesus are often clueless.

While they were still out on the lake far enough to cast their nets again just before returning to shore, Jesus advised them to ‘*Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some* (fish).’ There are some great details here:

- Peter was fishing naked apparently, but he threw on some clothes and *then* jumped into the lake.
- And there were 153 fish. Not 152. Not 154. But 153. Not sure who took the time to count them, but who cares?

And then – after everything they’d been through together – Jesus and Peter had a heart to heart talk about Peter’s calling:

- After being called to be a disciple about three years before on that very lakefront,
- After all the miracles and the parables and the healings and the teachings,
- After the transfiguration on the mountain,
- After washing Peter’s feet on the night before Jesus’ arrest,
- After the arrest and Peter’s denial,
- After the crucifixion and death,
- Even after finding an empty tomb with the help of the women . . .

Peter still needed some final teaching:

Jesus said to Simon Peter,
 “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

These what? we might ask?

- These friends?
- These fish we just feasted on for breakfast?
- This life?

What was Jesus talking about here?

Peter said to him, “*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*” Jesus said to him, “*Feed my lambs.*”

A second time he said to him, “*Simon son of John, do you love me?*” He said to him, “*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*” Jesus said to him, “*Tend my sheep.*”

He said to him the third time, “*Simon son of John, do you love me?*” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “*Do you love me?*”

The first place I preached after being elected Co-Moderator of the PCUSA was the church where I was baptized in Mooresville, NC. It’s a wonderful congregation with a rich history. The year I was baptized, they were voted Rural Church of the Year in the old southern Presbyterian Church.

My parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents are all buried in their historic cemetery.

But they have struggled over the years – especially over the past 20 years. And with all due respect to that congregation that I love – I wonder if they’ve forgotten how to be The Church. They know how to be faithful Church People but not faithful Followers of Jesus.

And as one of our colleagues here reminded me recently, they have conflated being Faithful Church People with being Faithful Disciples because **that’s what we have taught them.**

We in the Church have taught them that being Committed to an Institution is the same as being Committed to Jesus. We have taught each other that

- After all the Session meetings, and
- After all the New Member classes, and
- After re-carpeting the sanctuary, and
- After building a Family Life Center, and
- After replacing the Church Sign, and
- After teaching people to love singing hymns from screens, and
- After calling New Pastors who will turn everything around

We realize that we still need to have a heart to heart talk with Jesus:

First Presbyterian of Concord: what do we love more than these?

- These fish?
- These friends?
- This life?
- This sanctuary?

This is the basic question we need to ask ourselves in the 21st Century Church:
what do we love more than Jesus?

As I have traveled around the country, I often saw that our congregations love their cemeteries, love their windows, love their pews, love their pumpkin festivals, love their grand history more than they love Jesus.

And if I am being truthful with myself and with you: there are many things I love more than Jesus too. My family. My stuff. So many things. Heck, I sometimes love my phone more than I love Jesus.

This might be true for you too.

Before we can be the church that God created us to be, we need to figure out what it is that we love more than we love Jesus.

If we – at least *try* to – love Jesus more than anything else, **we will spend our lives feeding his sheep**. I believe that means that we will love the sheep that The Great Shepherd loves.

We will love them more than our stuff, more than our church property, more than our customs, more than our history.

Some of those sheep will be in our family and some will be old friends and some will be old enemies and some will be strangers.

And just like sheep, they will come in a variety of colors and sizes and breeds. And we are called to love them if we love Jesus.

It's as simple and as difficult as that.

What do we love more than Jesus in this congregation? What do you love more than Jesus in your congregation? The answer determines where God will lead us next.