

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 8, 2022

John 21:15-19

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 this to him a third time, 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 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,

Jesus said to him, “ Follow me.”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, they have breakfast. If y'all remember, Peter had quite the night before this. We can skip ahead if we want to the breakfast on the beach, but there's this little line tucked in there that when they figured out that this mysterious man on the beach was Jesus , Peter, who was naked at the time scripture tells, us put on a robe and then jumped into the water. Grief makes us do weird stuff sometimes, and it's obvious that Peter had quite the evening with his friends there on the boat. Then we have breakfast. Then we have this tender moment. The scripture doesn't expressly say that the disciples aren't there and around him, but this is an intimate one-on-one conversation. This is a moment, if you could imagine, that Peter will replay in his mind over and over and over again. These final words that his friend and his Savior has to say to him. It's a question that is asked of him three times, similar and reflective of the same question that was asked of him in reverse a few days earlier. The question, of course, was whether he knew Jesus. When he was asked that three times he denied him three times, and then the cock crowed.

This intimate moment with Peter and Jesus. This question of do you love me when we've been hurt, when we've been forgotten, when we've been neglected. This question, ‘do you love me’ he

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asks it of Peter three times and each time saying if you do, "well, then feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."

Jesus seems to communicate that loving him and caring for his flock are inextricably tied to another.

Love, as it turns out, does. Love is as love does. If you love me, if it's true, if you really feel the way you are saying you feel about me, then tend my sheep. Feed them along with the lambs. Of course, it's not cheap. Jesus is a shepherd of people, and so this request then, this charge, is to take care of the very human beings, flesh, and bone, standing right in front of Peter.

Jesus, it turns out, is ultimately concerned with the bodies and the lives of the people right in front of him, flesh, and blood. He cares about their hunger and their safety, their protection, their thirst, and tending as he announces to Peter means to care for their bodies and their spirits.

Caring, of course, takes on different forms in different times depending on what is going on in our lives and in the world. There's a type of caring that takes place within the Body of Christ that is the church, even Idlewild Presbyterian Church. There's a type of tending and feeding that has to take place amongst those who call this place home.

Yesterday, I got to spend five hours and a little bit over, with a group of two classes of deacons. Two and a half a group of 13 people whom we claim God has called to tend and to feed the flock that is Idlewild Presbyterian Church.

Yesterday, we talked about prayer and what it looks like to visit and feed. We talked about what it looks like to welcome and make people feel hospitable in this place.

We talked through all of those things, and we dove into prayer and the theology behind it. All of them, in different ways for us, came away yesterday as grateful for people who when asked by Jesus, 'do you love me?' respond with 'Yes, and I'll show you. I'll tend your sheep. I'll feed your lambs.' There is, of course, a type of tending and caring and showing of love that must take place within the Body of Christ that is the church, but then there's a totally different kind of tending and caring and the manifestation of love that has to take place out in the world. That's often more difficult and messier than we imagine it to be. This week, of course in this day, we celebrate Mother's Day. It is beautiful and complicated in all the right ways.

This week I started thinking a lot when I was reading this text about my mom. We had a routine when I was seven, eight, nine years old before I could go off and do camp on my own during the summer. We had a summer routine of our own. She taught step classes at the local Gold's gym and so we get up early, earlier than I ever wanted to at seven, eight nine. We'd go and she would teach two step classes back to back at seven o'clock and eight o'clock. I would get put in this mirrored room with a puzzle to do, right, and there was like a bar. See now, the bar is like a thing as the class, and you can, you know, spend a lot of money to go to a bar class. I had a bar for free and a big room by myself to entertain myself for a long time. I would sit there for two hours on a

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weekday morning, and she would come in sweaty, and she'd say, "I'm going to go shower up and then we're going to go to work."

We go from the Gold's gym on East North Street to downtown, to a job that she took right after we moved to Greenville. She worked about 20 hours a week at the Greenville Council for the Prevention of Teen Pregnancy. This was an organization that was bent on actually providing comprehensive health education to young people in Greenville. This was an important thing because there's a sort of cognitive dissonance that was happening then and even to an extent now about how we speak of sex education in our schools and in our classrooms. How it is that we actually inform and care for and tend to the young people that are in our midst. They were advocates for that comprehensive education, and she would go into different schools across our county and teach just one or two lessons in health science. That's all Greenville County would allow. She'd get in as much as she could in that time. They were advocates for comprehensive education, but also the provision of contraception as well. Important it seems for protecting our young people. We would go down to the Greenville Council for the Prevention of Teen Pregnancy, right there by Serene Football Stadium downtown. She put me in this little glassed-in room, and I'd have maybe a puzzle to work on or some sort of workbook that I might learn vocabulary or numbers or something like that. I'd sit there as young women came through the door of that center. She'd greet them at that door. They were often in tears. She'd walk them back to her office. They would spend 10, 20, 30 minutes together. She'd usually walk them back out to that front door and they'd often be in tears there as well.

I got to watch as my mother cared for them, advocated for their bodies, reminded them, or maybe taught them for the first time, that their bodies were their own.

When news broke late Monday evening of the leaked Supreme Court opinion which will if it is sustained, overturn *Roe v Wade*. I was angry and saddened. My first thought was about my mother, herself a woman, who had to make the most difficult decision a woman ever has to make, who took her own pain and fashioned it in a way that would ensure that young women in that little corner of South Carolina wouldn't have to walk that road alone.

My second thought was about those women who walked through that door, feeling abandoned and alone, who had been told all sorts of stories about their bodies, except that they were their own. I thought about their faces, and I thought about what it looks like when Jesus says, 'do you love me' and if you do, 'tend my sheep.' Care for their bodies. Give them sustenance for the journey.

It seems to me that when our Judiciary would see fit to undermine that care, it would be incumbent upon the church to speak unequivocally of it. If the measure of our love for Christ is inextricably bound in the way that we care for the people of God, for the bodies standing right in front of us, then it seems that the Church might stand firmly in a place that cares for and advocates for and protects the bodies of women.

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Frank Crouch says “This is the kind of love, whether you call it filios or agape. It involves an inherent expectation of doing. Love is, it turns out as love does, and this sort of love that Jesus asks of Peter and asks of us still, is a love that is courageous. A love that risks, a love unwilling to waver regardless of what it is called to do. Christ calls Peter and, indeed the Church of Christ, as individuals and as a community of faith, to follow him, even where we would not otherwise go. Even where we might find it difficult to go and the times in which we live are no time for we have not never done it that way before. The times in which we live are no time for returning to what used to be. These times, more than ever, are times that call for the best love of God and friends and neighbors.

Better yet, these times cry out for a love to which God calls us, and through which God will bring to life new life and abundance and care.

It struck me this week that if we might find ourselves during a week after having a meal together around this table that Christ might meet us in the places where we find ourselves this day. He might lean in, and he might ask of us ‘do you love me?’

We might find it easy to respond, ‘Yes, Lord; I love you.’ But he knows how difficult g that question in the real world is going to be, so he leans in again and he says, ‘do you love me?’ and we say ‘Yes, Lord; we love you.’ But he knows that we actually don't know everything it's going to take to live that out in the world, so he leans in a third time and he says ‘do you love me?’

we don't have to answer.

We don't have to respond.

We just have to do

Love is as love does. It seems to me that in the world right now, it is incumbent upon each of us and upon the church of Jesus Christ to tend the sheep, to feed the lambs, to care for the bodies placed right in front of us.

George Saunders at a commencement address at Syracuse University said “What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness and love. Those moments when another human being was there in front of me suffering and I responded sensibly, reservedly, mildly.”

It seems to me that Jesus knew for Peter, and Jesus knows for us this day, how critical it is for the Church of Jesus Christ, the one that took on flesh to speak and to care and to protect the bodies of the most vulnerable, particularly in this time and place for the bodies of women in need of our care and our support and our love and our unwavering desire, to tend and protect. The calling of Jesus Christ is no less than that. It's the last thing he tells Peter. It's the last word he speaks to him.

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He knows it will be difficult, but He knows it is the message that will bring to this world grace and hope and care and love. May we lean into the whispered question of our Risen Lord. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of Us All. Amen.