

What Does Love Look Like?

John 21:1-19

Sacrament of the Lord's Supper/ Third Sunday of Easter/ 5th May 2019

Don't you just love the image, here, of Jesus showing up along the seaside in Galilee, post-resurrection, making breakfast? He's grilling fish, toasting some bread. Taking care of his friends. Providing for the people he loves. "Come," he says, "Come and have breakfast," (Jn. 21:12). It's a beautiful scene.

And did you catch the reference to charcoal? Nothing is by accident in John's Gospel. He wants us to know that Jesus was cooking near a charcoal fire. It stands out. This detail is important. There's only one other time in John's Gospel that we find this word. We usually hear it on Maundy Thursday. After Jesus' arrest, John says, "...the slaves and the police had 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" (John 18:18). It's around a charcoal fire that Peter denies having anything to do with Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times. There's a direct link between that verse and this one in chapter twenty-one. It's intentional.

And because God is good and kind and rich in mercy, Jesus returns to Peter to transform the place of moral failure into the place of redemption and hope. Jesus comes to release Peter from his past, heal his memories, and then give him a new future.

And when they had finishing eating breakfast, around the fire, Jesus turns to Peter and says, let's talk. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" *More than these*. The meaning of the question is vague. Do you love me more than these other disciples? Do you love me more than you love these other people? Do you love me more than you love all this stuff—fishing, gear, nets, boats, work, your daily routine, your ordinary life, your comfort zone? It's probably this third sense that gets closest to what Jesus is getting at. "Sure," Peter says. Then, two more times Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Three times Jesus asks this question, giving Peter each time an opportunity to undo each statement of denial.

Jesus never say, "Hey, Peter, we need to talk about what you did to me back there in Jerusalem. Why did you deny me?" Jesus doesn't say, "Hey, why did you abandon me in my time of need? I was counting on you. I called you my friend. I thought you were my friend. Why did you treat me that way?" Jesus never says this. He doesn't judge or condemn. His one aim is to restore the broken relationship, to make sure that Peter knows he's forgiven, that he's still loved by Jesus, that he has an opportunity to begin again, because the Lord needs him. Jesus has a plan for Peter.

Yet, each time Jesus asks the question, Peter gets frustrated and testy. Peter pushes back a little. Was it out of guilt and shame? Jesus never mentions the denial, but Peter knows what he did. Jesus knows. Peter knows. Jesus knows that Peter knows. Peter knows what Jesus knows. But in the end, what happened doesn't matter. What matters most is the purpose of Jesus' life and what he came to show us. What matters most is the love. Given in love, sent in love, suffered

in love, raised in and for love, reconciled to his friends because of love. It's the love that matters most. Do you love me? Where is your love? Do you love me? Really? Then, show me.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, he rarely talks about love in the abstract or love in general. Love your *neighbor*; love your *enemy*; love *yourself*; love *God*. He doesn't talk about the idea of love. That's too rational. Nor is love always a feeling or emotion. Emotions and feelings come and go. In the Christian experience love is always particular and love is always a *choice*. We choose to love—even when it doesn't make any sense to, maybe especially then. We choose to love—even when we don't feel like it. It's love in action. It's concrete and real. Embodied. Feeding people. Healing people. Forgiving people. Bring life to people. Washing the dusty, sweaty, smelly feet of his disciples—there's nothing abstract or general about this. Before Jesus died he said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another" (John 13:34). And here after his death and resurrection, the love continues. Jesus says to Peter—and says to us – feed my sheep. Tend my sheep. If you love me, feed my sheep, take care of them—because they're hungry.

So, what does this look like? Centuries ago, St. Augustine (354-430) asked the question, "What does love look like?" His answer is still rings true today. "It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has the eyes to see misery and want. It has ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men and women. That's what love looks like."

This is not an exhaustive list, of course. Love has many incarnations, but it can't exclude these. And did you notice, again, that love is a verb, it requires action which flows from choices. Love is at work in how we choose to relate to our neighbors and strangers, the people who get on our nerves, the people we hate and despise, even our enemies. It's how we care for one another in community—how we listen to one another, speak to one another, work with one another, honor and value one another. It's lived out in community—in the church, and beyond it. That's what love looks like. It's acceptance and welcome and hospitality for all God's children. It's sharing our gifts. It's sharing our financial resources and giving generously with joy. It's teaching church school, and tutoring, and visiting members who can't make it to worship, sharing joys, sharing concerns, sharing tears. And, as Cornel West reminds us, "Justice is what love looks like in public." It's reaching out beyond our comfort zones—and Jesus is always pushing us out beyond our comfort zones—loving our communities, loving people beyond our tribe, breaking down walls. It's the work of the Envision Fund. It's the work of the Mission Committee—putting together personal care kits for IMA-LWR, going to Puerto Rico to help our neighbors there. It's our witness to the Catonsville community that We Choose Welcome (as our banner says on the front lawn), that we care, that we seek to feed God's people in a variety of ways, that we love.

In 1945, a treasure trove of ancient Christian manuscripts was discovered in the deserts of Egypt, in a place called Nag Hammadi. Included in the find was *The Secret Revelation of John*, a text that had not been seen since at least 180 A.D, maybe earlier. In this text, Jesus says to John, "Arise and remember that you are the one who has heard, and follow your root, which is I, the compassionate."¹ Jesus the compassionate. It seems to me that when Jesus commands us "feed my sheep," he's saying, be compassionate, extend compassion to my people.

If you love me, Jesus says, then feed my sheep, be like me, the compassionate one. Live in such a way that when people meet you and see you, they know that you belong to the Shepherd, the compassionate one. In love, live in such a way toward others that they come to discover (or remember) that they, too, are part of the sheepfold—whether they know it or not—that they, too, are the objects of God's compassion. That's what love looks like.

So, go ahead, love. Figure it out. If you love me, Jesus says, then love my people. If you don't love me, he says, then how can you expect to love my people? And if love is guiding us, love for him, which is essentially love for God, then, remarkably, Jesus tells us—remarkably—that we will do even greater works (Jn. 14:12). And we won't do this work alone. He is always there before us, meeting us when we get there, providing for us, loving us. Inviting us to bring what we have and adding it to the mix. Did you notice how Jesus invited his disciples to add to the table, to add their fish to what he had already provided. It's a partnership. We're all in this together.²

That's why this table—the table of God's kingdom—is so important. Over the weekend, the Church lost a powerful, generous witness and voice in Rachel Held Evans. She was 37. In her bestselling work *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding Church*, she said, “This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs, gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry.”³

What does love look like? Look at this table. We don't have grilled fish, but there's plenty of bread and wine. This is the place of redemption. Christ's people; being fed by the Lord. This is the place of radical hospitality. Every table can become his table. *This* is what love looks like.

¹ Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

² Jaime Clark-Soles, *Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 148.

³ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014).