

Hesitant Love

Pondering Questions: Part 8 “Hesitant Love”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – October 9, 2022

18th Sunday After Pentecost

Readings: John 21:1-19

Reflection: Psalm 146

Greeting: Happy are those who find wisdom and understanding. The Lord laid the foundations of the earth with wisdom. Hold on to sound judgement and discretion from God. The Lord is our confidence and guard! Praise the Lord! (*Proverbs 3*)

Prayer: O God, source of all wisdom and bringer of understanding, we humbly enter into your presence. May we be blessed by your grace and your knowledge as we join together to worship you this day. May we grow in heart and mind with you, Lord. May you lift us up and strengthen us by your righteousness. Help us to be bold in our faith so that we may do your will joyfully and eagerly. May we worship you in a spirit of truth, that we may follow you all the days of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 146

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord! (Psalm 146 NRSV)*

We read the words of Psalm 146 and hear of praising God. That the Lord offers us hope. That we find justice and healing in God’s care. That we are called to rejoice in God’s salvation and to praise him in his steadfast love. How have you experienced God’s redeeming grace? How have you shared that with others? What are the stories you can share about your own experience in following God? How can we share together in God’s grace and mercy?

Prayer: O God, your steadfast love and faithfulness have brought us together this day. Help us that we may always seek your wisdom in our lives and may we hold fast to your ways. May we share in the hope you have inspired in us and may we share always in your blessing. We ask that as we bring our joys and our concerns to you that you will strengthen us in your spirit. As you are with us in our joys and sorrows, may you lift us up in both our laughter and tears. May your light guide us and lead us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our reading for today comes from the Gospel of John, chapter 21 verses 1 through 19.

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." 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 his outer garment, for he had taken it off, 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." (John 21:1-19 NRSV)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Today, I'm addressing one of my favorite questions, because I feel like the answer shines a new light on a familiar reading. Today's reading has an exchange you may recognize. Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Three times he asks and three times Peter answers. What's going on here? Are we possibly missing part of the story? It's worth noting that this is debated among scholars, so what you'll get today is how I read this exchange. To do so, we turn to the Greek that John's Gospel was written in. And here we find two words that will have an impact on how we can read this exchange. You aren't going to find them in most of your English translations. Most common translations use love in place of both of these words. Now, to clarify they aren't wrong. But they don't exactly mean the same thing. We have Phileo (fee-low) and Agape (ah-gah-pay) both being used in our exchange, both being translated as love. I've put together my own reconstruction to help us understand where these words are found.

After they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Peter, do you love me more than the others, with devotion as you love the Father?" Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you as a brother." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Jesus asked a second time, "Peter, do you love me with devotion as you love the Father?" Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you as a brother." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

Jesus asked a third time, "Peter, do you love me as a brother?" Peter was upset that Jesus asked a third time. Peter replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you as a brother." Jesus said to him "Feed my sheep."

We can see that this exchange feels different than before. Peter seems to be hesitant. Which is something new for Peter. Peter was so ready to go in the beginning. He's had quite the journey in John's Gospel. Peter declares that Jesus is the Holy One of God. Peter at first refuses to have his feet washed by Jesus, then turns around and wants his hands and head washed to. Peter says that he will lay down his life for Christ, going as far as drawing a sword to defend him. But shortly after that Peter denies even knowing Jesus at all. Peter has been humbled by his experience, and I don't blame him. I can imagine that he's worried about saying how far he'll go and what he's willing to do. Because he knows that he failed to live up to his own words. He's fallen short of his ideals. I think that is where this exchange comes from. Christ appears and calls out to the disciples. They come back to shore and eat, and after they eat Jesus questions Peter. Jesus asks if Peter can love him, is devoted to him just as he is devoted to his heavenly Father. Peter says that he does love him, as a brother, a confidant, with the affection one has for a close friend. They're both talking about love, but Peter isn't talking about the same love as Christ. Peter hesitates and hold back. Because Jesus wants to know if he is wholly devoted, and Peter isn't ready to say that. Yet Jesus tells him to feed his lambs. We see this a second time, where Jesus asks if he is devoted in his love as he loves the Father. Peter still replies that he loves Jesus like a brother. But Jesus again gives him a command to take care of his sheep. The third time Jesus changes things up. No longer is Christ asking for Agape but instead asks for Phileo. He asks if Peter loves him like a brother and Peter is hurt. He has told him twice now that this is exactly how he loves him! And so, Peter is a little hurt that he's now being asked if that is how he loves Christ. So, he answers that

Jesus knows everything and knows he loves him like a brother. Jesus commands him to feed his sheep, and proceeds to command him, "Follow me."

Now, we might be able to relate to this pretty easily. Because love is a complex word. Love can be hard to define, and we use love in so many different ways. I love my children. I love pizza. I love the feeling of clean sheets on a freshly made bed. I love spending time with friends. I love being in ministry. But I don't love all of those things the same way. Love is a very expansive term, and our ideas of what that word means can really muddle a conversation. If I asked you "do you love me?" and you love me like you love sushi and I love you like a close personal friend, we aren't fully on the same page. Though I suppose that depends on how much you love sushi. We may be using the same words, but the message isn't the same. I think that same thing happens when we talk about loving God. We can sometimes use the words without having a clear meaning to them. Maybe you love God the same way you love cake. We can't get enough cake, always want more cake, and we think cake is good. But God expects a little more than that. Because we aren't devoted to cake. We aren't called to experience cake with our whole being. We aren't called to put our faith and our lives in cake's hands. But God does call us to those things. Maybe we too love Christ as a brother. That we would come to his defense, that we would be there for him and would be right by his side. But I know what it's like to love a brother. You can love them and still get angry. You can love them and say hurtful things. We can be angry with a sibling and have disagreements and even get into fights on occasion. But we are called to something more with the way we love God. That we are called to love with our whole being. I can love God so deeply because God first loved me, without asking me to prove I deserved it or demanding I earn it. It is a kind of love that holds nothing back, that we are to give all that we are and all that we have in that love. The closest thing I can even relate to it is the way that I love my children. That I will always love them, that they will always be mine, and that they cannot change my love for them. That I am there for them no matter what, that I am devoted to loving them and helping them. And I know that I can barely even scratch the surface of the way that my heavenly Father loves me. That I have only just begun to understand the love that Christ has for each of us.

And we can understand how easy it is to fall short of what Jesus is asking. If Jesus is asking Peter to love him with the kind of full devotion that he should have for God, Peter is likely questioning himself. How can he respond? He denied Jesus three times. He didn't even live up to his own expectations, let alone Christ's expectations. But Peter does love Jesus as a brother, and that's a start. Now, these commands that Jesus gives them to Peter to help him grow in his love. I think Jesus, just as Peter says, knows exactly how Peter loves him, knows how far Peter's heart is willing to go at this point. But Jesus needs him to go farther. Jesus needs more than for him to love him as a brother. Jesus meets Peter where he is. First Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." Notice we start with lambs and not sheep. Lambs are often described as the sheep that are under a year age. They are the young ones. They are the ones just discovering everything. Christ is telling him to tend to those who are just hearing the good

news. Preach to them and teach them what you have been taught. Peter is to welcome those who are just coming into the fold, to share the good news with them, to teach them who Jesus is, and to share God's love with them. Feed them and help them grow to become so much more. His first task is to share with those who are just coming into believing and to grow with them. The second time Jesus asks, he tells Peter, "Take care of my sheep." Tend to the flock that they don't lose faith. He is to take care of those who are already following Christ so that they continue to grow in love and to grow in compassion. That Peter needs to not forget about them, and he needs to continue to care for them and to grow in love and service with them as well. When Jesus asks Peter a third time, he commands him to "Feed my sheep." Preach and teach those who already know Christ and help them to grow. Help them to become teachers and preachers themselves, each a messenger of the good news. Peter is to help them to continue to grow and learn and to grow in love of God and each other. And as they all grow in that love, Peter gets closer and closer to the kind of love Jesus needs him to have.

And then we have that last command. "Follow me." This isn't a new command. This is the calling that Jesus made when he first met Peter. This is in itself a fulfillment of what Jesus said to Peter before the crucifixion. Jesus told him that he couldn't follow where he was going but that he would follow after. Peter has been following Jesus from place to place, from town to town, and across the countryside. Wherever Jesus has gone, Peter has been there to follow. But things are different. Those days of traveling beside Jesus are over. He has been crucified. He has been resurrected. They no longer even recognize him on sight, but they know his presence. And they will now be following him in a new way. They will follow in spirit. They will follow in faith. He is telling Peter to once again take his place and to follow in his footsteps and to follow in his teachings. Jesus is reminding Peter that he does know where he needs to go and that he does know what he needs to do. That if Peter can follow Christ now, wherever the Spirit sends him, that Christ will be guiding him in the path that he has already shown them. But Peter is graduating from physically following Jesus to spiritually following him. The Twelve have been struggling this entire journey and now they've been struggling with what the path forward is supposed to look like. They have been stuck in place. But now Jesus has given them purpose again. Jesus is telling them that now is the time to go and teach. Now is the time to go be with the people, to guide them and lead them. That they should go and bring good news to the poor and the afflicted. That they should welcome those who are just starting their faith journey. That they should strengthen each other in ministry and care for one another. They should pray for each other and build each other up in God's love. And that through all that they will truly be following their savior.

Now, one might ask why this message wasn't given sooner. Why didn't Peter get these words before hand so that he would be ready when everything changed? The simplest answer I see is that Peter wasn't ready. Peter needed to fail before he could succeed. Peter had to fall flat on his face. He had to have that moment where he realized that he had gone back on everything that he had promised and said he would never do. That in his rush to cross the

finish line, Peter lost sight of what really mattered. He is a humbled Peter, a changed Peter, a Peter trying to redeem himself. And so, Peter hesitates to love so completely out of a fear of failing. Christ knows his heart and knows what he needs. Christ isn't just giving Peter something to do, but he is commanding these things of Peter because he knows that Peter is ready for growth. Peter is starting to understand just how great a love he is called to. He is just starting to understand how great a mission he is undertaking. Because Peter will grow in his love and his devotion by following these commands. Because if he is teaching, feeding the lambs, he will grow in his own faith. That if he is helping others to know Jesus, to believe in the Messiah and the glory of God, he will continue to grow in his own love and devotion. When he takes care of those already on the path, and cares for the sheep, he will continue to remember all that Christ did for them and all that Christ is asking of them. That he grows in fellowship with them and grows further still in love. And when he answers the call to sustain those who are also sharing the good news, to share his peace and his message with them, that as he feeds the sheep, he will be fed himself. He will grow stronger still in love and devotion as he furthers that community in faith. That he will grow as he reminds them of all that they have been called for and all they still have yet to do. And it will get him to the point where finally he can say, "Yes, Lord, I am ready to love you with all that I have and all that I am, wholly devoted to you because you have filled my whole being. You have led me down this path, and I am ready to love."

We have that same path before us today. It is a difficult thing for anyone to say that they will devote their whole being, their everything to God's plan. Because even if it's just one thing holding us back, that is still something holding us back. Maybe we doubt that we are worthy of that love. Maybe we doubt that we are capable of doing everything that Christ is calling us to do. Maybe we think that we almost, almost are wholly devoted in love if we could just get over those doubts. But if we can follow Peter's example, that if we take these commands into our own hearts, that we too will be able to grow. That if we feed the lambs, if we take care of the sheep, if we feed the sheep, that we will be strengthened in love. We help others when they are in need, that we share love and show love to others. That we are never done. We are never done serving and we are never done growing. That God always has something more for us. That we will always find a greater love just around the next corner. That we will never be done receiving grace. That as long as we are willing, as long as we are looking, as long as we are accepting, as long as we are open, that God will always be opening up new doors for us. And as long as there is more to discover in God, that we will be able to grow in love and devotion. And as our love grows, we can become people who are confident in being able to call themselves disciples of our risen Savior who are always willing to answer that age old call, "Follow me." Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – *Pondering Questions*

Our series will have Pastor Cameron answering your questions! Get them to him however is most convenient for you and he will be using those as the basis for our weekly message!

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup	Ambulance Crew	Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Tricia Adkins
Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gabel
Sage Martin	Dalton McFarland	Ruth Ann Finley	Jodie Bunch
Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Family of Susie Callahan
Kenny Holmes	Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jackie Potter
Jeremy Klinger	Phil Hawickhorst	Ray Carr	Tracy Huddleston
Family of Mary Bayless	Jane Williams	Family of Colton Oakley	Family of Louise Oakley
Alice Sherwood	Dean Carlen	Ross Maddison	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Wayne Carrell	Gary & Mary Winterrowd	Leo Smith
Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Nick & Leana Ochoa	Greg Williams
Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter	Paul Schulte	

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