



First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

GOLDSBORO DISCIPLE

May 2020

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Visit us online at www.firstchristiangoldsboro.org this week for Sermon, Scripture and Communion videos posted by 9:00 AM Sunday

Our weekly conference call time has changed. Our time on Sunday mornings will remain the same and our weekly call will be rescheduled to Wednesday: Sunday at 9:45 AM and Wednesday at 6:45 PM

Here is all you do: Dial 712-770-5505 and then wait for instructions to enter access code, which is 300904#



Sermon for May 3, 2020

"Seeing the Lord and Hearing the Question"

Our third story from John 21 provides a kind of climactic closure to all these encounters. In each of our resurrection and post resurrection stories so far, we have seen Jesus drawing closer to this scared, distraught humanity that he gave everything for. I was talking to a friend last night who said her granddaughter Lila, around five, out of the blue said, "I just wish Jesus would blow all the sickness away." In fact, we all pray that and would love for Jesus to breathe life and peace and wholeness into our lives right now. Imagine you are sitting with Jesus now. Both of you have questions for each other. *Quest* and *question* come from this same root; to seek, to find. To follow a quest is to be willing to leave ourselves to find ourselves, to leave who we thought we were to find who we were created to be. As we sit together with Jesus, there is no social distancing between us. There is something contagious about him, something he wishes we might catch from him. That something is *love*. All the questions of the resurrection and post resurrection stories flow like a stream to this deep well which opens up when we hear Jesus ask you and me what he asked Peter: "*Do you love me?*"

He might as well ask us to place the stars in the sky and count the sands of the beach and the question leaves us bereft. Unless you bring that love, Lord, how will we return it? Like the moon, we can't generate our own light or love; we must reflect it. Now he comes asking, "Do you love me?" We cannot fully see the Lord - or ourselves or others - until we perceive all the ways he brings this love to the world.

So, first, he loves us by asking us to receive who he really is. Even before Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, even before his death and resurrection, Jesus asks his

disciples in Matthew 16, beginning with verse 13: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The disciples respond with the "some say" cop out, ¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Then apparently, he turns from the collective group to the individual. He turns to Peter, ¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, ^[a] and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

Jesus is saying, "Oh Peter, you didn't catch this from anyone on earth. Only my father reveals the depth of who I am." The first time love is used in the New Testament, it is an adjective shaped from an action, "beloved." The word comes from God's lips proclaiming the identity of his son when Jesus comes up out of the waters of his baptism, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased!" (Matthew 3:17). Because God so loved the world - and each one in it - he gives us his Beloved and so names us the Beloved, according to Henri Nouwen. Every attempt we make at loving, aside from our life in the Beloved, is always conditional - we will be loved if... Our path is doomed to impoverished isolation if love is something we must earn. If that is the case, love is fragile and fleeting. We are only as good as our last action or success. What we pass off as love is a watered-down, weak imitation based on self-centeredness and competition. In the world there are those who measure our worth by success, wealth, wisdom, relevance or popularity - as long as we are not as successful, wealthy, smart, relevant or popular as they are. They practice the "some say" rule. We are deemed worthy of love as long as we are respected by those who keep the doors of respectability; admired as long as we are esteemed by those presuming to be the gatekeepers of the marvelous, useful as long as we can advance the agenda of others. We are cared for if.... We are God's beloved in Christ, Nouwen writes in many of his works, and nothing we could be or do could make God love us more or love us less. Seeing the difference in the "love" the world passes off as true love and God's love in Christ is a moment of epiphany.

This epiphany leads to the second way Christ loves us. He loves us by asking us to experience our own need to love and yet recognize our own inability to love. Until we see the difference in the feeble love we attempt to give or receive and our condition of being loved by God unconditionally, we will always have the tendency to use the substitute love. Receiving love begins when we admit we are starving for a love we can't give ourselves or others. Not many weeks ago, I used a quote from Mother Teresa that bears repeating, "It is easier to feed a person starving for food than one starving for love." We must first admit we have fished on our own for years and have come up empty. We have fed on many things, trying to please ourselves or others, and yet are starving. Now we acknowledge our own failure to love and our frustration at not being loved. Most of us would admit that we have loved Jesus conditionally, hoping he would give us love in return. The love we have given is not created in the image of God, but *in images we have created*. Most of us would confess *we have loved ourselves trying to love*. And so, the first thing we do when Jesus asks, "Do you love me" is weep. In an address before a public audience in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI said that when we understand the

truth of our weak hearts, "the believing sinner weeps, he weeps in a fit of liberating repentance. After this weeping he is finally ready for his mission" (General Audience, May 26, 2006). Bernard of Clairvaux was a French Abbot writing in the 12th century. Some of you may be familiar with his four stages of love. We first love ourselves for the sake of our own selves. Then we love God for our own sake. Next, we love God for God's sake. Only then are we truly able to love ourselves for God's sake. When we love ourselves for God's sake, are we able to share love with others - to love them for God's sake.

Maybe, like Peter, we have crowed to ourselves or others about our great compassion until that compassion was tested and like Peter, we fled in horror when the real cock crowed, exposing our hollowness. And so, we run to Jesus weeping and confessing, "I have not loved you, myself or others as I ought." None of this startles God. In *No Man is an Island*, Thomas Merton writes, "The same God who loves us as we are also loves us too much to leave us as we are. We reduce God to our own dimensions, ascribing to him our own reactions and responses, especially our own petty and conditional kind of love, and so end up believing in a God cast in our own image and likeness..., But the man who is not afraid to admit everything that he sees to be wrong with himself, and yet recognizes that he may be the object of God's love precisely because of his shortcomings, can begin to be sincere. His sincerity is based on confidence, not in his own illusions about himself, but in the endless, unfailing mercy of God."

So, the third way Jesus loves us, who are starving for love and starving to love, is by feeding us. The most basic way a parent or caregiver loves is to feed, and so we find Jesus loving the disciples, who have once again cast out to sea but caught nothing, by cooking them breakfast on the beach. When we "shore" something up, we stabilize it or support it, so while they are rocking over the waters catching nothing, he prepares to *shore them up* with the most basic of things - the day's first meal. This is a shared meal in more than one way. He cooks what he brings and what he blesses them to catch. Jerome believed that the miraculous catch of 153 fish represented the apostles bringing all nations into the kingdom, citing Matthew 13:47: "The kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind." St. Augustine thought 153 was a triangular number of 17 - $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13+14+15+16+17=153$. Others have seen a connection between the number 153 and Ezekiel 47:10 "People will stand fishing beside the sea from En-ge-di to En-eglaim; it will be a place for the spreading of nets; its fish will be of a great many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea."

In The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple, Richard Bauckham explains that the numerical value for the word *gedi* (גדי) in the name "Engedi (עֵיִן גְּדִי)" adds up to 17. The numerical value for the word *eglaim* (עגלים) in the name "Eneglaim (עֵיִן לִיםֶגַע)" adds up to 153. Coincidentally, the Hebrew word *gedi* (גדי) is the one-hundred-and-fifty-third word of Ezekiel 47. If this all seems too arbitrary, what is clear is that Jesus loves by feeding. All humans understand that.

The fourth way Jesus loves us is by forgiving us. When Jesus turns to Peter, you would expect him to question Peter's denial, and express his hurt that Peter abandoned him or resent him for leaving him, but Jesus knew all along Peter was going to deny him. Here, just as Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus gives Peter an opportunity to be reconciled to him through love by asking him three times if

Peter loves him. He begins by asking Peter if he loves him *more than these*. *Is he asking Peter if he loves him more than he loves others? Is he asking Peter if he loves him more than the others love him?* In several of the earliest manuscripts, Jesus and Peter use different words for love in this passage. The first two times Jesus uses the word *agape*. He asks Peter: "Do you have the highest, noblest love for me?" It must have broken Peter's heart to hear this. He knows he has not loved Jesus that way, and so he answers honestly, "Lord you know I love you," using not *agape*, but *philos*, which is closer to saying, "I respect, admire and have a filial affection for you."

Jesus does not chastise him for this. The third time Jesus asks, he uses the same word Peter uses - *philos*. Jesus accepts the love Peter has. He accepts him where he is. A good parent does not chastise a child for not being able to run a marathon. First, he encourages him to go as far as he can. This is a beginning.

The fifth way Jesus loves us is by calling us to love those he loves. The Mary who comes to the tomb in John 20 and finds it empty, asks, "Where have you laid him?" Jesus has asked another Mary and her sister Martha that in John 11 after Lazarus has died, "Where have you laid him?" Where do we find Jesus? We find him laid out on the cross, but before that, we found him by his own admission, laid out as the door to the sheepfold. That's where he is, wherever the vulnerable are, the lost are, the hungry are, the endangered are. He is the shepherd, and following the question, "Do you love me?" is the imperative, "feed my sheep." He repeats this three times. Love those I love. Some people are overwhelmed that they cannot feed the world and so never feed even one person. Teresa of Avila once wrote in the *Interior Castle* that "many people neglect the task that lies at hand and are content with having wished to do the impossible." The first word for sheep used is actually the word for *slain lambs*. These in the Greek are the *arnion*, *referencing the lambs* that are slaughtered or sacrificed at Passover. Just as Jesus is the paschal lamb of God who gave up his life, these lambs may refer to those vulnerable individuals who are being persecuted. "Look after the vulnerable, Peter." This is Jesus' first request. The second time, Jesus says "tend my sheep." Perhaps as Peter's love becomes stronger, he will be able to tend not just the vulnerable lambs, but a larger flock.

Our Old Testament lectionary reading for today is Psalm 23. In that passage, we see the ways a shepherd tends the sheep:

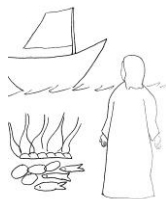
1. First by leading them beside still waters. Shepherds need a non-anxious presence. If he panics, they panic.
2. Second by restoring them. As our good shepherd, Jesus cares for our souls, restoring us through forgiveness and reconciliation.
3. Third, by directing them along right paths, watching for places the sheep may not be as sure-footed or may stumble.
4. Fourth, by protecting them. With the rod, he will fend off attacks. We might equate this today with prayer or acts of advocacy. With the staff, he will draw the sheep back from slipping.

5. Fifth, by preparing a table for them amid their enemies. I shared with you earlier one child's response when asked what it meant to "prepare a table in the presence of their enemies." This child was very sure it meant he should invite people who had been mean to him to come eat with him. We must not presume who is in and who is out of the fold. Jesus does say in John 10:16, "I have other sheep not of this fold; I must bring them in too and they will listen to my voice so there will be one flock and one shepherd." Jesus calls us to one table.

In these days of COVID19, how will we keep each other safe? More than ever we need the Good Shepherd to guide us. The ways of slipping off the cliff are subtle, yet real. We have been keeping ourselves in our separate folds or stalls until the pandemic passes. We want to roam the meadows and long to feed with other sheep. When will it be safe to leave our shelters? We may see other sheep out and the temptation is to join them. We need the wisdom of those we trust and the guidance of the Shepherd to keep us safe. The Region of NC just made the hard decision not to hold youth camps this year. We will not be able to open the doors of our church as soon as many would prefer. Jesus is the door to the sheepfold. He stretches himself out to protect the sheep from any who would steal in to harm the fold. He also protects the sheep from leaving before they need to.

So here we are. Breakfast is over and we are full, but many have not been fed. We sit here on the shore with him and the question he repeats again both breaks our hearts and breaks us open to a depth we never knew: "*Do you love me?*" As Dieter Uchtdorf writes, "Though we are incomplete, God loves us completely. Though we are imperfect, He loves us perfectly. Though we may feel lost and without compass, God's love encompasses us completely. ... He loves every one of us, even those who are flawed, rejected, awkward, sorrowful, or broken."

He loves us by asking us to receive who he really is and by asking us to face who we really are. He loves us by feeding us and giving us the capacity to feed and nourish many more than we could ever imagine, and in so doing, to love those he loves. May it always be so!





Prayers of the Parish: Lord, in your great love, increase our compassion and hear our prayers for:

Grace Price, Eloise Kleinert, Mary Ethel Lewis, Kathy and G. A. Spain, June Anderson, Willie and Faye Rogers, Rick Rogers (Faye & Willie Rogers' son), John and Becky Selzer, Teenie Wilson, Rebecca Daniels, Lorraine Loch, Val Watkins (Brantley's sister-in-law), the Spain's great granddaughter Katie, Molly McEldowney (Sharon Jones' daughter) and her brother, David Reynolds, Robert Strader (June Anderson's son-in-law), Jodie Hudson, Eddie Stewart, Linda Hilburn, Lee Summerlin, Gary Bartlett, Bill Smith, Gordon Aycock (friend of June Anderson), Chuck Allen, and the Kleinert Family, Ruby Santee and family in the death of her sister, Margaret Medlin, Dennis Horne and family in the death of his aunt Linda Sides, Mary Ellen Ham and Stephen Hall.

Good Shepherd, keep us safe from COVID 19 and protect those who have lost their jobs or are facing other challenges associated with this. For these, let us pray to the Lord. We ask for you to direct the paths of scientists, researchers working on a vaccination, health care providers trying to help the sick recover, our own government leaders, CDC, WHO, and support agencies for the roles they play. For these, let us pray to the Lord. We ask you hear the requests of all our hearts, spoken and unspoken, (PLEASE name your own at home) and we ask all according to your will, covered by your grace and mercy and in the Name of Jesus, Amen.

Communion (You may pick up individual communion packs at the entry table at the parking lot entrance Mondays from 10 to 12 or Tuesdays from 10 to 12 or use your own bread and juice at home. You may also drop off your offerings at that time)

Communion Meditation: God, as we come to the Table today, help us remember the love which kept you on the Cross, the love which brought you up from the dead, the love which finds us behind closed doors and discouraged on the road, the love with which you breathe life back into us, the love which feeds us and call us to love others. As we prepare your Table with our offerings, may we confess we have not loved you as we should. Receive our gifts and gratitude for loving us with a love that is perfect and plentiful.

Preparing the Lord's Table with Our Offerings - *In this time we are apart, please remember to share your offerings as regularly as you can by dropping them by the church office from 10 to 12 on Monday or Tuesday of each week, or by calling Wanda for another time, or by mailing in. Wanda will make weekly deposits each week during this time on Wednesday afternoons.*

Words of Institution - On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took the bread and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my Body broken for you. Eat this in remembrance of me." (COMMUNE) In the same manner after supper, Jesus took the Cup and when he had blessed it, he gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my blood of a new covenant, poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it in remembrance of him." (COMMUNE)

Benediction Prayer: Go in peace, go in safety, go in trust, go in grace. Get up through the power of the Resurrected Lord and go live in, through and for him, for Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Announcements and Calendar

National Day of Prayer Posted online May 7 at 5:00 PM

Administration Meeting Monday, May 11 at 6:45 PM via Conference Call

Called Board Meeting Monday, May 18 at 6:45 PM via Conference Call

Elders Meeting changed to Thursday, May 28 at 6:45 PM via Conference Call