

This message was delivered by Rev. Jeanne Gay to the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on the fourth Sunday of the season of Resurrection, May fifth in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen. It is entitled "Invitation to Agape" and is based on the following scripture:

The Good News of John 21:1-19

1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.

2 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.

3 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.

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."

6 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.

7 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.

8 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.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.

10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

11 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.

12 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.

13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 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."

16 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."

17 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."

18 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."

19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

Some people call this passage *breakfast on the beach*. What are you preaching on this week?

Oh, *breakfast on the beach*.

The first part of the passage—the part that Pastor Pam read—has some important stuff in it.

- The disciples are going back to work.
They'd been hanging around with Jesus
and that was all great and everything, but what now?
Might as well get back to life as they knew it.
Get the boats out. Go fishing!

We think of the disciples as having gone almost directly from Jesus' resurrection to founding the church, but remember that they didn't have a blueprint for what was to happen next. And what do we do when we don't know what to do next? We return to what we had done before, what we've always done.

- Jesus eats!
This may not seem all that important,
but it shows us that Jesus was not a ghost.
He was a real human being who got hungry,
grilled some fish over a fire, and ate breakfast.

That's important. This resurrected Jesus was not a spirit of some kind, floating around in human form to make people feel better. No, he was a real human being, one who returned from death to life.

And then there's the second part of the passage—the part I read—where Jesus and Peter have the same conversation over and over again.

“Do you love me, Peter?”

“You know I love you, Jesus.”

“OK. Feed my sheep.”

Now, some folks say that this conversation happens three times is to reflect the three times Peter denied Jesus.

Remember? The night of the last supper, after Jesus was arrested, Peter was in the courtyard and three times he denied knowing Jesus—and then the cock crowed.

So here we have the “do over,” so to speak.

Three times Peter gets to affirm that he loves Jesus.

That's good news for those of us who have strayed away from Jesus from time to time.

You know—us—

when our lives haven't always shown that we're someone who loves Jesus.

We get a do-over.

We get a chance to say *No, really, Jesus, I love you. Really.*

And we can imagine Jesus then saying to us,

“OK. Then take care of my people.”

But there's something else going on in this passage as well—
something that isn't visible in English.

You may have heard that in Greek there are several words for “love.”

- There's *eros*, which can be sexual love or love of beauty.
- There's *philiōs*, which is love that's more friendship,
love that's a kind of affectionate regard, brotherly love.
I lived in Philadelphia for many years—
the city of brotherly love:
same root—*philiōs*.
- And there's *agape*, which is used for God's unconditional love
and for our love of God in its purest form.

There's no *eros* in this passage, but there are both *philiōs* and *agape*.

- The first time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him,
he says, “Peter, do you *agape* me?”
And Peter responds by saying, “Yes, Jesus, you know I *philia* you.”
It's as if Jesus says, “Peter, do you love me?”
and Peter responds by saying, “Bro! You know I got your back!”
- And then it happens again.
“Peter, do you *agape* me?”
“Jesus, you know I *philia* you.”
“Peter, do you love me?”
“Jesus, yeah! You're my brother! You're my main man!”
- And then on the third time, Jesus changes his tack.
“Peter, do you *philia* me?”
And Peter responds with,
“Jesus, you know everything. You know I *philia* you.”

Hunh. How do we understand that?

I have to admit that I always want it to go the other way,
where Peter finally gets it
and the third time responds with *agape*.

Then I could preach a nice sermon on how “*philia*” (brotherly/sisterly love)
isn't as good as “*agape*,”
which is what Jesus wants.

But no, it's not Peter who changes his wording, it's Jesus.
Jesus switches from *agape* to *philia*.
What does that mean, then?

Let's try it as if it were Jesus talking to us.

“Hey People of Tontogany Presbyterian,” Jesus says,
“do you *agape* me? Do you love me in the all-encompassing way that I love you?”

I can imagine you thinking, “Well, Jesus, we try.”

- *I don't know if I manage agape very often, Jesus,
but I'm pretty sure I philia you a lot.
You're really important to me, but agape?
That's pretty intense, Jesus.
I don't know if I can do that.*

Again Jesus asks the question:
People of Tontogany Presbyterian, do you agape me?

What is your response? Think about it a bit.

Perhaps you're thinking *Here comes Jesus with the question again,
and I've got to admit that by this point I'm getting a little defensive.*

*Oh, Jesus, come on.
You know I'm not there yet, with the agape stuff,
but you're going to keep asking, aren't you?
And every time you ask, "Jeanne, do you agape me?"
I'm going to feel more ashamed.*

*It's because of those times I've denied you, isn't it.
I know that's in the back of your mind,
and you keep bounding me about this agape stuff,
which I don't even know if I can do!
I'm doing the best I can,
but maybe that's just not good enough for you, Jesus.*

And Jesus says, "People of Tontogany Presbyterian. All of you.
Do you *philia* me?"

*Yes! Yes! We can do that, Jesus! Thank you!
You aren't holding our faults and failings over our heads, are you?
You get who we are, and you love us the way we are!
Yes! We *philia* you, Jesus.
Absolutely.
We love you.*

And then Jesus says exactly the same thing he's said to Peter each time.

"OK. Feed my lambs."

"OK. Take care of my sheep."

"OK. Feed my sheep."

OK, Tontogany Presbyterian. Take care of my people."

Jesus is saying that however it is we express our love for God,
he has the same instruction for us: Feed my sheep.

Take care of each other.

Take care of the poor and the sick,
the lonely and the mentally ill,
the migrant and the immigrant.

You don't have to be experts at having a relationship with Jesus.

You don't have to be some kind of Super Christian.

No matter who you are or where you are in your faith journey,
 Jesus has one instruction for you:
 “Feed my sheep.”

Start with your family and friends and fellow church members, sure,
 but you probably already feed those sheep.
 Move on to the folks you see every week but don’t have a relationship with.

- How can you “feed” that obnoxious person at work?
 Do it.
- How can you “feed” the neighbor whose dog does its business in your front yard?
 Do it.
- How can you “feed” the person in your social group whose political views make you want to
 hurl them out the window?
 Do it.
- How can you “feed” the immigrant or the migrant worker ... the woman living in a shelter
 for abused women ... or her husband?
 Do it.

Who is it in your life that you can “feed”?
 You don’t need to start with the whole world.
 Just one at a time.

And then it comes back on us.

We read this passage as if it were an *if-then* situation:

If we love Jesus, *then* we should feed Jesus’ sheep.

But I think it’s a both-and situation.

When we feed Jesus’ sheep, we come to love those sheep.

And when we love the sheep, our love of the shepherd can only grow.

Growing in agape love of Jesus doesn’t happen just through
 attending worship on Sunday mornings
 or listening to Christian radio,
 or being part of a Bible study group.

It happens when we do what Jesus asks of us—
 when we feed the sheep, care for those who need help,
 love each and every one of God’s children.

“Tontogany Presbyterian Church, do you agape me?”

“We don’t know whether it’s *agape* or *philia*, Lord,
 but that doesn’t really matter, does it?
 Let’s go feed some sheep!”

Alleluia. Amen.