

Yesterday was Valentine's Day. I hope you had a great day. Now there are many different legends about how this day originated. In one version, Valentine was a priest who lived in Rome about 250 A. D. He and the Roman Emperor Claudius did not get along. Claudius was trying to raise an army, but many of the men did not want to leave their wives and girlfriends. So, Claudius had a crazy idea that if the men were not married, they would not mind joining his army. So, he commanded that there would be no more marriages.

However, Valentine continued to secretly perform marriages. He eventually was arrested and thrown in jail for his actions. Many young people came to the jail to visit him; they would throw cards and flowers into his window. One of the young people who visited him quite often was the daughter of the jailer. On the day that he was sentenced to die, February 14th, he left her a note thanking her for her friendship and loyalty. He signed it: "Love from your Valentine."

This note started the custom of exchanging love notes on Valentine's Day. Now every year on this day, people remember the priest who became known as Saint Valentine. But more importantly, they think about love and friendship. Numerous gifts are exchanged on Valentine's Day. It is estimated that \$29.1 billion will be spent on gifts this year with the average cost being \$200. Candy is the most popular gift. Did you know that more flowers are sold on Mother's Day and Valentine's Day than any other days in the year?

A woman woke up one morning, turned to her husband and said: "Honey, I just had a dream that you brought me a new gold necklace. What do you think that means?" To which he replied: "I don't know, but Valentine's Day is coming. Then you'll know." A few nights later, she had another dream and woke her husband up: "This time, I dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace. What do you think it means?" "You'll know on Valentine's Day," he replied and turned over and went back to sleep. On the morning of Valentine's Day, she again woke him up telling him about her latest dream: "This time I dreamed that you brought me a diamond necklace. What do you think it means?" "Honey, be patient," he said, "You'll know tonight." That evening, her husband came home with a gift. Delighted, she tore it opened and found a book inside entitled *The Meaning of Dreams*.

Now I hope that your loved one was smarter and more sensitive than this husband was. While candy, cards, flowers, and jewelry are demonstrations of love, what I believe most people really want to hear are those three wonderful words: "I love you." The Bible has been called God's love letter to humanity. In John 3:16 we are told that God loved us so much that He sent His Only Begotten Son to restore the broken relationship between us and Him, and to give us the promise of eternal life. 1 John 4:8 affirms that God is love.

This morning, I want to discuss a passage that we have studied before, but because yesterday was Valentine's Day, I want us to focus on love this time. Following the Resurrection, Jesus made numerous appearances to His disciples over a forty-day period. One of these is recorded in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John. Now for some reason several of the disciples, led by Peter, decided to go fishing in the Sea of Galilee. However, they didn't catch anything until Jesus, who was standing on the shore, told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. They caught so many fish that the nets almost broke. When they got the boat and fish ashore, they found that Jesus had prepared breakfast for them.

Now the part of the story that I want to focus on this morning is what happened after breakfast. Jesus took Peter aside for a private conversation. Now remember Jesus and Peter had not been alone since Peter denied knowing Jesus three times on the night that Jesus was arrested. Listen to their conversation in verses 15 through 19 of the twenty-first chapter of John.

Read John 21: 15-19

Now I know that at some time every one of you who has either been married or in a relationship has been asked: "Do you love me?" And from experience, most of you have learned that the tone and how quickly you answer yes will have a definite impact on what happens next. If you give an enthusiastic "yes" followed by a hug or a kiss, then you can look forward to a happy time. However, if you pause or your simply reply "yea," you may be in for a long discussion or silence.

If you have ever been married or in a relationship for a long time, you know that things can also become routine and the old spark may not be as bright as it once was. There was an old episode of *The Big Bang Theory* where Penny and Leonard who had been married for a while were complaining that the other one did not show the same affection as they did when they first got married. Sometimes marriages go like this:

Newlyweds: "Good Morning, Sweetheart!"

After a few years: "Morning, Honey!"

Little Later: "Morning!"

Later: "Ug!"

Much Later: "You still here?"

Unfortunately, this can happen if you are not careful and don't put the necessary effort and time into maintaining a healthy and loving relationship. So, the real question is not "do you love me," but "do you still love me like you once did?"

Now in our story this morning, you have to wonder what Peter must have been thinking as he ate breakfast with the Resurrected Lord. As they gathered around the fire of coals to warm up and partake of the breakfast that the Lord had prepared, it must have reminded Peter of sitting around the fire in the courtyard of the High Priest where he warmed himself and denied that he was one of Jesus' disciples three times. Now Peter had seen the Lord at least twice since the Resurrection, and Jesus had not mentioned anything about the denial yet. Have you ever been in a situation where you were waiting for the other person to bring up that sore point between the two of you? If so, you know how Peter felt.

Finally, Jesus takes Peter aside for a private conversation. Now Peter must be thinking "here it comes." One of the things that you have to like about Peter is that even though he makes mistakes, sometimes big ones, he keeps trying to get it right. In this passage, Jesus is giving him a second chance.

Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him. Peter quickly assures Jesus that, of course, he loves Him. How could Jesus doubt it? Our text tells us that Peter was upset when Jesus asked him a third time if he loved Him. Had Peter already forgotten that he had denied knowing Jesus three times? In asking the question three times, was Jesus somehow trying to cancel the denials and restore Peter to his status as the rock of the church?

Initially, Jesus asks Peter: "Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?" Now by these, did Jesus motion to the fishing boats and nets? Peter, do you love me more than your previous occupation? A good question since Peter had just been fishing all night. He may have also motioned to the disciples and asked: "Peter, do you love me more than your friends?" In other words, do you love me more than anything else in life; am I your first love?

After each of Peter's positive replies, Jesus says: "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep." In other words, if you love me Peter, show it this time. Show it in what you do, what you say, where you go, how you act, and how you live your life. If you love me, act like it. Follow Me. Feed others, both physically and spiritually, as I have fed you. Serve others as I have served you. If you want to know which people to love and serve, remember the people I have loved and served. If you wonder how people should be treated, remember how I treated others. If you love me, feed and tend for the people that I love; the people that I came to serve and save.

In a way, Jesus is asking Peter: "Do you still love me like you once did? Do you still love me as you did on the day I called you to leave your fishing boats on the shore and come follow me?" Just like a relationship can become routine and the initial spark die out, so can our relationship with the Lord become so routine that we end up just going through the motions. And if we are not careful, we can end up drifting apart from the Lord until there is no relationship. Like a

marriage, our relationship with Jesus Christ requires some effort on our part. We must never take our relationship with Jesus for granted; we must live up to the responsibilities of being a Christian, being saved by the grace of God.

The old hymn that we just sang entitled “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” was written by Robert Robinson when he was twenty-three years old. The third verse goes: “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.” Unfortunately, this verse represented Robinson’s later life when he gave in to sin and drifted from God. While riding in a stagecoach one day, Robinson heard a woman humming his hymn. She later engaged him in a conversation and asked what he thought about that hymn. Overcome with emotion, he replied: “Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the same feeling that I had back then.” That’s a sad statement, but that’s what happens when we drift from the Lord, when we lose our love for the Lord.

In the second and third chapters of Revelation, Jesus writes a personal letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor. In each of these letters, He compliments each church on their service to the Lord but also calls attention to their shortcomings. To the church at Ephesus in the second chapter, Jesus writes: “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love.” The *Message* paraphrases it like this: “You walked away from your first love – why?” The Ephesians got so caught up in their work and programs that their love for Jesus diminished. They became so focused on the day-to-day activities of the church that they lost sight of Jesus; they lost the enthusiasm that they had when they first accepted Jesus into their hearts. Have we as individuals and a church lost sight of Jesus? Is He still our first love?

A four-year-old girl, hugging a doll in each of her little arms, looked up at her mother and said: “Mama, I love them and love them and love them, but they never love me back.” How true of some Christians who are loved and loved and loved by Jesus but never love Him back.

This morning, Jesus is asking each of us the same question He asked Peter beside the Sea of Galilee: “Do you love me?” Some of us may have never responded to His question. We have not given Him our love or our life. We have not experienced His love, grace and forgiveness; we don’t have a personal relationship with Him. If that is you, don’t wait another minute wandering and searching for happiness and fulfillment in life; these can only be found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. During the closing hymn, close your eyes and ask Jesus to come into your heart and be the love of your life.

And then there are those of us who have accepted Jesus into our hearts, but over the years have drifted from Him or as the song says: “We are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love.” We have become strangers and our personal relationship with Him needs to be

renewed. To us Jesus asks: "Do you still love me? Do you still have the same love and enthusiasm that you had when you first accepted me as your Lord and Savior?" Of course, this question also applies to those of us who are still committed to Jesus and have a good personal relationship with Him. We all need to prayerfully consider and reflect on this question: "Do you still love me?" Is Jesus still our first love? Is our love for Jesus just words or do we back it up with actions, by how we live our daily lives?

Do our lifestyle and ministries reflect our dedication and love for Him? Are we spending time alone with Him each day in prayer and Bible study? Do we actively participate in a weekly Bible study and worship? Are we actively involved in the outreach ministries of this church to feed the hungry, care for the homeless, and love our neighbors? We answer Jesus' question: "Do you truly love me" when we serve and follow Him; when we feed and tend His sheep. May we each respond with Peter: "Yea, Lord, you know I love you!" And then let's demonstrate it by living each day to the best of our ability in service to Him. Make sure Jesus is still the love of your life! Amen