

Do You Love Me?

Sermon delivered at the John Wesley United Methodist Church in Falmouth, MA

By Gayle Kerry

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Scripture: John 21:15-17

Peace and Grace to you this morning. Thank you to Pastor Rebecca for the opportunity for me to speak to you today.

Let us begin with prayer: Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable unto you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

How many of you have ever watched the PBS News Hour which is on from 6-7 each evening? One of the spots they have each week is a time when they invite someone to offer a “brief but spectacular” talk on something they are passionate about. When they introduce it they always say, “my name is ___ and this is my brief but spectacular take on ___!” So I would like to offer you a similar introduction here this morning. “My name is Gayle Kerr and I would like to offer you this brief but spectacular presentation on LOVE.”

The sermon title comes from the passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus asks Peter the question, “Do you love me?” This scene takes place after the resurrection and the disciples are still somewhat in a state of shock and haven’t quite gotten their act together. They’re still grieving and many times when we are in a state of grief and don’t know what to do with ourselves we turn to whatever we know best. In this case it was fishing. They had been fishermen before they met Jesus so this is what they knew best. They spent the night fishing but didn’t catch a thing. Then they saw a man on the beach (didn’t know who) and the man said, “throw the net on the other side and see what happens.” At this point they began to recognize who it was and when they did what he said they caught more fish than they could pull in. Peter dove into the water and ran to Jesus on the beach. He had a fire there waiting for their fish so he could cook it, and he had some bread. This is the first thing I notice about this Jesus: his hospitality. Can you imagine yourself, tired from fishing all night, grief stricken over the loss of your friend, and your friend shows up and says “*Come and have breakfast with me here on the beach.*” What a love feast that would be! Then, after they had eaten and visited a bit, Jesus turns to Peter and says, *Do you love me?* And Peter answers, *Yes, Lord.* And Jesus says, *Feed my sheep.*

Then he asks a second time and a third. By now Peter is frustrated and a bit annoyed and says, *OF course you know I love you, Lord. You know everything.* And Jesus says for the third time, *Feed my sheep.* Now, I don't know about you, but the only problem I have with this story is that that conversation stops there. If I were Peter I would surely say, *Wait..What? You want me to feed your sheep and tend your lambs? What does that mean? What does that look like? Which sheep? Which lambs?* Unfortunately, we all know Jesus seldom tends to details. He basically lets us figure things out for ourselves. How frustrating is that?

But the really interesting thing about this story is its timelessness. It's just as relevant to us here in the 21st century as it was back in the first century. I'd like you to close your eyes for a minute. Picture yourself in this scene with Jesus on the beach. Imagine its just you and Jesus. And Jesus says to you _____(your name) do you love me? And you answer yes. And now he says to YOU *Feed my sheep.* Sit with that for a minute. What does that mean to you? Remember the question is for you, you know.

So, to get our imaginations going around this question I have a video clip I'd like you to watch. This is a scene from the musical Fiddler on the Roof. For those of you who aren't familiar with the story, it takes place in Imperial Russia around the year 1905. It's the story of a farmer named Tevye, and his wife Golde, the parents of 5 daughters. Tevye is struggling to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural traditions as outside influences encroach on his families lives. In this scene he is struggling to understand the concept of love, because his 3 oldest daughters have recently told him they want to marry for love when the culture has always operated with arranged marriages. Let's take a look. (show video)

So how does Tevye come to the conclusion that Golde loves him? From all the things she has done for him over the years. Love is a verb! It requires action. I'd like to invite you to try something with me. Close your eyes again. I'd like you to get a picture in your mind of the person who loved you the most when you were growing up that was not your mother or father. Once you have thought of someone, I want you to remember something or things that person did for you that let you know that they loved you. (pause). Now I want you to take the 3x5 card you have been given and write down one thing that person did for you. When you are finished, pass the cards down the row and someone will collect them from the center aisle. (collect them and bring them to me).

Let's listen to some of these acts of love. (Read many). This is the face of Jesus Christ in the world. This is how you, as sheep, have been fed. And this is where Jesus wants you to begin when you go out to feed sheep in our world.

Let me tell you how others are doing their part to be Christ in the world. For the past 28 years I have been involved in the ministry of Spiritual Direction. This title is really a misnomer because I don't really direct anyone, I am simply the listener who listens to another's story of their relationship with God in order to help them discern where God may be leading them in their life. This act of Holy Listening is catching on in the church lately and people are asking how they can do it out in the world instead of keeping only within the church. For the past 6 years the Methodist Church has been offering training in Spiritual Direction through a program called Gateways to God which has been taught at Rolling Ridge Conference Center in North Andover, MA. Next year they will begin an advanced program called Missional Spiritual Direction which is designed to teach lay persons and clergy how to do this deep listening out in the neighborhoods where we live. I have recently joined the staff there and I'd like to tell you how one remarkable woman has begun to practice this art of deep listening in her community and what fruit it has produced. We call her **The Skate Park Lady**. Six years ago she noticed not far from her church was a park where many young boys came to hang out. She decided she wanted to get to know these boys so she simply began sitting each day after school on one of the park benches. As the boys began to notice her there day after day they became curious. One day one of the boys asked her what she was doing there. She told him she just liked to sit and watch them play and ride their skate boards. After more time passed one boy asked if she would like to help them create a skate park where they could try out their best moves. She told them she didn't know anything about a skate park. They said that was ok because they could teach her. They told her what they needed and she went back to her church and began to gather resources. Pretty soon they had a skate park in their neighborhood. The boys were thrilled. They improved greatly in their skate board skills. After awhile they asked her if she could take them to a skate board competition. Again, she didn't know anything about these competitions but she agreed to learn and soon she and they were attending and competing in these competitions. Slowly but surely a trust began to grow between the Skate Park Lady and the skate boarders. They began to have conversations; about their families, their struggles, their joys, their questions about life, and God and whatever. She found out that several of these boys never had a birthday cake on their birthdays. So, she began baking birthday cakes for them on their special days. They exchanged cell phone numbers and face book addresses. When times got tough for the boys they

would ask her if she would drive them to visit their mothers or fathers in jail. Or, if the boys were in trouble they would let her know and she would come and visit them in jail.

Her story began to be told around the community. There was a New Balance Shoe factory nearby and they heard what she was doing. They donated boxes and boxes of new sneakers for her to give out and every boy got a new pair of shoes instead of the hand-me-downs they always wore. One boy came and asked if he could have a pair for his dad because he never had a new pair of before. All of this came about because she made a decision to go out into her community and become a listener to a group of boys who probably had no one like that who was willing to listen to them and care about their life stories. Over time, she became Jesus Christ for them—someone who simply cared about them. She knows she cannot fix their lives but she also knows she can walk along side of them and be a trusted friend. Listening, trusting, caring, accepting—no small gifts for someone who doesn't have that in their life. That's how she feeds her sheep.

Mother Teresa has said, *You don't have to do grand and elaborate things for God. You just have to do small things with great love.*

Do you love Jesus? Then go out there and feed some sheep. You can do this. Amen.