

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Southampton, New York**  
*“What does it Mean to Love the Lord?”*

**Psalm 30**  
**John 21: 1 – 19**

**April 26, 2015**

Have you ever considered all the different ways there are for us to communicate to someone that we love them? I mean, really, when you stop and think about it, the possibilities are just about endless! For example, a prominent national florist had an advertising campaign a few years back, which encouraged us to “say it with flowers...” and, indeed, that is one very popular way to get the “I love you” message across. As a matter of fact, I’ve done that very thing for Sylvia many times over the years... sending her a nice floral arrangement, with a cutesy-pie little card that said something like, “To the greatest wife in the world, *love* Rick.”

When I was in high school in the 70’s, folksinger Jim Croce highlighted another way to say “I love you,” with his hit record entitled, *“I Had to Say I Love You, in A Song.”* His point being that, if you don’t have the nerve to just come out and tell someone that you love them, face to face, you can always put your feelings to music, and get the message across *that* way. And, speaking of music, Stevie Wonder once had a big hit in which he told his beloved that he “just called to say I love you.” Which, of course, is another popular way to express our love and affection for someone: picking up the phone, or, in today’s world, logging onto the internet... and, with the help of bells, and microprocessors, and wireless technology, getting word of our devotion across in that way.

And the list goes on and on. In my own home, in the course of a typical day, I might say “I love you” with a hug... with a kiss... with a hastily written note... with a gift... with a smile... with a willing ear to listen to the story of the day’s events. You and I can say “I love you” by being understanding, we can say it by being good disciplinarians, we can say it by extending forgiveness, we can say it by “being there” when somebody is doing something important or facing something difficult, we can say it by counting somebody else’s needs as more important than our own.

Hey, we can even say it by looking someone straight in the eye, and verbally sharing the message: *“I... love... you!”* In all those ways, and in half a million others, we are able to express... to one another... the fact that we do, in fact, love each other!

And that’s all fine and good. *For people!* For *us!* For you and me and the six billion other folks who share this planet with us. But... how do we get that same message across to our *Lord?* How might we communicate to *Almighty God* the fact that we love *Him?* How are we supposed to put our arms around the infinite Creator of the universe and all that’s in it, and meaningfully express our feelings of affection and devotion?

How can you and I, today, right now, in Southampton, New York, give a clear and definitive answer to the question that Jesus asked of Peter, next to the sea of Galilee

on that post-resurrection morning: “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*” It’s an easy question for Jesus to ask... but when you think about it, it’s a really difficult question for us to answer... or, at least, it’s really difficult for us to actually **demonstrate** or **prove** the answer that we give!

Oh sure, we can answer Jesus’ question just as Peter did: “*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!*” We can always say those words, and saying the words is not without value. But, unlike Peter, we can’t back those words up by walking across the room, slapping Jesus on the back, shaking Him by the hand, and giving Him a warm embrace. Unlike Peter, we can’t offer to stoke the fire, clean a few fish, set the table, and validate our love for Jesus by serving Him a hearty Galilean breakfast. Unlike Peter, we can’t do a lot of things for Jesus, that people would naturally do to show that they love each other.

We believe that Jesus is **here**, present with us... just as He was present with Peter and the other disciples, that morning by the lake. But the **spiritual nature** of His presence with us now simply limits what we can do, and how we can do it, to show our Lord that we really do love Him! So we can’t just send Jesus an affectionate note... we can’t just “call to say I love you...” we can’t just e-mail Jesus, or send Him a dozen roses, or take Him out to lunch at Fellingham’s!

Yet, loving the Lord... loving Jesus, loving our Heavenly Father... that’s one of the most important things that we are called to do as God’s people. Truth be told, it’s **THE** most important thing that we’re called to do! And the reason why it’s so important is because **God also loves us!** In fact, if it weren’t for the reality of God’s **prior** love for each and every one of **us**, we wouldn’t be able to have any kind of relationship with God at all! And we wouldn’t be able to have forgiveness for our sins at all! And there would be no need for us to gather in this sanctuary for a church service at all!

You see, it’s God’s love for us that gets the whole spiritual ball rolling... it’s what gives you and me life, it’s what gives us grace, it’s what gives us peace, it’s what gives us direction, and meaning, and wisdom every day of our lives. That’s one of the bottom-line realities on which our faith is built: ***if not for God’s love for us, we would have nothing, and our lives would be without hope!*** And this reality is attested to over and over again throughout the biblical witness.

Remember that in the Gospel of John, Jesus told Nicodemus that it was because **God so loved the world**, that He sent His only Son to give that world forgiveness of sins, and the gift of eternal life! And Paul, in his letter to the Romans, reminds us that the proof of God’s great **love** for us is that, while we were yet sinners, He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for us! And the Psalmist reminds us over and over again in Psalm 136, to “*give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!*”

Make no mistake, the unanimous witness of the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, is that **God loves us**, and that God’s love is **life** to us, and that God has spared no effort to make sure that we know His love, and experience His love, and live every day of our lives in the light and grace of His love! Therefore, it comes as no shock to discover that, in response to the love which God has given to us, we, now, are called to give **our** love to **Him!** And that message, not surprisingly, is just about as prominent throughout the Scriptures, as the message that it is God who has loved us in the first place!

And so we find Moses, in the book of Deuteronomy, proclaiming to his people: *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”*

And in the gospels, we find Jesus, in answer to a Pharisee who had asked Him, *“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”* quoting those same words of Moses, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”*

And, of course, in our lesson from John’s gospel for this morning, we find Jesus asking Peter, three separate times, that all-important question: *“Do... you... love... me?”* And Peter’s answer was, as we saw... *“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!”* And if, like Peter, we are disciples of Jesus, then that’s *our* answer, too... this morning! *“Yes, Lord... we Presbyterians in Southampton, New York, we also love you!”*

The question of the day, however, is how do we show our Lord that our love for Him, is not merely a matter of words or talk? How do we make that all-important jump from simply talking about love, to translating our talk into actions... actions which will leave no doubt that when we say we love God, we really do mean business? Well, I believe that our text from John offers us some valuable guidance as we seek to express our love for the Lord in our life of discipleship.

First of all, I want to emphasize one more time that, it is valuable, and it is meaningful, for us to simply *tell* our Lord that we love Him... to actually say the words, whether verbally, or in the silence of our hearts, perhaps in a time of personal prayer. Remember, Jesus specifically asked Peter, on three separate occasions, “Do you love me?” And in each instance, Peter responded with the same words that we would use, if Jesus asked us that question: “Yes, you know that I do love you!”

Now, Peter had an advantage over us, in that he could actually see Jesus, face to face. When Peter said, “I love you,” he was saying it to a person who was standing in front of him... a person that he could reach out and touch with his fingers. We obviously lack that capacity in our relationship with Jesus today. But as we said earlier, we do *not* lack the real *presence* of Jesus, in our midst, by our sides, in our hearts, every minute... of every hour... of every day... of our lives!

So, when we say the words... or when we pray the words... *“Lord Jesus, you know that I love you!”* or, *“My Heavenly Father, I want to tell you that I love you!”* we aren’t merely spewing empty words out into space, where they drift away, never to be heard and never to be acknowledged! No, when we say those words, we know that our Lord does indeed hear us... and when He hears us expressing that sentiment, I believe that it has the same effect on *our* relationship with the Lord that it had on Peter’s relationship with the Lord!

It connects us! It bonds us! It builds a bridge between ourselves and our God, and it puts us in a position where we can grow and develop in our faith, and become the servants and disciples which our Lord has made us and called us to be! So, by all means, we should not hesitate to tell our Lord that we love Him! We can do it at home, privately, in our prayer time. And, we can do it here, too... in our times of corporate worship!

Every Sunday morning, we spend a lot of time just telling our Lord that we love Him! In our hymns... in our prayers... in our expressions of praise... in all those ways, we are saying to Jesus: *“Lord, we appreciate all that your love means to us... and we want you to know that we love you, too!”* So, saying the words really is important!

But our text reminds us that it's also important to go beyond simply saying the words... and to put those words into some kind of **action**. In the first letter of John, we are told that, if we love God, we will “keep His commandments.” And in our text, Jesus applies that principle to Peter, when He responds to every expression of Peter's love with the challenge, *“I'm glad to know that you love me, Peter. Now, go and feed my lambs! Go, and tend my sheep! Go, and feed my sheep!”*

You see, in each instance, Jesus made it clear that Peter's **love** for Him could not be divorced from Peter's **discipleship** of Him! The two would always have to go together: to love Jesus is to serve Jesus... to love Jesus is to care about the things that Jesus cares about... to love Jesus is to do the kinds of things that Jesus would do, and to be the kind of person that Jesus would be, and to treat other people the way in which Jesus would treat them.

So, if we really want to demonstrate our love for our Lord, the best way that there is for us to do that is to go out and be the best disciples that we know how to be! Forgiving those who have done us wrong... showing compassion to those who are suffering... reaching out in mercy to those who've been shunned and oppressed... telling other people about the love and the grace of God... making a serious effort to live just, moral, and holy lives.

To live such a life is not merely to go through the motions of being a “do-gooder!” No, it's to express, in a meaningful and tangible way, the fact that we really do love our Lord with our hearts, with our minds, and with our strength! It's to put flesh and bone on the words which we speak... and it's to show our Lord that His love for us has not been in vain, but that it has inspired us, and challenged us, and changed us from the inside out! And that's a way to say “I love you!” which can, and will, make a real difference!

The old children's hymn tells us that “Jesus loves us, this we know!” In the days and weeks ahead, may we respond in kind... and may Jesus know, through all that we say and do, that we love Him, too! That's our quest; and that's our life as Christian disciples.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!