

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
[www.lutheranlccf.org](http://www.lutheranlccf.org)  
**Fifth Sunday After Easter, May 14, 2023**

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 401, 399:1-2, 398, 408, 417:1-4.

Lessons: Ezekiel 34:1-12, Hebrews 13:7-21, John 10:1-18.

Sermon Text: John 21:15-17.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last Sunday you heard about the way Jesus miraculously provided earthly blessings – a huge catch of fish and breakfast – for his apostles. You heard about Peter and six other apostles miraculously hauling in a huge catch of fish. In that way, they and we – are taught to rely on God for everything.

After his ascension into heaven, they would not have Jesus personally to rely on. On Pentecost, 10 days after he ascended into heaven, his followers received special gifts of the Holy Ghost to assist them in sharing the Gospel with the world.

The last chapter of John’s Gospel continues with Jesus asking Peter three searching questions. Today we see

**JESUS ASKS PETER IF HE LOVES HIM.**

- 1. Jesus asks the question three times.**
- 2. Peter is then given the command to feed Jesus’ lambs and sheep.**

These words tell us of Peter’s reinstatement as a penitent follower of Jesus who then has the command to feed Jesus’ lambs and sheep with the Word of God.

Jesus used this appearance as an opportunity to turn Peter’s attention to humbly serving him.

Anyone who has learned another language knows that there are some words which are difficult to translate from one language to another. Sometimes there are words with similar meanings but fine shades of meaning which just can’t easily be translated into the second language.

In our text Jesus and Peter both use the word translated “love” in English. But in the original Greek language there are two different words used. English doesn’t have words identical to the meanings of the Greek words.

The NIV has a good picture when Jesus asks Peter two times *“do you truly love me?”*

Peter recognizes his limitations and acknowledges his sins with the way he answers these questions.

When the disciples had finished their breakfast, Jesus showed that he had a special reason for appearing at this time.

Here the Lord purposely speaks to Peter. In a very serious way Jesus asks Peter three times about his love for him. He asks the first question in such a way as to make a comparison between the love of Peter and that of the rest of the apostles.

Peter had previously professed a greater love for Christ than the other disciples. Before Jesus’ arrest, he told his disciples *“**This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.**”* Peter replied, *‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.’ ‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’”* Matthew 26:31-34 (NIV)

But Peter had learned, to his great sorrow, how foolish it is to trust in one’s own strength. Three times he denied his Lord after saying that.

Jesus' lesson on this day was necessary in order to keep Peter in the humility which is demanded of any servant of the Lord. The use of his old name, Simon, and the addition of the explanation, "*son of John*," made the question all the more searching: "*do you truly love me more than these?*" Was Peter now ready to love his Lord and Savior with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his mind?

The threefold answer of Peter is significant of the change that had taken place in him since that night of the denial. At that time he was quite proud of his strength and abilities. But now Peter's pride was relegated to the background, while Peter appeals to the knowledge of Christ.

*"When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.' The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.'"*

Twice Peter says "*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.*" But Peter isn't quite willing to commit himself to the greater love the Lord asked about, translated as "*truly love*".

When the question of the Lord came for the third time, Peter was sorrowful, and was deeply grieved. He felt the justness of the Lord's position; he knew that he had given cause for doubt. And the very gentleness of the reproof made the grief of Peter all the more emotional and his protestations of love all the more passionate.

The first two times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, Jesus uses the word meaning "*truly love*". Twice Peter says, "*Yes, Lord, ... you know that I love you.*" Peter does not answer "yes, Lord, I truly love you."

The first time, Jesus asked Simon Peter "*do you truly love me more than these?*" That was the test. What would Peter say now about his love for Jesus? Jesus used the Greek word for the tremendous love that is found in John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" (NIV)

The NIV text reflects that sacrificial love here with the word "*truly*." "*Do you truly love me?*"

The phrase "*more than these*" could mean "Do you love me more than these other disciples love me?"

Peter merely responded, "*Yes, Lord, ... you know that I love you.*" He could not and would not compare himself to the others. His word for love was not the same strong word as Jesus used, but one that means something like "I hold you as a dear and trusted friend." And he did not make the claim on his own, but appealed to what Jesus must know was in his own heart.

Jesus responded, "*Feed my lambs.*" He gave Peter a standing order to be about the business of feeding the lambs, that is, to "continue to feed" Jesus' believing lambs.

This feeding meant to give spiritual nourishment, to lead the lambs to Jesus' Word and sacraments. That way, they would grow in faith for eternal life.

Many readers assume "*lambs*" here means "children." But "*Lambs*" might also be a way of speaking of all Christians, and in particular about those who are new in the faith. John, for example, in his first letter refers to his readers repeatedly as "dear children."

The second time, Jesus asked the identical question of Peter but omitted the comparison "*more than these*." Peter also answered the same way. He didn't boast. He simply depended on Jesus' knowing Peter's love for him.

This time Jesus replied, "*Take care of my sheep.*" If the word "*sheep*" was to add meaning beyond the word "*lambs*," the command to "*take care of*" clearly suggests a broader meaning than the command to "*feed*." Not only was Peter to feed the flock, but he was to watch over the flock, to be a shepherd to it. Besides feeding, that implied guiding, protecting, comforting; and it has become the directive not just for Peter but for all pastors, who are called "shepherds" in Scripture and for all teachers and leaders of Jesus' flock since then.

When Jesus questioned Peter the third time, he changed the Greek word for "love" to match the one Peter was using. It's as if he was saying, "Okay, Simon, I won't insist on a full-blown, godlike, sacrificial love. Do you hold me as a dear friend, as you claim?"

It grieved Peter to hear Jesus ask yet a third time. We can only guess at what Peter was thinking. He could hardly avoid recalling his denial of Jesus, and some of his hurt was likely sorrow for his sin. Then too it must have hurt to be questioned about his love for Jesus, as if it possibly wasn't genuine.

Still, Peter remained humble, penitent and faithful. He didn't boast of his own abilities and imply he could pass any test of love. Rather, he appealed to Jesus' knowledge as his God and Lord. Peter insisted that Jesus already knew the answer to his own question.

Peter finally appeals to the Lord's omniscience. Jesus, who knows all things and all hearts and minds, would know Peter's heart and mind.

We admit that our Lord knows our hearts when we confess our sins – that we have sinned in thoughts, words, and deeds. The one who knows all things, who searches hearts and minds, could and would read the feeling of Peter's heart correctly and know that the love he had for his Savior was genuine, based upon faith in the redemption that Jesus had won. This is a mark of true faith, when Christians not only confess their sins, but also confess before men that they love their Lord, when they invite the omniscient God himself to search their hearts. The love of Christians may often be weak and in great need of support, but it must be genuine just the same. The Lord recognized and rewarded the sincerity of Peter's love and faith with the command to provide good spiritual food.

Three times Jesus gives him the significant command to feed, to be a pastor to his sheep and his lambs. The sheep of Jesus, as he himself explains in John 10 are those whom the Father has given him, that is, the believers. And the lambs are the little ones in the kingdom of God, especially the children and those in whom the Holy Spirit has recently created faith. Thus Peter received a special call and was reinstated in his office and ministry. Peter was to be one of those who have charge of the flock of Christ; who perform the work of pastors and shepherds. For to feed the sheep, as Luther says, is nothing but proclaiming to them the Word of God. The commission of the Lord is powerful even today. All true preachers of the Gospel, in this respect, have the same ministry as the apostles. The prime requisite for a person who leads a flock of Jesus is genuine and passionate love toward Christ, the great Shepherd of all. This love will then find its expression in true pastoral work, both public and private, the application of the wonderful message of salvation wherever this message can be proclaimed.

So Jesus uses us today.

Every Christian is to know the truths of Law and Gospel. Every Christian is to recognize his own sins and to recognize and especially to believe that Jesus Christ paid the price for all those sins and redeemed him and redeemed her. Every Christian is to then seek, every day, to live a life worthy of Christ.

Dear Lord, give us these gifts! Amen.