

Do You Love Me?
John 21:15-22
The Rev. Layne Brubaker
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our all hearts be acceptable in your sight, o lord our strength and redeemer. Amen

I recently came across an article on CNN about a woman named Courtney Dauwalter, who immediately became a new hero of mine! Until reading this article I had never heard her name, but in my mind, she is a in the flesh superhero, because she is an ultra-marathon runner, meaning that she regularly runs races that are between 100 and 200 miles long. Honestly, I think people who run marathons are superhuman and I was more than shocked to learn that these sorts of races even exist, or are even possible. Courtney is a leader in this sport and she regularly completes races 10+ hours ahead of fellow competitors (male and female). What really stood out to me about Courtney is the attitude she brings towards her sport.

According to the article: *Given the extraordinary distances covered, you might expect her to have a forensic outlook on the craft, with rigorous training schedules, extreme diets, and advanced technology galore. Whereas, the opposite is true. Pre-race she says "I'll usually go with pizza, and afterwards I'm often craving a beer and just a huge pile of nachos."*

Courtney does not have a coach, or training plan, she states. "every day I assess myself and see where I'm at for the day."

Courtney does not present as a prestige athlete; rather, she presents as a happy go lucky person excited for new and fun challenges, but according to the article I was reading: "Underneath that smile, lies a resolute commitment to mental strength."

What makes Courtney truly stand out in the sport of extreme running is her mental ability to take on challenges and stubbornness and to not quit when most other people would. These less tangible strengths are what make Courtney stand out. Courtney states: I love pushing my limits and seeing what's possible.

In my mind, Courtney demonstrates what is possible when we pursue something purely out of love.

But What is Love? One definition I came across defines Love as unconditional affection with no limits or conditions: to completely love someone is to trust the other with your life and being willing to do anything for another.

Love is an important theme in today's gospel reading. Today's Gospel reading is one of Jesus appearance to the disciples after his Resurrection. Jesus is on the beach having a breakfast of freshly caught fish and after having eaten, takes Peter aside for an important conversation. Jesus asks Peter, "Do you Love me?"

Now, there is some backstory to this conversation between Jesus and Peter. In this current moment on the beach joy is overflowing because we are in the Easter moment! Death did not win, Jesus conquered death and sin, Jesus is the resurrected one and has brought the promise of new life and new beginning to all people.

But we cannot forget that this scene follows closely on the heels of a very unhappy and unloving scene, crucifixion/the haunting memory of good Friday has not been erased, and the sting of that trauma, pain, fear, and shame has not left anyone's memory, especially Peter's. And for Peter and Jesus, there is a particular conversation needing to be had.

Before Jesus was arrested, at the last supper Jesus predicted his impending betrayal and death, to which Peter declared that he would not let that happen, that he loves Jesus more than anyone! And he will fight to his death for Jesus. In response to these claims, Jesus correctly predicts that not only will Peter not do any of this, but he will actually deny Jesus three times before the following morning. As we all know, Peter did just that.

I think for Peter the memory of his denial, and his misplaced pride in himself, was most likely eating away at Peter during breakfast on the beach.

I also wonder if Jesus needed to hear from Peter, that Peter's love was not just something for the easy days but could Peter Love Jesus in the worst of time. Can Jesus trust Peter's Love?

Jesus and Peter take a walk on the beach, and Jesus says to Peter "Do You love me more than these?" Jesus is basically saying "so now Peter, after all that you have been through, do you still think that you love me more than everyone else?" Jesus is asking are you still so prideful in yourself and your own abilities that you think you love me more than these other disciples. You love me more than other followers. The "these" Jesus refers to is purposefully unspecific.

Peter responds "Yes, Lord you know that I love you."

Peter response doesn't really answer the question, and there may be traces of shame hidden in Peter's answer. "Peter does not claim to love Jesus more than anyone else, which suggests that he has reflected on his three denials, but he is giving a simple answer to a complex question."

So, Jesus asks Peter again, "Do you Love me?" and again Peter responds, "Yes Lord, You know that I love you." What is not grasped by our English translations of this passage is the

many different words used for love. The two times Jesus asks Peter- do you love me? Jesus is using a specific word for love, but Peter is responding with a different word for Love. "So, it is like Jesus is saying to you really love me Peter, and Peter says yes lord you know I have great affection for you."

There are many exegetical debates on what is happening in the Greek of this passage; scholars have tried to decipher exactly what is happening with these word choices and there are many different theories and opinions, but what is true is that there is an inherent intent by the author to demonstrate a change happening within Peter during this conversation.

Because Jesus, then asks Peter for a third time "do you Love me?" But this time Jesus changes the word for Love to the word that Peter has been answering with. "Jesus says, Peter do you have great affection for me" and something about Jesus word change "deeply grieves and hurts Peter." It's as though, Jesus has cut Peter's pride to the quick. "Here we see Jesus performing painful but necessary surgery. Jesus is The light shining in the darkness of Peter's heart, which brings life but is not always pain free. To be made alive, past shame and guilt must be exposed by the light."

In response to Jesus third question, Peter does not respond with a simple answer, he finally lets his hurt and shame be seen- he says LORD, YOU KNOW ALL THINGS! You KNOW that I really LOVE you! (this time Peter responds with the word Love Jesus used in his first two questions). This time, Peter responds from the depths of himself, the author is using specific word choices, to convey that Peter in this moment has experienced conversion. Peter's conversion illustrates that he is now willing to give himself completely over to the sovereignty of God and do whatever it takes to convey his love for Jesus.

So what does it mean, to truly LOVE Jesus, After each profession of Love, Jesus gives a similar command to Peter to feed and shepherd his Lambs and Sheep. Jesus is himself the good shepherd and now he commissions Peter to care for the flock that belongs to Jesus, for they are my lambs, my sheep, Peter is instructed to manifest his love of Jesus, by caring for other people.

But this is not all that Jesus tells Peter in this conversation. Jesus also tells Peter what the cost of truly loving Jesus is. Before now, Peter did whatever he wanted and went where he wanted, but now Jesus tells him you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. There will be a cost to Peter's love, and to faithfully follow Jesus in this post Resurrection world Peter will need mental stubbornness, and fortitude that is not easily lost; the going will get tough for Peter and Jesus is telling him that he will not be afforded the ability to deny Jesus in the future.

When I read this passage, I see Jesus standing before me asking, "do you love me?" "Do you Love me with unconditional affection with no limits or conditions: Do you completely trust me with your life, with your future? Are you willing to feed my sheep, care for my lambs? Are you willing for me to lead you to places where you do not want to go? Do you have the mental

fortitude of Courtney Dauwalter to run this marathon of faith? Can you push through the pains of this world and pursue God's Call in this world beyond what I think it is possible?

This past week I had the wonderful privileges of attending Princeton Theological Seminary's Forum on youth ministry. I was able to attend the event along with all the youth advisors from Lewinsville, Siobhan Grayson, Madison Kloster, Nate Jones, and Evan Ayars all attended the event with me. It was 2 1/2 days full of theological education; it was by all accounts a great experience. On Tuesday evening of the forum, we attended a lecture by Dr. Miguel Del La Torre; he is a theologian, ethicist, seminary professor, and prolific writer. It was a huge honor to get to hear him speak, and it was the rare experience of hearing a prophet speaking hard truth. It was the sort of lecture that was hard to hear, but also ignited my soul because the words were coming from the Holy Spirit, which is how we know God is at work. God's call is hard but is always trustworthy. In De La Torre's lecture he stated:

I don't fight for justice because I think I'm going to win; in fact I know I'm going to lose (immigration issues). I fight for Justice because it defines the faith I claim to have and more importantly it defines my very humanity.

think he was saying something similar to Jesus' words to Peter: If we say yes to loving Jesus, then we are called to care for our fellow humanity which will lead us on paths that we do not want to go. Winning is not a guarantee; in fact, we most likely will not win, but that is not the call. If we love Jesus our call is to love, to love our fellow humanity with a tenacity that cannot be explained that can only be sustained by the Holy Spirit. To Let go of control of our future; to submit to God's sovereignty and be willing to go wherever that may take you. If you love Jesus, can that be your mission, your purpose, to be focused on the love of Jesus, caring for other people, feeding the hungry, sheltering for the homeless, clothing for the naked, taking medicine to the sick, and being present to the lonely? Amen.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, Remind us, that Easter is not a thing of the past, but a continuous miracle, a death-defying promise worth our constant proclamation. Ground us in your good news, O God, and help us hold on to your promises of hope. Keep our feet steady on Christ's path as we seek to be his faithful followers. In your name we pray, Amen.