



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 4, 2018
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
MY HEART AS SANCTUARY, MY LIFE AS PRAYER

What Do We Love More than Jesus? Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

After his resurrection, when he was making appearances to his followers in various places, Jesus met up with his closest friends by the Sea of Tiberias (or the Sea of Galilee, as it was also known) where they had gone fishing. You know the story. After a frustrating night of fishing, the sun rose and the group of disciples saw a solitary figure on the beach. The man asked if they had caught anything and, upon hearing that they had had no luck, the man suggested they throw their nets on the right side of the boat. The nets filled with fish. John realized that the man was Jesus and told Simon Peter who pulled on his robe, jumped into the water, and swam to shore. They all enjoyed a nice breakfast of roasted fish and lay back on the sand—probably for a well-deserved nap.

Jesus, who either had a good night's sleep or no longer needed rest for his resurrected body, wanted to talk. He wanted to talk with Peter. Three times he asked a personal and, for Peter, very troubling question, "Do you love me?" Three times a rather agitated Peter affirmed that he did love Jesus.

That was a tough question for Peter. When Jesus was arrested in the garden, Peter, along with the rest of the disciples, ran away and hid. Peter did work up enough courage to hang out in the courtyard of the high priest's house to find out what was going to happen with Jesus, but when one of the servants outed him as a follower of Jesus, Peter vehemently denied that he knew him three times. Thus, Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him and three times Peter's heart ached at the question.

Do you love me? Of course we do, Lord. You know that. We get up on Sunday mornings, shower, dress, and get to church in order to be there with you. We come back to church for special events, for weddings and funerals, for covered dish luncheons and committee meetings and everything else those folks plan. And don't forget, Lord, we give our money to support all of your ministries. Of course we love you! No one likes to be asked a question when the answer should already be obvious.

A month or so ago, our Presbyterian friends got together one weekend. All of the local churches met for worship at First Presbyterian Church and had a wonderful time together. The day before, representatives from twenty-seven congregations met together in Goldsboro for a conference. Their guest speaker was the Rev. Jan Edmiston, Co-Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA. In her sermon, she told a story which some of my Presbyterian colleagues recounted.

Rev. Edmiston recalled that years before she had been invited by a Presbyterian Women's group to offer a devotion at their monthly meeting. She read that passage from the Gospel of Mark in which one of the scribes asked Jesus which commandment was the greatest. Jesus answered with those beautiful verses which we know so well: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29-30).

It was her first time in that church and, in order to get to know something about the congregation and its ministry, she asked the ladies to tell her something about their church that they really liked. "Tell me what you love about your church," she invited. The first woman to speak said, "I really love our windows. We have beautiful windows in our church." That seemed like a good answer, so she called on the next lady. "Oh, shoot," she exclaimed, "I was going to say the windows, too." The next lady also said that she really liked the windows of the church. Every woman in that gathering stated that what they loved about the church was the windows and they really didn't come up with anything else.

The ladies went on with their business meeting which was fairly typical, but there was some friction about what they wanted to do or the direction they should go. Conflict is common, but it can be uncomfortable, and that day it was. Rev. Edmiston said that she couldn't tell that any of the people in that room really liked each other. The meeting drew to a close and they asked her if she would offer a prayer before they left, which she was happy to do. She picked up her Bible and read again the passage of scripture she had read earlier, but she substituted the word "window" for "God." She said, "Hear, O Israel: the windows are One; you shall love the windows with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." She did admit that they were really pretty windows!¹

What do we love more than Jesus? If you like, we can pause for a moment while we all, myself included, squirm uncomfortably in place. Jesus' question of Peter was difficult enough, "Do you love me?" But we can all answer that question honestly, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you!" And we do. We do love Jesus and have for a long time. What I learn from this story is that even though we profess our heartfelt and very real love of Jesus, just as Simon Peter did, if we are honest, there are some things that we love more than Jesus. What do we love more than Jesus?

Rev. Edmiston's question is a real doozy. It's a loaded question like "Have you stopped cheating on your income tax?" or "Do children still cry when you walk into a room?" What do you love more than Jesus? It is a tough question to answer. If we answer, "Nothing," then we are being dishonest and we (and God) know better. But who wants to enumerate all of the things that top God on our list of things we love? No one wants to answer that question.

Yet, it is a question we ought to answer. We are not alone. Religious people have always struggled with loving God with everything we are and have. Remember that the Hebrew people, fresh out of slavery and headed to the Promised Land, collected their gold jewelry and had Aaron fashion it into a calf for them to worship because Moses had been up on the mountain far too long. Remember, too, that he was up on the mountain to receive the Ten Words, the Ten Commandments, as we know them, the ten guidelines for living which God obviously thought they needed to have as a reminder of what their love and loyalty meant. What did the newly freed Israelites love more than God? They loved their idols, their abuse of the character of God, all of the things they wanted to do on the Sabbath other than rest, their neglect of their parents, their revenge for wrongs done, the things that belonged to a neighbor including spouse, workers, livestock, possessions, and their good name. While Moses was on the mountain getting a list of the things we love more than God, the Hebrew children were down below making an idol that tangibly reminded them that they loved something more than God.

¹You may view one version of Rev. Edmiston's sermon at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBleuX9r_fQ.

A thousand or so years later, things had not changed a great deal. The Jewish people still struggled to love God more than anything else, but it was difficult. Jesus reminded them of that very problem in a rather dramatic way when he threw over the tables of the money changers and used a whip to chase off everyone who was profiting from the worship of God in the temple. What did they love more than God? Money and position and influence. They loved taking advantage of people who were coming to the temple to do what? Express their love for God. Jesus reminded the people that if they wanted to love God more than anything else, they had to respect his sanctuary as a place of worship, a house of prayer, a home in which to love God with everything we are.

What do we love more than Jesus?

How would you answer that question? My answer probably varies from day to day. On many days, I would have to honestly answer that I love my family more than I love Jesus. I admit that there are days when I love money more than Jesus while on other days it is my routine or what is friendly and familiar that I love more than Jesus. It pains me to confess that on some days I love my job more than I love Jesus. That sounds odd, I know, since my job is supposed to be all about Jesus. Yet there are days when I get more immersed in the things I do than in the One whom I am supposed to serve.

There are days when I love comfort more than Jesus, days when I am more devoted to tradition or familiarity or the status quo than I am to Jesus. Sometimes I love the absence of conflict better than I do Jesus who calls me to speak and act against injustice and a lack of righteousness. Yes, there are days when I love the stained glass windows in this sanctuary or the Palladian window that looks out on the world more than I love the One who created the world.

Sometimes I love my ideas and suppositions more than I love the One who created my mind and heart and first opened them to Truth. Sometimes I love the known more than I love the God of the unknown.

What do you love more than Jesus?

How do we answer that question as a congregation? While I am pleased that we take good care of our facilities—and our windows—I don't think we have misplaced our affection in the things that are identified as Lakeside. Are there other things, less tangible, that are dear to us but which might well

override our love of God and our willingness to go wherever God leads us? This is a good and difficult question to consider.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus did his best to help us answer this question. In his parables, he taught us that to love God is to live as if God is near at hand. To love God is to love God completely with heart, soul, mind, and strength—our entire personality. To love God is to love our neighbor. To love God is to love with childlike wonder and trust. To love God is to accept God’s love for us, a love that welcomes the prodigal child home and honors the child who has never left. We love God by loving as God loves.

What do we love more than Jesus? Quite a lot of things, I suspect, but the life of faith is a journey of discovering and acknowledging those things and putting them in proper perspective. It is not easy or painless at times, but it is the path to a life well lived.

The spiritual we heard earlier, beautifully sung and profound in its simplicity, can be our guide. Originally sung by people who awoke to a day they knew would be filled with hard labor, verbal and possibly physical abuse, and above all, captivity of the body, this song gave evidence that their spirits could not be enslaved. Perhaps their devotion to God under the most difficult of circumstances, can inspire our own daily loving of God:

O, when I am alone, give me Jesus.
O, when I come to die, give me Jesus.
And when I want to sing, give me Jesus.
And when I am alone, give me Jesus.
You may have all the rest; give me Jesus.²

In our rising, in our resting, in our fears and struggles and grief, in our joys and successes, in our living and in our dying, God loves us. God loves us and simply wants us to love God back. Loving God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength will keep all of the other loves of our life in right order and perspective. When we try to figure out what we love most in life, Lord, give us Jesus. Amen.

²African American Spiritual, “Give Me Jesus,” arr. L.L. Fleming, Augsburg Publishing House, 1973.

March 4, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We know, O God, that instead of being like Moses on the mountain receiving wisdom and grace from you, we are more likely to be with everyone else in the valley, looking for meaning and seeking love from things that are tangible but lifeless. Forgive us, O God, and open our eyes and ears and minds and hearts to your love which gives true life to us all.

We praise you this morning, O God, for all of the goodness that has come our way and for the many blessings that are evident at every turn. Truly you provide all that we need and, when we pay attention, we recognize that we are given far more than we deserve. Thank you for all of your generosity to us.

We pray that you will continue to work in our lives to awaken us to the ways you work in our world, to sensitize us to the wonders and needs around us, and to enable us to fully engage the world you have given us. Call out our gifts and talents and guide us to use them to your praise and glory, we pray.

We thank you for all of the help that comes our way but admit that our needs are never satisfied. We ask today that you continue to help us with all of the challenges of life that come our way. When we are ill, provide us with good care that will hopefully bring cure and will surely bring us hope. When we are dismayed and discouraged, we ask that you bolster our spirits and give us the courage to live each and every day. In our sorrow, offer us comfort and hold us close until the pain eases and our spirits are healed. In our distress, bring to us the people and the resources that we need to restore our lives. And in our joys, celebrate with us, we pray, for we know that all good things come from your generous hand.

We do love you, O God, but help us to love you as you love us. Teach us the depth and strength of love, the courage and commitment of love, and the hope and redemption of love for you have so generously loved us. Thank you, O God, for the privilege of loving you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.