

“Answering the Question, Receiving a Call” based on John 21:1-19
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on May 4, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

So, when my son Harrison, who was Peter in our reading, was little, he came into the kitchen of the house we were living in holding a box of Band-Aids that were stored in our medicine cabinet over the sink in a bathroom that was not very sturdy. He was maybe 3 years old at most, so it quite impressive that he had gotten this box of Band-Aids out.

So, I asked him, “Harrison, did you climb on the sink?” He didn’t answer. So, I said, “Now, Harrison, tell us the truth.” He responded, “I do not like cheese.” He still doesn’t, so it is true, but it didn’t answer our question. This was not the truth we wanted to know. Our concern about his acrobatics, and we may have made him worried, even afraid answer.

Have any of you ever answered a question like this? Have you ever given an answer that was technically true, but you were really trying to just get around the question. There’s a book, “It’s True,” by Mercer Mayer, and in it, Little Critter does this. My favorite lie of his comes when his mom says, “If you did your homework, you may have a cupcake.” Little Critter says, “I did.” His sister says, “That’s not true!” He says it is true, because he did some of his homework, just not all of it.

Now, in the gospel passage that Savannah, Kesson, Harrison and Oliver wonderfully read for us today, the gospel writer shows us a picture of Simon Peter doing something just like this. But we’re reading it in English, so we miss what Simon Peter does here. You see in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, especially, and other languages, there are different words that can all be translated to English as love. So, John here is writing in Greek originally, and we translate it to English for us to understand it. In the Easy-to-Read version that they read is a good translation.

Jesus asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Jesus calls Simon Peter by his birth name only – Simon – and by Simon’s father’s name. This was how last names were done in Jesus’s time. I’d be Andrew, son of Francis. Harrison would be Harrison, son of Andrew. He doesn’t call him by Simon Peter, or Peter, the nickname that Jesus gave him. Maybe that’s because, in this moment, Peter isn’t really being Peter. Jesus gave him that name to be a leader, but here all the leading that Peter is doing is taking the disciples out on a fishing trip. He’s not taking them out into the world, as Jesus had sent them.

In the reading our youth did last week, we saw Jesus, who had resurrected from the dead, showing up in a locked room and he said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Then he then gave them the power to forgive sins and yet, here they are – fishing. Somehow, I don’t think Jesus meant, that they needed to forgive the fish. No, they’re avoiding doing what Jesus asked them to do. And so, Jesus’s question is like the question I asked Harrison, and the one Little Critter’s mom asked him. Jesus wants to know what Simon Peter has done here.

And so, Jesus asks him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” You can almost imagine Jesus gesturing or pointing to the six other disciples – Peter’s friends. And his question uses the Greek word, *‘agape,’* that we translated as “love.” This is a word that the Greek’s didn’t seem to use all that often back then before the Christians came around. Christians took this little used word, and they gave it a new meaning. They used it to mean pure love – the love we have for God and the self-giving love God has for us. It’s a love that puts others first.

So, when Jesus asks if Simon Peter loves him, he asks if he loves him more than he loves his friends. Now, what John says Simon Peter does here is he goes around the question a little bit. Simon, son of John, does not commit to fully loving Jesus as he is supposed to love God. Simon Peter uses a word that means a love for friends – *'phileo.'* It's a love for siblings like "Philadelphia" the city of brotherly love. Peter basically says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you as I love my friends here."

Jesus does not call him out here or scold him, he just gives him a command, "Feed my lambs." John has Jesus use the word for a newborn lamb, a tiny baby lamb, a helpless lamb. It's a nursing lamb. Jesus here is saying, "Feed the littlest ones who cannot feed themselves." Even if Simon Peter will not commit to admitting he loves Jesus fully, with a never ending always faithful love. John has Jesus saying Peter can still do a job, even if he cannot commit to loving Jesus. Jesus wants him to feed the most vulnerable. He wants Peter to help the most helpless to live.

Then Jesus asks him again, and this time he leaves out the comparison to his friends. Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" and again, the gospel has, *'agape.'* Again, Peter doesn't answer the question: He will not say if he *'agape'* loves Jesus. The story has Peter say, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you as a friend." So now, Jesus adds to his responsibilities. He is going to help Simon learn how to love. He tells him, "Take care of my sheep." Lambs are baby sheep, so now in addition to feeding lambs, Jesus wants Simon Peter to be like a shepherd. This is not just someone who feeds the babies, but someone who tends to all the sheep, caring for all of their needs.

I think John, the gospel writer, wants us to see that Simon Peter is struggling and Jesus recognizes it. He sees his disciple struggling. You see, Simon Peter may not feel like he's really up to the task of following Jesus. You ever have your parents ask you to do something and they think you can do it, but you're thinking you cannot do it. That's Peter here.

After all, on the night Jesus was arrested, Simon Peter said he didn't even know Jesus when he was asked. Then, when Mary Magdalene said that Jesus had risen from the dead, Simon Peter ran to the tomb and he found only the linens, which John says were neatly folded in the empty tomb. Mary got to see the risen Jesus, as John tells us, but Peter found only the clothes in an empty tomb. He hasn't had a chance to apologize to Jesus and say I'm sorry I denied you.

When Jesus showed up and told the disciples he was sending them out into the world, John doesn't tell us that Jesus spoke specifically to Simon Peter. No, in John's story, Jesus speaks to all the disciples at once. What do you think Simon Peter was feeling when he said, "let's go fishing?" What do you think Simon Peter was feeling when at the shore, some guy tells them, "Hey, throw your nets on the right side, and they caught 153 fish, filling their nets? What do you think Simon Peter was feeling, when he jumped in the water and swam ahead of the boat to find Jesus on the shore?

I think Simon Peter is feeling like he is not worthy of being a disciple anymore. He wanted to prove himself by being the first one there. I think he thinks he doesn't deserve the name Peter that Jesus has given to him. I think he questions whether he will be able to follow any of Jesus's commands. After all, he denied Jesus and who's to say he won't say, "I don't know him," another time in the future. I think Jesus calls him only by his birth name, because Jesus also recognizes that Simon doesn't really feel like Peter. And John shows us Peter being afraid to say to Jesus, "I love you fully." He's only willing to call him a friend.

So, then Jesus, the third time around, says, “Simon, son of John, do you love me as a friend?” Jesus brings it down to his level. I think it hurt Simon Peter because he realized what Jesus was doing. He realized that Jesus knew how low he felt, and Jesus meets him where he’s at. I don’t think Jesus hurt Simon Peter here, so much as it made Simon Peter deal with the pain he was already feeling – the guilt. Simon Peter responds, “Lord, you know all things. You now that I love you as a friend.”

Jesus completes what he is asking Simon Peter to do. He says, “Feed my sheep.” He wants Simon Peter to love all the sheep, being willing even to feed the ones who it seems can probably find grass on their own. He wants Simon Peter to love others just as Jesus loves others. Remember that it is in John’s gospel when Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd. (More on that next week.) This is Jesus passing on to Simon Peter, and I believe he is passing this on to you and me, and to all of these adults here, a calling, or the job, of being just like the Good Shepherd.

Also, in John’s gospel, before Jesus was killed, as we heard on Maundy Thursday, he told the disciples they had a new command. He said to them, “Love one another, just as I have loved you.” In Jesus, we see the full extent of God’s love for us, and God’s love for the world, for everyone. John’s gospel tells us that Jesus is God’s Word, the eternal Son of God. He is one with the Father, and he came to live in our flesh as a human being completely as one of us. He did this so that all who believe in him – or trust him and follow him and give their allegiance to him – will not perish but have eternal life. Jesus is God in our limits.

Jesus shows us how far God’s love will go when he calls the cross his throne. You see, he was betrayed by a close friend, and he was rejected by his own people. He was pushed away, and given over to the greatest power in the world – the Roman Empire. The empire crucified him, hanged on a cross to die a shameful death. The empire wanted to embarrass and shame Jesus, and tell all of his followers that they will be killed like him, if they don’t just go quietly away. So, then Peter listened to Rome and went quietly away denying Jesus at a moment when we might think a friend needed him most. He was afraid he would be killed, so he denied Jesus.

But even though the world did everything it could do to silence Jesus and put him to shame, Jesus rose from the grave. His body was raised up and transformed. He got up and he lives again – not just then, but he now lives eternally. You see, Jesus showed us that he defeated the powers of sin and death. They tried their worst, and Jesus showed us the power of resurrection and the power of love – that true, never-ending, always faithful love of God.

When we follow Jesus, no matter what others do to us, Jesus promises us that love and resurrection will win. So, even though Simon Peter is struggling, Jesus shows him that he is forgiven. Jesus, who knows all things, also knows that Simon Peter will not deny him again. Jesus tells Simon Peter that he, “someone else will dress you and lead you to somewhere that you do not want to go.” John says this refers to Peter’s death because Peter is going to be crucified also.

Jesus tells Simon Peter that he is to be like Jesus. He is to be like the Good Shepherd in his life, and for Simon Peter, this would even mean that he will suffer a death like Jesus. Simon Peter had avoided following Jesus up to this point after the resurrection. He didn’t listen to the command to go out. He didn’t accept that he was sent by Jesus to love as he is loved. He went fishing instead of loving others and serving people. But now, Jesus says again, “Follow me.”

It's a hard question that Jesus asks each of you and of the youth, and of all of us adults as well – "Will you come and follow me?" We are all afraid of what other people might say or what other people might do to us. Jesus tells us very clearly to love one another, just as he has loved us. But what will people say if we were actually We are all too often worried about what people might say, of we were actually feeding and caring for others as Jesus asks of us.

You know, we give an example in a lot of children's sermons to encourage you. We say that if you see someone who doesn't have friends, you should be their friend. This is true. This is the best way that we can be like Jesus in how we love. If we see that someone has no food, we can share our food with them. If we see that someone is cold, we can give our coat to them. Whatever the need, if we see someone who is in need, we can do something.

But I want to let the young people in on a little secret here because we, as adults, are not good at this. It's the truth but we're not good at it. We don't do a good job of being friends with people who are different from us. We worry a lot about what our friends might think if we included someone else – someone who might behave a little differently, not have the same money we have. They might come from a different culture. We struggle with this. We do. We are good at our church about feeding the hungry and contributing money to causes, and that is wonderful. But myself included, I think we all struggle to make them our friends. We struggle to truly love them with agape love as Jesus loves us.

Our world tells us to worry about our own needs – to worry about our family, our church, our country, all first. But John's gospel says, "God so loved the world that he sent his only and unique Son, the only begotten, so that anyone who believes in him, might not perish, but have eternal life." Jesus says this is the kind of love we should have for other people. He says, if the world tries to shame us and make us feel unworthy, don't worry, he has overcome the world. So, Jesus has a question for us, "Will you come and follow me?"

Jesus knows that all of us, like Simon Peter or Little Critter, might try to avoid this question, and we will say that we love Jesus in whatever way we can honestly say it? Will we say we believe in Jesus, in whatever way we can answer. Jesus will answer us, no matter what our answer is by calling us "to do." He is calling us to love with God's never ending always faithful kind of love. He calls us to believe, not by just saying we believe, but by living with trust that God's got our back and that Jesus is our King – the only king.

Not one of us is fully there. We all struggle with this – even me, a pastor. Simon Peter wasn't there, and he was talking with the risen Jesus and still he had trouble with belief, love, and faith. But we can all do the things Jesus asks regardless of the levels our hear is at. We can feed and take care of others. We can make friends with those who are different from us. We can do acts of love, and this will build the love of God in our hearts, because the Holy Spirit is in and among us transforming us and pouring that love in our hearts.

Maybe we all need to hear that Children's message talking point – adults, youth and children need to hear the same message. Do not worry about what other people think – befriend the lonely, feed the hungry, care for others. Advocate for people who need help, even if it doesn't help you directly. This is the path – the way, the truth, and the life. This is what it means to truly follow Jesus. Amen.