

John 20:1-18

Introduction

One of my former pastors once told me that the hardest passage to preach in the entire Bible is Paul's meditation on love from [1 Corinthians 13](#). This seems like a strange thing to say. But I think he was on to something. Love is a mystery. Trying to describe love is like trying to describe a lion's roar or an eagle's flight or the way of a ship on the high seas. When it comes to describing love, [1 Corinthians 13](#) stands on its own.

More so than the other gospels, the gospel of John focuses on *love*. John presents Jesus as the bridegroom. In John, Jesus' public ministry begins at a wedding. In John, Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at a well, the place where the patriarchs met their wives. In John, Jesus is the lover from the Song of Solomon receiving perfume and spice.

The emphasis on love continues in John's account of the resurrection in [John 20](#). With this in mind, I want to note two things this morning from our passage.

1. Love is the Greatest Theological Virtue
2. Love is stronger than death.

Love is the Greatest Theological Virtue

Love, as Saint Paul writes, is the greatest of the theological virtues: "faith, hope, and love abide, these three; *but the greatest of these is love.*" ([1 Cor 13:13](#)).

One of the ways that John's gospel highlights the theme of love is by placing different characters next to each other.

Peter's Leadership and John's Love

The two characters that are the most obvious example of this are Peter and the Apostle John himself, the disciple whom Jesus loved.

This helps explain why John decide to include the details of his race with Peter in his account of the Resurrection?

After Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty, she runs to Peter and John saying, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Verse 4 states, “***Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb...Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;***”

There are examples of Peter and John alongside each other throughout the closing chapters of John’s gospel:

During the Last Supper in [John 13](#), John reclines at Jesus’ side and Peter has to ask John to ask Jesus the question about who it was that would betray him. There is a sense that John has a greater intimacy with Jesus than Peter.

After Jesus’ arrest in [John 18](#), both Peter and John accompany Jesus to the house of Annas and Caiaphas. However, *John goes all the way into the house* while Peter stays in the courtyard.

During the crucifixion, in [John 19](#), John is at the foot of the cross and Jesus charges him with the care of his mother Mary.

After the Resurrection, when Jesus appears on the beach to his disciples in [John 21](#), John is the first to recognize Jesus.

These comparisons between John and Peter teaches us about different aspects of these disciples and their strengths and weaknesses. Throughout the gospels, Peter is the disciple who takes charge and leadership. Peter’s discipleship to Jesus is oriented around *the mission of Christ*.

This is a good thing. Peter is the first to actually enter the tomb. He is also the first out of the boat when Jesus appeared on the beach.

But these comparisons show another aspect of how we relate to Christ. We are not *just* servants of Jesus who carry out his orders. We are also friends of Jesus. We are called to friendship with Christ. A friendship marked by deep love and affection for our lord.

This can be difficult because, in our day, all love gets boiled down to eros. Affection in friendship makes us uncomfortable. C.S. Lewis describes our problem well in his book *The Four Loves*:

Those who cannot conceive Friendship as a substantive love but only as a disguise or elaboration of Eros betray the fact that they have never had a Friend.

It's true that the evangelical church has over emphasized the idea of a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ" and ignored what the Bible teaches about our service to the mission of Christ.

That said, we must be wary of over-correcting in the opposite direction. Yes, we are to be focused on the mission of Christ. But we are not to forget that we are called to love our lord Jesus. In correcting the effeminacy of the modern church, we cannot become like the church in Ephesus who Jesus condemns in [Revelation 2:4](#) when he says, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first."

The Love of Mary Magdalene and the Women

The comparison between John and Peter isn't the only one that John's gospel emphasizes. Mary Magdalene and the women also stand as examples of love.

It was love that brought Mary Magdalene to the tomb on Resurrection Sunday. It was love that brought the women to the foot of the cross during the crucifixion. Like John, the women in John's gospel exemplify love and devotion to Jesus' person.

Like the bride in the Song of Solomon, Mary distresses because she seeks her beloved and can't find him. She cannot find her beloved and she weeps. When it looks like the mission of Jesus has failed the disciples scatter, but the love of Mary leads to the garden. As Paul explains, "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." ([1 Cor 13:7](#)).

Mary is blinded to Jesus' identity until he calls her by name. Jesus taught his disciples, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." ([John 10:27](#)) Mary heard the voice of her shepherd, she knew him, and then followed his directions.

In the garden, Mary Magdalene is a symbol of the church, the bride of Christ. Like Mary, the church is the community of those who have been delivered from darkness and welcomed into fellowship with the bridegroom. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, Jesus and his bride stand at the headwaters of a New Creation.

Jesus calls to his church with the words of the bridegroom, “Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away, for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.” ([Song 2:10-12](#))

Love is Stronger than Death

Love is the greatest of the theological virtues and the Bible teaches that love is stronger than death.

In [John 10](#) Jesus tells his disciples, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep....I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.” ([John 10:11](#)).

In [John 15](#) Jesus teaches his disciples, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.... No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends.” ([John 15:12-16](#))

In his first letter, John writes, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” ([1 John 3:16](#))

How do we know God loves? God’s love is displayed for us in Christ laying down his life for his sheep.

Jesus did not lay down his life in vain. He laid down his life in order to take it up again. Death could not hold Jesus because it had no claim on him. The perfect love of Christ conquered the grave.

Because God’s love conquered the death we need no longer fear death. As [Hebrews 2](#) states, “Through death Jesus has destroyed the one who has the power of death and delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” ([Heb 2:14-15](#) paraphrase).

The triumph of love over death was foretold by the prophets:

Isaiah declared “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”” ([Isaiah 25:8-9](#))

Likewise God promised through Hosea, “I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death. O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.” ([Hos 13:14](#))

This day we glory in the victory of God’s love over death. Take heart once again in the chorus of God’s triumph: Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” ([1 Cor 15:54-55](#)).

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!