

*100 Days in John*  
***Do You Love Me?***

**First Presbyterian Church  
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**Gerrit Scott**



Breakfast on the beach with Jesus. Fish grilling on a charcoal fire. Hunks of crusty bread after a hard night's work. An invitation to share a meal with the risen Lord Jesus. Don't you wish you could have been there. Just one more morning together before Jesus departed. Just time to savor his presence.

After breakfast, Jesus called Simon Peter aside. Jesus had an intimate question for him. He used his formal name. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" That's always a scary time in a relationship if one person has to ask, "So do you really love me? Do you love me more than you love fishing? Do you love me more than my students love me?" If the question has to be asked, it implies something isn't quite right. The tasty breakfast and easy fellowship with Jesus had turned into a serious test. Simon, do you love me?

Simon Peter answered earnestly, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Of course I love you. I know you know. Peter was sincere. But he was also a bit more humble than a few weeks earlier when he boasted, "Lord, I will lay down my life for you!" (Jn. 13: 37). A lot had happened since then. Jesus had been arrested and crucified. Bold Peter had denied three times that he even knew Jesus. The muscular fisherman hadn't even

had the courage to stand up to a serving girl. Are you one of them? “I am *not!*” (Jn. 18:17). I am not. In denying Jesus, Peter had negated his whole life. I am not. I’m nothing now that I have denied my Lord. I did nothing to help him. I didn’t save him. I am nothing but shame and grief.

Think what the news of Jesus’ resurrection meant to Peter. I can just hear him, “He didn’t stay dead! That means I didn’t cause his death. I get to see him again. I have my whole life back because I have my Lord back.” You can just hear the personal intensity when Peter writes in his first letter, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (I Pet. 1:3). Peter knew intimately what it means to go from dead despair to living hope.

But now Jesus wanted to question him. Three times he called Peter by name and asked “Do you love me?” Three times Peter had denied Jesus. So three times Jesus asked Peter to reaffirm his love. Jesus was restoring him. And giving Peter his mission. Each time Peter said he loved Jesus, Jesus told him, “Then feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” Show me you love me by caring for these little lambs of mine. Call home the flock that is mine and then tend them. Here at the end of John’s Gospel the whole of the Christian life is summed up. Love Jesus; care for his sheep. Let’s see if we can take these words to heart.

It’s a bit unnerving just to be asked, “Do you love Jesus?” Sometimes we don’t know how we feel. At any given time we might be too tired, too hungry, too distracted, too busy to find the place in us that loves Jesus. We might pass through a season of indifference to Christ. Or a season of willfulness and unrepented sin. My way not your way. And then we can’t connect to the deep place in our heart that loves the Lord.

Peter again helps us in his first letter. He goes on to write, “Though you have not seen him, you love him. And though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and full of glory.” It’s like Peter is saying, “Let me just tell you how it is. You do love Jesus. Even if you can’t see him. Even if you can’t always feel it. You belong to Jesus and the truest thing about you is that you love Jesus and believe in him.” Let’s take that truth as our starting point, and then see if we

can stir up the feelings that are down inside us.

This week as I led Bible studies, I asked a series of questions to help us locate our love for Jesus. This was one of them:

If you could meet Jesus during the days he walked our earth, which of your senses would you most like to bring to bear and why:

- To see his face with your eyes.
- To hear his voice with your ears.
- To feel his arms around you.
- To breathe in his unique scent.

Which one would you choose? Seeing him? Hearing him? Feeling him embrace you? The replies were evenly split between those three.

Some talked about how much they wanted to *see* Jesus. I feel that. I'd like to see the emotions on his face. I'd like for him to look at me. To really see me and regard me. I think the greatest sight of all would be to have him look at me, knowing he sees everything, and then see love in his eyes. Love that would draw me away from the stupid idolatries and into deeper devotion to him. I'd like to know he sees me particularly and personally. To be regarded by the Son of God through seeing his bright, shining countenance turned toward me in welcome would be the greatest sight I could see.



Others mentioned how much they'd like to *feel* his embrace. I like to think of those strong carpenter's arms gathering me in, like a father with a beloved child. I'd like to feel a manly hug from which I didn't have to pull away. But I could just sink into that welcome. Just melt into that embrace. I love the stained glass window in our Dunham chapel of Jesus with a flock of sheep around him. He holds a lamb in his

arms, right close to his chest. When I look at that window, I think, “That’s where I want to be. Right there. Held. Kept. Safe.” As the eternal Son of God, Jesus does not have to put one lamb down in order to hold another one. He has room in his everlasting arms to gather each and all who will let him pick us up and hold us so close. It’s then that we would catch his scent and know it to be the smell of home we’ve always known and always longed for.

Personally, I settled on wanting to *hear* Jesus’ voice. I miss hearing my parents’ voices. From time to time they sound in my mind, and it’s always precious for the memory to live again. I can hear Rhonda’s Dad, who just died in January, so clearly in my mind and it always touches my heart. I think of singers I love to listen to. Some of them have died, and it always stabs me to think that their voices will not sound again in this world. My hopes for heaven include silent voices speaking and singing again. So there is power for me in imagining hearing Jesus’ voice. Especially I’d like to hear him call me by name. That powerful presence knowing me well enough to say my name. To summon me. Out of myself and into him. To call me home for the feast. Imagine hearing these words from Isaiah 43 vocalized and directed right to you:

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you,  
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you.  
I have called you by name, you are mine.”

There could be no sweeter sound than Jesus’ voice speaking this personally.

Being loved stirs us to love in return. We may find it difficult to find our feelings of love for Jesus. What we don’t want to do then is to spend hours wondering what’s the matter with us, and obsessing over our own feelings. Rather, we want to take time to consider how Jesus loves us. We want to admire him in the gospel stories. And consider being there, hearing his voice, feeling his touch, meeting his eyes. When we pour our efforts into thinking how he loves us, oh, it can bring us to tears of love in return.

Of course, another way we connect to the deep love we have for Jesus is to vocalize it. We describe to Jesus what we admire about him. We sing to him. And we don’t fall for the devil’s old trick. “I don’t feel like singing, so I won’t sing and be insincere. I’ll wait until I feel love in order to sing

love.” You could be waiting a long time. Start singing and love will flow. Start praising him with words and emotion will come. How many times have you felt, “I don’t really feel like coming to worship?” Maybe every week! In fact, it can make you mad to think you have to get up and get dressed and come downtown. But then how many times do you feel at the end of the hour, “That was so good! I feel so much closer to Christ. I feel so refreshed.” Speak, sing and say love *before* you feel love, and in time the feelings will follow.

But now we have to turn to the way Jesus told Peter to prove his love. *Do you love me? Lord, you know I love you. Then feed my sheep.* Tend my lambs. We demonstrate our love for Jesus by loving his lambs and sheep. Loving his people. The strong ones and the lost ones. The beautiful ones and the awkward ones. The elders who talk about their ailments and the adolescent boys who only grunt. The teenage girls in perpetual drama and the middle aged in a rut of perpetual sameness. The rebels and the faithful. The useful and the useless.

Here’s one way to stir your heart towards doing that. It goes back to worship. Sometimes when singing, I like to imagine someone for whom I’m concerned singing that very song with open heart and full expression. It’s a way to pray for the wandering by imagining them among the faithful. It’s a way to put words of faith into the mouths of the hurting, the doubting, the perplexed and crushed. It makes worship so much more engaging to sing both for myself and for others. The same can be done when you read psalms or the great hymns of the New Testament. Speak them aloud, not just for yourself, but for someone else. Watch love grow! This kind of worship will naturally issue in practical expressions of love.

Now finally, I want to share with you a text I got from our colleague Bob Vincent, Benn’s father, who was for decades the pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Alexandria. Now in his retirement, Bob visits churches in our presbytery. Recently he sent these words from a woman in Texarkana:

The church needs to come to the realization that “pretty church” is over. There are some very ugly situations that are going to show up on our doorsteps. Lazarus will show up. Smelling of death, with grave

clothes hanging off. These people will be sitting in our pews looking to get cleaned and free. But they'll be sitting next to the snoots who come to church just wanting their one-hour dry cleaning. God is about to make a dramatic appearance with healing, signs and wonders...but the church will need to get dead serious about prayer, intercession, and deep worship.

I found that fascinating. Now I don't think we have a lot of "snoots" who come to church just to get a little spiritual dry cleaning. But I think her words are spot on about Lazarus showing up to get free of some grave rot.

Forces hostile to a Christian view of the world have most of the microphones these days. We no longer mention God. We frame everything in terms of self liberation. We can feel like the gospel is a lost cause. But the loud microphones don't tell the whole story. The fact is that God is real. And only God can fill the deep emptiness in our souls. Only the Gospel can provide a reconciliation with God and others that we so desperately need. Only Jesus can apply a real atonement for the damage we have done. These attempts to be our own gods, to manipulate nature, to create our own fulfillment are doomed to fail. The drugs, the porn, the sex changes, the craving for money, seeking meaning in luxury, the online betting, making sports into a god, they will all let us down. And when these idols have had their way, they will discard their used up followers. Then, battered, exhausted, empty, frightened, ashamed people will make their way into our lives. They will want to know if Jesus still loves them. If he has anything to save them.

They may come into the church. They're more likely to meet you over coffee. Do we have room for them? Are we willing to be discomforted? We will be ready to walk alongside those discarded by the cultural gods? It will take teams of us. It will take a radical welcome. Patience while people come back to their senses. There are probably just such people in the sphere of your life right now. Are you noticing? Are you asking to listen? Are you patient enough to absorb the venom that may come your way for the name of Christ until trust is built? Can you pick up on the caring and leave the converting to Christ? Peter, do you love me? Feed my lambs.

