

"Do you love me?"
A reflection for "vespers with a free range pastor"
Lincolntonville, Maine
Sunday, September 30, 2018
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: John 21:15-19

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" [Simon Peter] said to [Jesus], "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time [Jesus] said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" [Simon Peter] said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to [Jesus] the third time, "Do you love me?" And [Peter] said to [Jesus], "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this [Jesus] said to [Simon Peter], "Follow me." John 21:15-19

Will you pray with me. Beckoning God, you call to us every day, whether we hear you or not. You call us to love you as we love one another. We say we do, and then.... sometimes we don't.... love one another.... or even give you a second thought in the busyness of our daily doings. So we come to worship to be reminded of what's important in life. Give us a heads up again this day, O God, that we can answer that question, "Do you love me?" in the affirmative. Amen.

In our text for this evening from the Gospel of John, Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" And three times, Simon Peter says, "Yes, of course I love you!" And Jesus commands him to take care of his sheep. We know Jesus doesn't mean four-footed sheep, but each one of us.... each one of the people Simon Peter came in contact with. To show love is to tend, and to feed in all ways.

We don't see much of that going on nowadays, do we? At least we don't see much of it in the news. We're scrapping with one another.... in our country.... around the world.... in our communities.... sometimes in our families.... maybe even in church. Unfortunately, we seem to be doing a lot more scrapping than loving right now. I think about this a lot. Maybe you do, too.

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks Simon Peter. And Simon Peter immediately says he does, and gets annoyed when Jesus asks him the same question three times. I wonder if Jesus might be thinking under his breath, "Peter, Peter, Peter.... I don't think you have a clue what it means to really love, to really tend, to really feed my sheep. You think you do, but you haven't been tested enough yet to grasp what it means to love unconditionally, fully and with passionate commitment."

And then.... Jesus gets to the point that really hits home with me. He tells Peter, "When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (Jn 21:18) Oh baby, that's the part I don't like to hear, having just had my seventieth birthday.

I understand from the text that we're supposed to interpret this as a reminder of Jesus being nailed to a cross.... taken where he did not want to go.... led to his death. I get that. But what about now? Where are *we* being led that we'd rather not go? Who's got that belt tied around our waists, now or in the not so distant future?

Wait a minute! *I* want to be in control of my life! *I* want to decide where I'm going and how I'm going to get there! But sometimes it just isn't so. The older I become, the more I have to accept the realization that I'm not always going to be in control. As the years go on, I'm realizing I need to bloom where I have been planted -- in my age, in my retirement from pastoral ministry, with my aching back, and not very good eyesight. More and more I'm not going to be the one doing the planting of myself!

I can't imagine Jesus would have chosen where he was planted in the end. I've always wondered why he didn't just marry Mary Magdalene and have a couple of children and go out into the desert, maybe doing a little preaching now and then, but living a long, rich life with the Mrs. and their children and grandchildren. But, that wasn't to be so. Jesus had to bloom right where he was planted, even if it was being nailed to a cross and hung out to dry.

HOW can this be a good story? HOW can we bloom where we are planted when we don't like the soil we're stuck in? I don't know about you, but I keep waiting for things to get back to normal, when I'll be more in control of myself. Back to normal, I say, why can't we *get back to normal?*

I want to read you a poem by Richard Jones entitled, "Normal -- Tent Revival, 1957".

When things get back to normal
God will put on black robes and ascend to the mercy seat
to judge the world, the ruined cities, the devastated hills,
the living and the risen dead.

When things get back to normal,
He'll open the Book of Life and read what each [one] has done,
said, and written, reciting our words and deeds to the angels
to see if there is any forgiveness like honey on our tongues.

When things get back to normal
all will stand before God and be burned like dead branches
or blessed with the incomprehensible fire of mercy.

When things get back to normal,
we will be standing on the threshold of heaven,
a kingdom of singing where at last we will learn
the meaning and purpose of poetry.

Back to normal.... I've come to the conclusion in the last year or so, that it's never going to happen. We can't get BACK to normal. Each day is a NEW normal. And the sooner we accept that fact of life, the easier it will be to bloom where we are planted.... even though it might not be in a lovely garden, but in an annoying patch of weeds, or in a stubborn crack in a broken sidewalk.

Jesus' "new normal" was as a savior for those of us who call ourselves Christians, not as a senior citizen with an aching back, failing eyesight and a longing for the good ole days.

On Friday, I led an informal memorial service at a funeral home in Rockland for a seventeen year old youth who took his own life a week and a half ago. He couldn't take it anymore.... life.... being bullied at school.... worried he wasn't living up to his old man's hopes

and dreams for him.... overwrought with too many of the hardest challenges in any young person's life.

He just couldn't figure out how to bloom where he had been planted at the age of seventeen. Now, his family, his friends, his teachers all have to figure out how to bloom where *they* have been planted in relation to him and his way-to-early death. Me, too.... I didn't know him personally, but I knew him through his father and some of his friends. How do *I* move into the uncertain future that faces us all? How do *you* move into that uncertain future?

Here's the point for the day -- Jesus asked Simon Peter if he loved him three times. And three times, Simon Peter answered that of course he loved him. And Jesus said, and I paraphrase here -- "Show me. Show me how much you love me. Take care of others. Give them something to eat. Tend to them, wherever they are in life, wherever they have been planted.... as you say you tend to me, even as I am being planted where I did not plan to bloom."

Love one another. "Tend to one another's gardens as if they were your own. When things get back to normal all will stand before God and be burned like dead branches or blessed with the incomprehensible fire of mercy. When things get back to normal, we will be standing on the threshold of heaven, a kingdom of singing where at last we will learn the meaning and purpose of poetry."

Bloom wherever you've been planted.... Bloom with gusto and good humor. Bloom with grit and a grin. Bloom, that others might follow your blossoming until we are all thriving in a garden together, tended by God. Love one another as you are loved.

Let the people say, "Amen."