

Following The Risen Lord.

Text: John 21:15-19

Suggested Hymns:

102, 179, 336, 340, 366

1) By Loving Him With All Our Heart

2) By Feeding His Flock

3) By Being Willing To Die For Him

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 21:15–19, *¹⁵ So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Feed My lambs.”*

¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My sheep.”

¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.

¹⁸ Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.” ¹⁹ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.” (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Jesus showed Himself alive to the disciples a number of times during the 40 days until His ascension. He used the opportunities to prepare the disciples to carry on His work following the Ascension.

In the verses preceding our text today we learn of seven of the disciples who went fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Peter had the idea, and the others did not

need any coaxing to join him. They set out by boat for a customary night of fishing, but they caught nothing.

This scene was similar to the time at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when Jesus called Peter, along with James and John, to follow Him.¹ Jesus would supply the fish and use that as an opportunity to turn the disciples' attention to Him and His ministry.

Early in the morning Jesus came and stood on the shore. Once again, Jesus was not immediately recognised. He called out to them *“Children, have you any food?”*² *“No,”* they answered, but they did not yet catch on that it was Jesus.

When Jesus told them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, they did it without much thought of who was telling them to do so. But when the catch was so big they could not haul the net into the boat, their attention turned back to Jesus. John, perhaps remembering that earlier catch of fish when they began to follow Jesus,³ said to Peter, *“It is the Lord!”*

*Jesus said to them, “Come and eat breakfast.” This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead.*⁴

Christ's appearances after His resurrection strengthened the faith of His disciples. In our text Jesus turns to Peter and says, *“Follow Me.”* The question is, *How Do We Follow the Risen Lord?* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. We Follow The Risen Lord By Loving Him With All Our Heart

The soul-searching question *“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”* reminds Peter of an occasion that still troubled his conscience. On the way to Gethsemane this disciple, trusting in his strong faith, had vehemently asserted that he would never be offended in Christ, even if all the other disciples forsook Him.

Yet he denied the Lord three times. He fell to a much lower level than the others, whom he despised. Only the Lord's prayer had saved his soul from destruction.

Peter later repented. Now the Lord tests his humility and seriousness by asking him three times: *“Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”*

Peter does not boast: *“Surely, Lord, I always loved You more than all the other disciples.”* He had learned his lesson. Humbly he answers, *“Yes, Lord; You know that I love You”* whereupon the Lord says, *“Feed My lambs,” “Tend My sheep,”* and *“Feed My sheep.”* At the close of our text Jesus summarises Peter’s earthly course and work in the words: *“Follow Me.”*

What about us? Suppose Jesus asked each and everyone of us, His eyes searching the innermost recesses of our souls: *“Do you love Me?”* How do we relate to the parable of *“The Judgement”* in Matthew 25:31-46 where Jesus says *‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me?’* If the Kingdom of God does not mean more to you than your time and talents and earthly treasures, you do not love Jesus.

The same applies to congregations as a whole. It is our business to feed the flock of Christ, and save souls from hell. If instead we are selfish, limit our interests to just our own needs, can we claim that we love Jesus?

This world’s riches, personal conveniences and luxuries, downright sinful pleasures, often destroy the love for Jesus.

2. We Follow The Risen Lord By Feeding His Flock

At this appearance, Jesus had a plan in mind for Simon Peter. Peter had sworn an allegiance to Jesus that was bigger than life itself.⁵ Peter had boasted a love so deep that if he were the only disciple left with Jesus, he would never abandon Him and fall away.⁶ Then, that same night, Peter proceeded to deny his Lord three times, each successively more emphatic.

It was time to restore Peter and give him direction. Jesus spoke three times to Peter, paralleling the three denials. He addressed Peter as Simon son of Jonah, not as Peter.⁷ The disciple’s rock-like characteristics were not the focus here.

The first time, Jesus asked Simon Peter, *“Do you love me more than these?”* That was the test. What would Peter say now about his love for Jesus? Jesus used the Greek word for love that we encountered in God when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus.⁸ The NIV text reflects that sacrificial, purposeful love with the word “truly.” *“Do you truly love me?”*

But this time Peter was a much humbler man and not so bold in his claim of love for the Lord. He merely responded, “*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.*” He would not, and could not compare himself to the others. His word for love was not the same as Jesus used, but one that meant something like “*I hold you as a dear and trusted friend.*” And he did not make the claim on his own, but appealed to what Jesus must know was in his heart.

Jesus responded, “*Feed my lambs.*” He gave Peter a standing order to be about the business of feeding the lambs. In the Greek the word “feed” can be translated as “continue to feed.”

As John’s gospel records, Jesus often used everyday situations to illustrate spiritual truths. This feeding meant to give spiritual nourishment, to lead the lambs to Jesus’ Word and Sacraments. That way, they would grow in faith for eternal life.

Many readers assume “*lambs*” here means “children.” It is a fair assumption, since Jesus chooses His words deliberately and follows next, as if by contrast, with tending the “*sheep.*” Lambs mean children; sheep mean adults.

However, “Lambs” can also be a way of speaking of all Christians, and in particular of those who are new in the faith. John, for example, in his First Letter refers to his readers repeatedly as his “*little children.*”⁹

The second time, Jesus asked the identical question of Peter but omitted the comparison “*more than these.*” Peter also answered the same way. He did not boast. He did not object. He simply depended on Jesus’ knowing Peter held him dear.

This time Jesus replied, “*Tend My sheep.*” If the word “sheep” was to add meaning beyond the word “lambs,” the command to “*tend*” or “take care of” clearly took on a broader meaning than the command to “feed.”

Not only was Peter to feed the flock, but he was to watch over the flock, to be a shepherd to it. Besides feeding, that implied guiding, protecting, comforting; and it has become the directive not just for Peter but for all pastors (that is, “shepherds”) and teachers of the flock since then.

When Jesus questioned Peter the third time, He changed the Greek word for “love” (*agape*) to match the one Peter was using. It is as if Jesus was saying,

“Simon, I won’t insist on a full-blown, god-like, sacrificial love. But do you hold me as a dear Friend, as you claim?”

It grieved Peter to hear Jesus ask yet another time. We can only guess at what Peter was thinking. He could hardly avoid recalling his denial of Jesus, and some of his hurt now was likely sorrow for his sin. Then too it must have hurt to be questioned about his love for Jesus, as if it possibly wasn’t genuine.

Still, Peter remained humble and faithful. He did not boast of his own integrity and imply he could pass any test of love. Rather, he appealed to Jesus’ knowledge as his God and Lord. Jesus, Peter insisted, already knew the answer to His own question.

Once again, Jesus commanded, ***“Feed My sheep.”*** Imagine what any of us might have said to Peter in similar circumstances, something like, *“I don’t believe your love, nor can I trust you to work for me again after the way you denied me.”* Instead Jesus, in forgiveness and love, directed the abject, but repentant, sinner to become a leader of His people. And so Jesus uses us today.

The love of Christ demands the dedication of all our gifts of body, mind and spirit, to the service of Jesus by feeding His lambs and sheep.

While both designations, “lambs” and “sheep,” apply to members of Christ’s flock, it would seem strange that the Lord uses them separately if He did not mean to imply some distinction.

The story of “Jesus Blessing the Little Children”¹⁰ shows Christ’s special interest in little ones. He wants parents to show interest in their children’s souls, and congregations in the children within their midst and in the community. Many parents are satisfied if they have provided for the bodily needs of their children by feeding, clothing, and educating them for this life. But also cultured heathen parents would do all these things.

Christians must do more. God requires the souls of the children at their hands. These they must feed with the Bread of Life from infancy, putting into their hearts the knowledge of salvation. Christian congregations cannot escape this duty.

They must provide Christian education and training for children inside and outside the church. Experience shows that the Christian school is the best means to teach the children the way of life and to train them in godliness.

Wherever such institutions cannot be established, Sunday, Saturday, and summer schools may be used as means to teach children of the congregation, and especially to reach out to the unchurched, so that many lambs can be brought to Jesus. Thus we prove our love for Jesus by feeding His lambs.

But we likewise must feed the sheep, proclaiming the Gospel in its truth and purity, being active in mission work in our community and in all parts of the world where there is an opportunity for saving souls.

Faithfulness in following Jesus who came to save souls demands consecration to the work of feeding lambs and sheep with the means of grace. Jesus asks, ***“Do you love Me?”*** Answer: ***“Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”*** “I shall follow You by winning souls for You.”

3. We Follow The Risen Lord By Being Willing To Die For Him

Finally, we follow Christ by being willing to die for Him. Jesus says, ¹⁸ ***Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.”*** ¹⁹ ***This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me.”***

One last time in this Gospel, we hear Jesus insist on the solemn truth of His words: ***Most assuredly,*** “I tell you the truth, ‘amen, amen.’” Jesus had accomplished His purpose with Peter and restored him to his position as a shepherd of Jesus’ flock. Now Peter was ready to hear what would happen to him while doing Jesus’ bidding.

Using picture language, Jesus told Peter that he would reach old age but then would be taken by force, have his arms stretched out, and be carried away against his will. He was telling Peter how he would die for his faith. The description is commonly understood as foretelling a martyr’s death by crucifixion, just like Jesus.

Although it sounds gruesome and depressing to imagine, it would be Peter's final act of glorifying God. In faith, Peter had eternal life. In faith, Peter would carry God's Word to the people and, as God's shepherd, care for them. In faith, Peter would give the grandest of all testimonies to God's glory by dying as a martyr and entering the Father's house of glory.

Having fulfilled His purpose, Jesus said to Peter, ***"Follow me!"*** Jesus had used those same words with Peter at the beginning of His earthly ministry.¹¹ That time Peter literally walked with Jesus and learned from Him day after day. But Jesus now was risen from the dead and only appeared among His disciples on occasion. Soon He would ascend to heaven.

"Follow me!" had additional meaning this time. It meant to stay true to the Word of Jesus and continue to teach it, to remain faithful even to the martyr's death in glory to God. ***"Follow me!"*** meant the sure hope of reuniting with Jesus again in heaven.

Jesus predicts a martyr's death for Peter, who, according to tradition, was crucified head downward, not accounting himself worthy to die in the same manner as Jesus.

So the question is, Do you love Jesus to such a degree as to be willing to follow Him into death? Would you say, if given the alternative of sealing your faith with a martyr's death or renouncing faith, *"Lord, You know that I love You even unto death?"*

Remember that Christ died for all people. This means that we should not live to ourselves, but to Jesus who died for us and rose again. May the risen Lord fill us with a love of unselfish service and with faithfulness unto death.

Let us conclude with the words of the hymnist,¹²

Be thou faithful unto death,
Be thou faithful unto death:
Let not pain or sorrow ever
From the cross of Christ thee sever;
Though thou suffer, may thy faith
Never waver unto death. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Luke 5:1–11

² John 21:5

³ Luke 5:1–11

⁴ John 21:14

⁵ John 13:37; Luke 22:33

⁶ Matthew 26:33; Mark 14:29

⁷ “rock,” see John 1:42

⁸ *agape*, John 3:16

⁹ 1 John 2:1, 12, 13, 18, 28

¹⁰ Mark 10:13–16

¹¹ Matthew 4:19

¹² Hymn 340