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 John 21:15-25
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Food is love.

For so many people I know, feeding others is their love language, or one of their love languages. For example, if you come over to have a meal with our family and you don't eat very much or as much as you normally might, my father-in-law will ask you what's wrong. He'll start wondering if you aren't feeling well or if perhaps you are sick. He'll try to put more things on your plate just in case you were being shy. For my parents, food is love, although it looks a little different. The meal will more than likely be some fancy new recipe that looked amazing my mother just wanted to try that also happens to have some of your favorite ingredients. And I suppose, food is also love for Daniel and I. Just this week, when we were taking some time to put together a backyard playset for our children we offered food and then dropped off special cookies to one of our friends who helped us put it together.

If you had someone who expressed their love through food in your family as you were growing up, then you might have special family recipes for being sick - grandma's chicken noodle soup, or chamomile honey tea, or other favorites for birthdays and celebrations - that special pie or cake.

Because, once again: Food is love. Food is thank you. Food is I hope you feel better. Food is caring. Food is comfort. Food is celebration. Food is congratulations. Food gives us connection and brings us together. Even from a physiological point of view, food is everything.

Last week we read the first part of this scripture in John chapter 21 where the risen Jesus is expressing his love and care for the disciples by inviting them to breakfast on a beach - and he gives them bread and cooks them fish over a fire after a long night of fishing.

Then, and only then, after Jesus has just tended to their physical needs and cooked and fed them, does Jesus begin to have this deeper, more spiritual conversation with Peter.

The three times Jesus formally asks Peter - "Simon Peter, son of John - do you love me?." Three times might seem offensive to ask someone the same kind of question but in this instance it's a way of cancelling out the three times Peter had denied knowing Jesus the night of his arrest.

So two times, Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love you." And even the third time, a little hurt, Peter affirms "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." After Peter affirms and expresses his love for Jesus, then Jesus commissions him. He gives him something to do, a focus, a mission, a calling. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.

A lot has been said over the years over the fact that there are at least two Greek words here that have been used for love and different words for feeding and tending. But the truth is,

scholars don't really know or agree over whether the actual different words used for love or feed or tend mean anything or not.

Jesus tells Peter simply.. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. What's clear is that "Feed, tend, feed" - are all basic actions of care and love that we can do for another. To me, it signifies that love is a verb. Love is meant to be acted upon. Not just thought about. Not just dreamed about. Not even just written about. But acted upon. "Peter, if you love me, here's how I want you to express it. Here's what you can do."

What I love about this is that Jesus doesn't ask Peter to do anything more than what Jesus has just done for him and the other disciples. Jesus has just literally fed them. And beyond their physical needs, he has just tended to Peter's emotional and spiritual need of forgiveness, of knowing that his relationship with Jesus, which had ended in such a horrible, tragic way with denial and fear and shame, is restored and reclaimed, as Peter expresses that he does indeed know and love Jesus. What I love about this is that Jesus is modeling in this story what that love, feeding, and tending the sheep look like. Love has to be initiated. Jesus comes to them, fishing on the water (in the story from last week), he comes in spite of the awkward moments of Peter's last living words about him, he feeds them, caring for their physical needs and tends to the emotional and spiritual ones as well.

As people who follow Jesus, just as Peter followed Jesus, the expression of our love for Jesus, for God, and for one another, must be rooted in action - tangible action. Often our witness is most powerful, not through our words, but through our actions.

That is SO hard right now.

Think about how the rituals around grief have changed right now. One of the very first and basic ways we offer comfort after death or at a memorial service, is through a touch or a hug, these little actions, don't need words to accompany them, and yet they are not possible at the moment.

Love is a verb. Love is an action. Love is movement. Love is feeding and tending and forgiving and... (insert lots of other verbs here). Which again, feels and is really hard right now. What does it look like to love people actively in the midst of a pandemic when we are still asked to stay home? What does it look like for us today to feed and tend?

Perhaps it means doing no harm and extending our stay at home if possible. Perhaps it means thinking of the most vulnerable among us when we are ready to go out, to go back to work, to resume life where we left it back in Feb/March. Perhaps it means somehow prioritizing the lives of those who are dying in greater numbers - people of color, people in poverty, people working low-income essential jobs, people who are mature in years. Perhaps it means continuing to find new ways to make lemonade out of those same old bitter lemons... sidenote - this week I made some raspberry lemonade to go with Daniel's graduation celebration meal, and it wasn't half bad.

Ultimately Jesus' questions to Peter are questions of discernment. They are questions about the most important things in life. And they boil down to 2 things: Do you love me? And if so, what are you going to do about it?

What does it look like today for you to love by feeding and tending? Feeding and tending are active ways of loving. This is a question that only you can answer – with the unique gifts that God has given you, and your situation in life – you have to discover for yourself. What does it look like today, in this Covid19 era for you to love Jesus? For you to feed and tend Jesus' sheep?

There's a moment in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, when Tevye the father of five daughters, asks his wife of 25 years from an arranged marriage if she loves him. Golde, his wife, thinks he has gone nuts, or has indigestion and tells him to go lie down. Love was not part of the picture at the time when they were married - it was all about an arranged marriage. His wife answers, "For 25 years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow, after 25 years why talk about love now." But still, somehow, Tevye needs to hear her answer. Finally she asks herself, "Do I love him? For twenty-five years I've lived with him, Fought him, starved with him, Twenty-five years my bed is his, If that's not love, what is?" And answers him, "I suppose I do." To which he replies, "And I suppose I love you too." Together they sing, "It doesn't change a thing, but even so, after 25 years, it's nice to know."

In spite of the very strict gendered roles in this cultural example that may not translate as well into our cultural context anymore, this depiction of love is that real love is grounded and expressed in action. Thousands of repeated actions of feeding, caring, tending, forgiving, laid on top of one another over days, months, years, decades. Love is action.

Do we truly love Jesus?

Then we are called to be the initiators of love.

We are asked to be feeders, growers, forgivers, nurturers, tenders, caregivers, justice-seekers, givers, etc. etc.

Do you truly love Jesus? Then perhaps the invitation for you and I today is to spend some time discerning how you are being called to tend or feed God's sheep.