



John 21:15-25
Personal Jesus
The Beat Goes On

Rev. Brian North
September 3rd, 2018

About three weeks after you were conceived, a small electrical pulse stimulated your heart muscle. That first movement of your heart was so faint that it could not be detected, even with amplification and high-tech medical equipment; but that first movement was, in fact, the first beat of your heart, only about 21 days after you were conceived. And it's never stopped beating – 70 milliliters of blood with every contraction, 14,000 pints being pumped every day, 100,000 or more beats of your heart every day from that day to this one.¹ At 80 years old, your heart will have had about 3 billion heartbeats.

God gave us these amazing gifts called our hearts, and of course, we can't even make them beat on our own. Can you imagine if our hearts only beat when we remembered to tell it to? We would be in serious trouble. How many of us forget where we put our keys or parked the car or where we left the kids? Fortunately, our heart beating isn't dependent on us remembering to do anything. God created them so that that beat goes on whether we are aware of it or not. It's a gift from God.

Just as our physical heart is a gift from God, so are the relational and emotional capabilities that we associate with the heart – the ability we have to love. The heart, in other words, is what we associate with love. And the ability to love is a gift that comes from God. This God who has given us our hearts is love, after all (1 John 4:16).

With that in mind: Have you ever had someone ask you if you love them, or had someone ask you if you love them? It's a surprising and unusual question isn't it? – especially if it's someone you think should know you love them – like your spouse or your kids. Usually we just *tell* people that we love them without being asked first. And as we continue the narrative that we looked at last week in the first 14 verses... and remember they're here on the beach, sitting around a campfire eating fish and chips... fish and bread. And: **It probably came as a surprise to Peter that Jesus would ask him this question that John records for us in verse 15: Do you love me?** If it didn't

¹ Thanks to John Ortberg, pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for the inspiration of this opening paragraph.

surprise him the first time, it certainly did by the third time Jesus asked. Can you imagine!?! Three times! And the first time he asks him, “do you love me more than these”! It's like your spouse asking you if you love her more than work or sports or your favorite hobby...or if you love him more than reading or manicures, or coffee with her friends. So we're going to camp out on verses 15, 16, and 17 for the first 60 minutes of the sermon ☺, because this is important stuff, and I want to make sure we get this.

So, there's actually some scholarly debate about what Jesus is referring to when he says “more than these” because it's not completely clear. And this has been discussed for 1700 years or more; so this is not a recent question to be discussed. **“More than these” could be Peter's fishing gear that's lying there on the beach next to them.** In other words, “Do you love me more than this stuff that provided you with an income and has monetary value in and of itself?” Jesus might be intending the question like that.

This is one of those times, however, where what's written probably doesn't do the conversation justice, because we can't hear the tone, the words that are emphasized, the emotion...or see the body language, and so forth. In other words, we don't have the full context. We never do, but we can usually ascertain pretty well what that context is. In spite of that, many scholars believe he's referring to the other *disciples* and their love for Jesus, and so what Jesus means by the question is, “Do you love me more than these other guys love me?” This is not so much a comparison or a competition to see who loves Jesus the most: **It really is Jesus reminding Peter of his own confident proclamation of being more devoted to Jesus than the other disciples.** “Do you love me more than these? Are you sure?”

Remember, shortly before Jesus was crucified, Peter said, “Even if all other disciples fall away from following you I never will” (Matthew 26:33). Peter was pretty darn sure of his love and devotion to Jesus, and that his devotion was more solid than the other guys'. But then Jesus didn't live up to Peter's expectations: Peter didn't want a crucified Messiah. He wanted something different. **Peter wanted Jesus on his own terms, not on God's terms, and when things took a different turn, he went so far as to deny even knowing Jesus.**

And this is one of the very key things to understand about knowing Jesus personally. He's the one in charge. He's the Shepherd. Things are on His terms. "Personal Jesus" - as this series is called - does not mean He's personal butler or personal maid or personal servant as though we're the ones in charge. Yes, Jesus is a servant, but He's a servant King. He's God come down to us. He brought Creation into being along with His Heavenly Father and His Holy Spirit. He reigns over all Creation. He's the great I Am; He's the Son of God and the Son of Man; He's the Prince of Peace; He's the King of Kings and Lord of lords...and He has come to us on His terms. He is NOT our cosmic vending machine - insert money, push button, and get what you want. If Jesus is determined to die on a cross to save us, then that's what he's going to do. And Peter couldn't handle that. He wanted a different Jesus.

Sometimes, we're not so different from Peter. Maybe not the full-on denial part...but we want Jesus to do this and do that, give us this, give us that...like he's our personal puppet or marionette. We pray, "Thy will be done" but oftentimes what we really mean is "my will be done" or "May thy will be like my will and may it be done." Jesus is personal because He knows and loves each of us more than we could ever imagine.

In fact, to just briefly look ahead in the passage though we're not done with these three verses, this all gets kind of reinforced when Jesus talks to him about being led where he doesn't want to go; and this other disciple - "the one whom Jesus loved" - has a different calling on his life, and Peter's not so comfortable with that, either. By the way, we don't know for sure who this disciple is that's referred to as the one Jesus loved. Five times he's mentioned in the gospel according to John, and only in John. Historically, piecing some things together, it was believed to be John the son of Zebedee, who was also seen to be the author of the gospel according to John, but others have said it was Lazarus, or Thomas, and other wild speculation exists, too...but we really don't know for sure. It could very well be John, but we're never told. Anyway, the point here is that what happens in the future is in Jesus' hands, and everyone's journey of discipleship is going to look a little different. Our job simply is to love him and follow him, as He leads us.

So the question that Jesus asks three times, “Do you love me?” is a way for Peter to affirm his love for Jesus, but this time without putting himself above the others, and to affirm that he loves him even if things don’t go as he wants. And notice that Peter doesn’t include the comparison in his answer – he just says, “Yes (as in, ‘yes, you’re right, I messed up,’ not ‘yes, I love you more than these guys’)... Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Not “You know that I love you more than these.” In fact, because Peter left out the “more than these” this is a big reason scholars *don’t* see this as a question of comparing his love for Jesus to his love for the fishing gear, because if Jesus were asking Peter to compare and contrast his love for Jesus with his love for fishing gear, Peter would probably have said, “Yes, I love you more than these.” He earlier proclaimed his devotion as being more than the disciples, failed to live up to that, and now he’s learned his lesson. He doesn’t love Jesus more than the Disciples, and so he just responds that he loves him, and leaves it at that.

And Jesus asks him this question three times, almost certainly, because of the three denials Peter made. So that further ties this to his earlier proclamation about being more devoted than the others, followed by his 3-fold denial. So what we see here: **Jesus extends grace to Peter by allowing him to affirm his love just as many times as he had denied him earlier.** This is important, because in the midst of this conversation, Jesus asks Peter to tend to his flock. To feed the sheep. To care for and love the people who have put their faith in Jesus Christ. And in asking him to do this, Jesus is affirming Peter as a disciple. He’s reinstating Peter – not that Peter needed reinstating from Jesus’ perspective; this is all about building Peter back up for Peter’s own sake, and maybe for the sake of the other disciples as well, and definitely for the sake of the Kingdom work he’ll be doing in the near future that we see in Acts. Peter needed to know that he was loved and accepted by Jesus, in spite of his failure. He needed to know that the beat goes on...that he’s still part of what Jesus is doing...that God’s grace is extended even to Him. We all need that reminder. Jesus welcomes you into the fold as well, whether you’ve denied him as Peter did, ignored him, never followed in the first place...whatever. The beat goes on in regards to his grace, and it’s extended to you.

And Peter, in that moment, experienced a verse in Ezekiel, when God said through the prophet: **“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” Ezekiel 36:26**). God wants Peter, and he wants us, to have hearts that are soft and tender toward Him and toward other people. Not cold toward our Creator and turning to other gods – whether that’s other spiritual deities or the gods of money and power and so forth. He wants us to have hearts full of love and care, so that we’d be in a personal relationship with our loving Creator and Savior.

Now, this is a huge responsibility that he's giving Peter when he tells him to tend and care for the flock. **Jesus is asking him to love these people, to care for them, to feed them, in the same way that a shepherd cares for his flock.** As Jesus loves the sheep, so he is asking Peter to do the same thing. And it’s not that others don’t also have this same responsibility (you can’t read the NT and conclude it’s only a select few people who do this – it’s the responsibility of all believers), but Peter is being called on to be the leader in this regard.

This metaphor of “sheep” to refer to people who love God and are devoted to Him and his ways is a common one throughout Scripture. We talked about that very fact several months ago when we looked at Jesus’ statement, “I Am the Good Shepherd” and it’s connection to Psalm 23 where we read that “the Lord is my shepherd.” And shepherding was a common occupation then, and most people were familiar with the shepherd’s job, as well as being familiar with sheep and their tendencies. So they knew sheep. But here in Kirkland our “sheep I.Q.” is probably not so high. In fact, most of us in 21st Century America aren't terribly familiar with sheep. Any of you currently have any sheep in your back yard? Anyone grow up with sheep? So here's a little quiz for us all to familiarize ourselves with sheep and to better understand just what it is that Jesus is saying to Peter about the people who follow Christ. And we should note that this is in regards to domesticated sheep; Sheep who are used to having a shepherd. There are wild sheep who don’t fit in this quiz...but domesticated sheep do:

If sheep aren’t directed to suitable pasture and water, what do they do?
A. They figure it out for themselves

- B. Send around a petition to be given to their shepherd**
- C. They probably die because they can't figure anything out for themselves**

Which best describes the intelligence of domesticated sheep?

- A. Top of the food chain**
- B. Sign them up for Harvard**
- C. Mutton heads**

How do sheep keep cool in the hot summer months?

- A. They visit a "Bah Bah" shop**
- B. They wear lighter clothing and drink lemonade**
- C. They count on their shepherd to shear them at the right time**

If a sheep gets separated from its flock, it...

- A. Stops and asks for directions (unless, of course, it's a male)**
- B. Finds a wolf, kills it, and eats it**
- C. Most likely will die from predators or exposure to the elements**

Here's a domesticated sheep that did buck the odds and survived for 5 years out in the wilderness: **(Picture Here)** His wool is over his eyes, and he's ginormous. He was found, sheared, and began to be shepherded again.



The point is that: **Domesticated sheep are not the brightest animals on the planet, and yet that's what the Bible continually uses to describe the people who follow Jesus.** It's not meant in a disparaging way; it's just that sheep need to be guided. Sheep need a shepherd. And so do we. In fact, on the count of 3, let's all say, "Baaaaa" 😊 1, 2, 3... Wow...you all make a great/terrible flock of sheep. (You're a better flock of disciples, which is a good thing!) Anyway...we need to be loved and cared for, just like sheep – which Jesus does. So Jesus is our ultimate shepherd, but we need others in our lives through whom God works, to help along the way as well: Pastors, Ministry leaders, Elders, Deacons, Sunday School teachers, small group leaders, Parish coordinators, and all the people who don't have formal titles but are just as much a part of the body of Christ.

All of us who follow Jesus are, at a certain level, shepherds (say: “I am a shepherd”). We all shepherd one another and others whom God brings into our lives as well. So we’re all sheep, and we’re all shepherds. This should come as no surprise: Jesus himself was not only our shepherd, but the lamb of God. He leads and nurtures us as the shepherd, but on the cross he was the once and final sacrifice as the spotless lamb.

So: this sheep analogy is not meant to discourage us but to humble us, to help us see that we’re not “all that” or as smart as we think we are, and lead us to be open to God’s shepherding, which equips us to be a shepherd in other people’s lives. And that takes a soft heart. Not the physical heart that’s been beating since your 21st day in your mother’s womb...but in the spiritual and relational sense. A person with a heart of stone is a person who’s too prideful to acknowledge their need for a shepherd in their life. A person with a soft heart is open to God’s shepherding. No matter where you are on the spectrum of soft or hard heart, God is working on you. He’s put people in your life to shepherd you. His Word shepherds us. His Spirit shepherds us. He’s actually seeking to soften your heart toward Him and to love him and be in relationship with him.

Whether you’ve never really let God soften your heart and have a relationship with Jesus, or whether your heart is soft and you’re in a great relationship with Jesus...or whether you’re in the middle, perhaps like Peter and you love Jesus but struggle to do so when he doesn’t meet your expectations: **Jesus will keep coming back to you and extending grace, just as He does with Peter.** Just like your heart, the beat goes on for His grace; he doesn’t give up. And He will build you up, and give you opportunities to have that relationship with Him...and if we’re willing to follow, He will lead us through life and right into life eternal with Him. And as verse 25 says, the very last words of the Gospel according to John, “The world couldn’t contain all the books that would be written if all that Jesus did were written down in detail.” Imagine how many books it would take to record in detail all that he does in our lives – today, and in eternity – when we have that personal relationship with Jesus. May it be so, for each one of us, as both sheep and shepherds, as we follow our ultimate Shepherd, the Lord Jesus. Let’s pray...Amen.