

Christ-Centered Teaching in the Light of John 21:15-17

[Presented to the Joint Conference of Winnebago Lutheran Academy and Milwaukee Lutheran High School, held on October 13, 1944]

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After his resurrection from the dead the Lord appeared not only to individuals, as Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, and the disciples on their way to Emmaus, but on several occasions appeared to the assembled disciples. Twice, at intervals of a week, He had appeared to them behind locked doors, once when doubting Thomas had been absent, and again when he was present. Again He appeared to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. It was on this occasion that the threefold question "Lovest thou me?" was put to Peter, and he three times protested his ardent love for the Lord. Peter had seen the Lord several times since His resurrection, Lk 24:34 and 1 Cor. 15:5 but had not been reinstated into his office of apostle which he had forfeited through his three-fold denial at the Lord's trial. There Peter had shamefully denied any connection between himself and Jesus, denied that he knew the man, began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not this man of whom ye speak,—all this in spite of his earnest protestations that he would remain loyal to his Lord, come what may. When the Lord told the disciples, "All ye shall be offended because of me this night; for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered. But after that I am risen, I will go before you into Galilee." Peter boasted, "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I." And Jesus saith unto him, "Verily I say unto you, That this day, even in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice." (Mk. 14:27-30)

Peter had miserably failed His Lord in His hour of trial. This grieved him when the Lord looked at him after the cock had crowed twice, and he went out and wept bitterly. Peter was in this repentant frame of mind, then, when the Lord appeared at the Sea of Tiberias. Peter is eager to make amends and to demonstrate his loyalty to his Lord. Note the actions of Peter on this occasion. Peter had suggested a fishing trip to a half dozen of the other disciples, and when they were out on the water, Jesus called to them from the shore, asking, "Children, have you any meat?" They did not recognize him, and answered "No." Then the Lord told them to cast the net on the right side of the ship, and the miraculous draught of 153 fish resulted. It was then that John became aware of the identity of the Lord, for he said, "It is the Lord." Peter girt his fisher's coat unto him and cast himself into the sea, the faster to reach shore. He had yielded to his impetuosity again. On shore they dined on the fish they had just caught, and after dinner the Lord asked Peter the three questions, which together with their answers on Peter's part and the Lord's comment on his answers form the basis of our study this morning.

"So when they had dined, Jesus saith unto Simon Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" How that question must have hurt Peter! Peter had been highly favored by the Lord. He had been very hasty in his suggestion that the Lord should not submit to his enemies, had drawn the sword, but been gently corrected by the Lord. He had been allowed to witness the transfiguration, the raising of Jairus' daughter, his agony in the garden, in short he was among the most highly favored of the disciples. Again and again Peter had acted as spokesman for all the disciples. It was he who had made the beautiful confession when the Lord had asked, "Will ye also go away?" "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God." Now the Lord asks him "Lovest thou me more than these?" Peter had always thought that his love for the Lord was greater, stronger, firmer, more lasting than that of the other disciples. He had boasted, "Although all shall be offended, yet will not I." The Lord makes no direct reference to that boast with this question, but the question, and particularly its threefold repetition make the implied reference to Peter's boast and his subsequent denial only too obvious. Peter was evidently hurt by this question of his Lord. The Lord seemed to be casting doubt on Peter's sincerity, "Is it really true, Peter, that *you* love me more than these other disciples do? Certainly some of your actions at my trial seem to indicate the opposite. Were they prompted by temporary weakness and yielding to strong temptation, or have you really lost the fervor of the love wherewith you once loved one? How about it Peter?"

Peter's answer to the Lord's question is just what we would expect of Peter. He speaks from the fullness of his heart, he fairly bubbles over with protestations of his love for the Master. "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee." He says that the question is now superfluous. His love for the Master is genuine. Jesus in his

omniscience knows that. That denial at the trial was a momentary weakness. That shall not happen again. He does not want to leave any room for doubt on that point. To get the full force of Peter's reply we must look into the original Greek. The Lord had asked "ἀγαπᾶς με" Peter deliberately changed the verb in his reply to "φιλέω σε." A study of these verbs reveals some interesting facts regarding the exact meaning of each verb. The verb "ἀγαπάω" and the noun "ἀγάπη" derived from it occur only in biblical and ecclesiastical language. The Septuagint uses the word in the Song of Solomon for the Hebrew אָהַבָהּ. In the New Testament it occurs only in the writings Matthew (once), Luke (once), twice each in Hebrews and Revelations, but frequently in the writings of Paul, Peter, John, and Jude; not at all in Acts, Mark, or James. The word denotes a preference for, a high regard for the welfare of, a wishing well to another person. It is used of the love of God for man, of the love of man for God, of the love of the Father for the Son, and of the love of Christians toward each other as children of God. It lies on a high plane, and borders on veneration or adoration. The word "φιλέω" means to delight in, to long for, it may even mean to kiss, in short it is expressive of natural emotion rather than of a veneration or esteem. In Latin there are two verbs which could be used as fairly accurate translations of each of these words: *amo* = φιλέω and *diligo* = ἀγαπάω. In English there is no pair of words that brings out this fine distinction of meaning. The Lord therefore asked Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas, dost thou esteem me higher than these other disciples?" and Peter answered him in effect, "Lord, thou knowest that I not only esteem thee highly, but that I love you with every fiber of my being, with the most fervent love." We should also note that in his answer Peter omitted the words "more than these." Peter has learned a lesson in humility. He is more cautious in the choice of his words, less hasty and less boastful than he formerly was. His disgraceful denial of the Lord has had a sobering influence on him.

The Lord acknowledged the answer Peter had given to his question as satisfactory, and thereupon reinstated him in his office of apostle. He said, "Feed my lambs." Nourish and supply with spiritual food the little lambs in my flock, this must mean teach the little children the rudiments of Christianity. Promote the spiritual welfare of those members of the church who are still weak in Christian knowledge, who need strengthening food, nourishing food, so that they may grow in faith and knowledge.

The Lord now repeated the question to Peter, "He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" The wording is identical with the first question except for the omission of the words "more than these." The Lord paid no attention to the change of the verb Peter had made. Deliberately he again says "ἀγαπᾶς με" to let Peter know that it is not personal love and affection that he expects of him, but rather the highest reverence, the confidence and esteem, submission, and admiration, which are His due.

Peter answers exactly as the first time, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee," again using the verb "φιλέω." He is bursting with personal love and affection for his dear Lord, and must express it. Out of Peter's repeated protestation of love to the Lord we seem to feel the unselfish devotion of the Apostle to his Lord, The weakness that caused the denial is gone, overcome by love for the Lord and his work.

Again the Lord acknowledges the answer with a repetition of the charge he made the first time, "Feed my sheep." The English translation shows us only one change in wording, from lambs to sheep. The Greek original substitutes a different word for "feed" here, "ποιμαίνε," which really is a broader term. It means to tend a flock, to keep sheep, including not only the provision of feed, pasture and water, but also the protection of the flock against other dangers. In a transferred sense it therefore means not only the instruction of the young and uninstructed, but to supply all the requirements of the soul, spiritual food for growth in faith and knowledge as well as protection or warning against the many dangers that beset the pathway of a Christian's life, temptations, doubts, errors, sins, and whatever else may prove hurtful to the soul.

The word for sheep "πρόβατα" is found in this verse in R G L Tr txt. WH mrg. but T Tr mrg. WH txt. read "προβάτια" which would mean a little sheep. Regardless of the reading adopted the meaning evidently

refers to the activity of which the Lord often spoke of himself engaging in, when he referred to himself as the “Good Shepherd.” Peter too refers to him (1 Pet. 5:4) as the “Chief Shepherd.”

Again Peter is given to understand that love for the Master, love of the Lord is the necessary condition of all wholesome guidance. Direction and guidance, yes, oversight and rule are part of a pastor’s duties. Peter’s own record shows this to be the case. 1 Pet. 5:2 he exhorts the elders, who also is an elder, “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

As the Lord repeats his question, now for the third time, it appears that the subtle suggestion of Peter in his answers has been adopted by the Lord. He asks again, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” But this time he does not say “ἀγαπᾷς με,” but “φιλεῖς με.” By his persistence, Peter seems to have conquered the heart of the Lord. The Lord says in effect, “Dost thou indeed love me dearly, love me with the earnestness and fervor that has twice corrected my word into one more congenial, more ample, and more true than the word I used?”

Peter was grieved that the Lord asked for the third time. Doubtless the threefold question was an unpleasant echo and reminder of three similar questions asked a few weeks ago at the trial in the palace of the high priest. He may have thought that Jesus did not trust the reality of his personal affection toward Him, that he will not accept my implication that this is more to me than reverence and esteem. In his answer he does not begin as before with “Yea,” but calls attention to the Lord’s omniscience: “Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.” He means to say, “Lord, thou knowest all my thoughts, all my feelings, all my emotions. Thou knowest what an impulsive man I am at times, how weak I have been on some occasions, how disloyal I have been when I denied thee. But thou also knowest that at heart my love for thee is sincere. It was not my faith in thee that failed, but my courage to confess that faith under the circumstances. My love and devotion for thee is still unshaken.”

The Lord repeats the commission of Peter as apostle a third time. “Feed my sheep.” In the English text this looks identical with the second charge, but in the Greek the word “βόεκε” is used again. As to sheep, R G L WH read “πρόβατα” in the margin as a variant reading, whereas T Tr WH read “προβάτια” in the text. This would mean “feed my little sheep.” If we follow the readings adopted by some texts, we would have a steady progression of thought in the three charges, which the reader must feel is the intention if there is any variation of the terms at all. The first charge would then be, “Feed my lambs,” the second, “Shepherd my sheep,” and the third, “Feed my little sheet.” First let Peter, let all the apostles, let all successors of the apostles learn the delicate duty of dispensing the milk of the Word to those who are young in years and in grace; then let them learn to guide, direct, and protect the mature disciples from outward foes, preserving discipline in the flock, seeking those who stray away and become lost until they are found; and finally let them care for the sheep who are young in heart, who are still immature in faith and knowledge, and therefore require the assiduous care of a faithful shepherd.

Applying this passage now to the work of a minister of the Word, and specifically to our work as teachers of Christian high schools, we can learn many valuable lessons from it for our work. First and foremost among these is the fact that for the pastoral office, as well as for the office of a Christian teacher, love is the prime requisite. Love varies in quality, ranging from the common love of man for man, in this case of teacher for student and of student for teacher, to the highest and noblest love which the soul has for God and God for our immortal souls. Love is a requirement for successful teaching, particularly this latter type, although a certain measure of the other is necessary also. Christ asked Peter, “Lovest thou *me*?” Love, honor, and devotion, attachment, respect, esteem, veneration of *Jesus* is the quality which a teacher must possess above all others. His person serves as a model for our lives, his character as a pattern according to which we should shape our own as well as that of our students, his work of salutation is the basis of our hope for eternal life, his suffering and death the price paid for our sins and the means of gaining our redemption and establishing our righteousness in the sight of God. These facts make a whole-hearted devotion to the Savior imperative for any one who assays to be a successful Christian teacher.

Christ asked Peter, “Lovest *thou* me?” Personal love to Christ is required of Christian teachers. It must not be historical, vicarious, imitated, attempted love, but experimental, actual, genuine, active love of the teacher for his heavenly Master. This love must be a burning fire in his heart, must fill his soul with enthusiasm for the Savior and His cause, and result in warm devotion to the work of the Lord. No half-way measures or half-hearted work will do in our profession. “My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways.” Prov. 23:26.

Another obvious lesson from our text is this that as Christian teachers we are expected, to “Feed the little sheep.” They require food of various types, the young requiring the milk of the Word, the simplest Gospel truths taught so that a child can grasp and understand them; others need more substantial food, so that they may broaden out and increase in understanding. But a steady supply of food is required to keep our bodies alive, and it is not otherwise with the soul. It does not suffice to feed the soul with heavenly food for a while, and then turn it loose, stop the feeding, or substitute inferior food. Our Christian boys and girls need to be kept on a diet of God’s Word through their high school and college years as well as, nay, even more than that is necessary in their elementary training.

The Bread of Life must be their chief item of diet. Our Christian schools must not regard the study of the Word of God as a supplement to the regular curriculum, but as a basis for it. Our teaching must not merely be in harmony with, and contain nothing contradictory to, but must be permeated with, and must emanate from the Word of God.

A third lesson which we note is this that the sheep are not our own, but belong to the Master. He told Peter three times, “Feed *my* lambs, *my* sheep, *my* little sheep.” We as teachers are the shepherds, the providers, the feeders,—but not the owners of the sheep. Their owner is Christ, and we should be careful always to treat them as such, in spite of their peculiarities, their failings, and their shortcomings. This is the correct basis for teacher-student relationships.

Finally there is one more point that should not be overlooked. The threefold charge is given Peter by the *Lord*. Christ has also commissioned us to do His work in His stead. We are not self-appointed individuals who profess to have superior knowledge which we are willing to dispense for a fee. Our positions are created by the Lord who established his church on this plan “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” Eph. 4:11. It is not for us therefore to seek our own personal gain and aggrandizement from our work, or to feed personal ambitions in our positions, but merely to serve our master who has commissioned us to the best of our ability, for the edification of his church on earth. That is our lofty aim in our profession. And in the degree in which we love Christ we shall feed and tend his lambs and sheep.