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Scripture Text: John 21:15-19

Sermon Title: *The Risen Jesus Confronts the Quality of Our Love*

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The Risen Jesus Confronts the Quality of Our Love

Introduction:

On this Pentecost Sunday we will look at another appearance of the risen Lord to his disciples during these 40 days between his resurrection and final ascension into heaven. John gives us this 21st chapter as an epilogue, featuring some crucially important words of Jesus to his disciples regarding their and our ongoing mission in the world. Last Sunday we looked at the risen Lord and the miraculous catch of fish. That night of futility ended in the miraculous catch of fish, and the breakfast Jesus prepared for the disciples at the lakeshore. The breakfast time of fellowship no doubt reminded the disciples of the Last Supper with Jesus.

Sitting around the coals of the fire brought another memory into the mind of Simon Peter. He no doubt recalled the night of Jesus' arrest when he had followed his Lord "at a distance" (Luke 22:54). Jesus had warned Peter that he would deny him three times, a warning he totally disregarded as unnecessary. But, while he was warming himself by the fire, a young girl asked him if he was a follower of Jesus, and Peter adamantly denied that he ever knew him (John 18:15-18; 25-27). Now Jesus prepares to ask Peter a thrice-repeated question that calls for his response. This is what has been

called “the most celebrated exchange of questions and answers in the entire Bible” (Gary Burge, page 587, *NIV Application Commentary: John*).

Follow as I read **John 21:15-19**.

Commenting on the simple verse from John’s first letter, which says “God is love” (1 John 4:16), Paul Scherer wrote something that has remained with me through the years. To say “God is *love*” is not the meaning of this verse, because God is much more than love. He is holiness, wisdom, power and faithfulness, to name a few characteristics. John means to say, wrote Scherer, that *God* is love, “for when you say that, you have said all that can possibly be said about love” (pages 225-233, *The Word God Sent*).

Scherer went on to say that this verse is “the costliest thing that has ever been said about God, and it is the costliest thing that can possibly be said about us. If it should ever lay hold on you,” continues Scherer, “I don’t know what the upshot will be, and you don’t either.” God’s love will move in, he says, to make our broken lives whole, but will not shelter us from trouble and suffering. God’s love in fact will thrust us out into a world of suffering. The protection God promises in the Psalms, for example, is the keeping of us in his love. But as Scherer says, “God is almost intolerably careless about crosses and swords, arenas and scaffolds, and about all the ‘evils’ and all the ‘plagues.’ His caring doesn’t mean he goes in for ‘upholstering!’” Loving God and knowing a God of love can be very costly.

In our text, Simon Peter came to understand something about the demands of love, and in particular, loving Jesus, as he confronts the quality of our love. I have already noted in these recent sermons on the appearances of the risen Lord that only an empty tomb and real encounters with the risen Lord could account for the radical change in the demeanor of the disciples. The crucifixion of the Lord had left them crushed and fearful, and certainly in no mood to fabricate a resurrection or to launch a dangerous, worldwide movement. I want us to note in particular the impact of the risen Lord Jesus on Simon Peter, and the demands that Jesus placed on him. Only a risen Lord could restore Peter to his broken relationship with his master, and could reinstate him to his position as a servant leader of Jesus’ other followers. But this being reinstated as a leader and his being restored to his relationship with Jesus would place some heavy demands on Simon Peter.

I happened to catch just a closing comment by the head executive of a large corporation, who was being interviewed on a business news program. The television news journalist had asked him about his hard work, and the executive answered that besides his marriage, running this huge company was the hardest job he had ever had. It was this reference to his marriage that piqued my interest. And it is true, that all successful relationships require work. The risen Lord Jesus was giving his disciples lessons that would be of use after his return to heaven. The Christian life is a relationship with the living, risen Lord Jesus. As the most important relationship, there are demands in this relationship. Although we are forgiven and saved by grace

alone, yet to know Jesus means we must pay the price for this primary relationship.

Roman Catholic tradition has throughout the centuries interpreted this passage, along with Matthew 16:13-20, as Jesus' appointment of Peter as the head of the church worldwide, as the spiritual leader of the catholic, i.e., the universal church. We understand, however, that Peter is a representative of all of us as the members of Christ's church. Each one of us who claims Jesus as Lord is confronted today about the quality of our love for God and his people.

Note with me that Jesus confronted Peter and he confronts us with...

Remembering our failures (verses 15-17)

A relationship of love and trust requires work. If there has been a breach of that trust and a violation of that love, there must be reconciliation and restoration. For a marriage relationship, the most difficult yet most important words are "I'm sorry," or "I was wrong," words that are not easy for me to say but have been necessary throughout our over 44 years of marriage.

Simon Peter had never lost the love of Jesus or his love for Jesus. Yet he was becoming painfully aware of his sinful failure of having denied the Lord three times. First there is the charcoal fire that is a vivid reminder of the same kind of fire where Peter was warming himself when confronted by the young girl (John 18:18). Next, Jesus asks him the same pointed question three times. Notice that...

Jesus confronts us with our sinful failure to love

We have evidence that the risen Lord Jesus had already personally visited with Simon Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5). It may have been that on that occasion Peter confessed his sinful failure and would thus have received Jesus' total forgiveness. Indeed, immediately upon having denied the Lord those three times, Peter had seen Jesus' face, and "went outside and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). The crucified and risen Lord, who had died to forgive Peter's sins as well as ours, met the broken-hearted disciple and offered his complete forgiveness.

Yet, though forgiven, Simon still needed to be reinstated to his position of ministry and leadership among the other disciples. Because it was in front of the disciples that Peter had bragged about his loyalty, it was therefore necessary that he acknowledge before them his failure (John 13:8, 37-38, Luke 22:33; Matthew 26:33-35). Although Jesus forgives all our sins, and the cross removes all our guilt, yet our being restored to full fellowship with him and with others and our being reinstated to ministry requires giving an account to him and others. Our sins and failures must be acknowledged in order for there to be a free and joyful spirit for fellowship and ministry.

Jesus addressed Simon Peter as Simon, reverting to his old name before he gave him his new name, Cephas/Peter, which means “rock” (21:15; 1:42). Peter had acted as anything but a rock. He had been weak and unstable, and Jesus needed to restore him in order for him to become a solid rock in faith and service.

Jesus asked him if he loved him more than these, probably meaning, “Do you love me more than these other disciples do, like you said you did?” Peter in response replied with uncharacteristic humility and reticence, “Yes, Lord...you know that I love you.” By now Peter understood that he had failed to uphold his pledges to the Lord, and was reluctant to make any bold declarations. Yet he understood that Jesus knew his heart, and realized that he loved Jesus.

Jesus offers forgiveness and a renewed relationship

Jesus was impressing on Peter’s mind and heart that to be reinstated was to be forgiven and restored and to be given a second chance. He was in the process of a new beginning by which he would become useful in the kingdom of God. Perhaps Peter remembered what Jesus had said to him on the night of the Last Supper:

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus had prayed for him, which means that even though Peter’s faith would falter, it indeed did not finally fail. He would be given an opportunity to repent, and would be restored to Jesus and reinstated as a servant leader of his brother disciples.

The reason many are unable or unqualified for kingdom service, according to Gary Burge, is the lack of what he calls “recovered joy.” This is because for many in Christian service there has been no true repentance for and repentance over past sins. Often, with many who are self-disqualified and unable to offer true and effective service, there has been no healing of past hurts. Thus, there is lingering bitterness. With some, there is suppressed anger, or a feeling of unworthiness that causes some to be driven as they try to prove to God and others their worthiness to be ministers or kingdom servants.

Many hide their insecurities and unresolved guilt behind a legalistic ministry that makes inordinate demands of self and of others, perhaps in an effort to gain God’s approval. As Burge says, “Many pastors and lay persons in ministry need to visit the shores of Galilee and re-read John 21” (Page 596, *NIV Application Commentary: John*). Only a visit with the risen Lord Jesus can give us “recovered joy,” and the “second chance” we all need for effective ministry. This recovered joy that comes through broken-ness and transparency before God is the only solution for ministerial competitiveness and lack of transparency, says Burge.

Loving Jesus, Simon was learning, was costly. He would need to have an ongoing sense of repentance, and the realization of his failure and broken-

ness and weakness before God. God uses broken people who never forget the ongoing need for grace and forgiveness and who are continually repentant before God. In those three years of Jesus' earthly ministry, Simon Peter never liked the idea that his Lord would face a cross. After his magnificent confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Simon immediately reacted when Jesus spoke of his approaching cross. "Never, Lord!" he said. 'This shall never happen to you!' Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men'" (Matthew 16:22-23). Peter had to learn that the cross was necessary for Jesus, for him to be our Savior. And then he was to learn what Jesus meant about the cross each one of us must carry, the cross of repentance, self-denial, weakness and suffering (Matthew 16:24-25). We are useful in Christ's service only to the extent that we take the way of the cross.

Then, with the cross there comes the joy of knowing we are loved by Jesus, who uses us despite our failings and weaknesses. We who love Jesus must pay this price of remembering our failures. But also the risen Jesus confronts us with the demand of...

Renewing our pledge (verses 15-17)

Sometimes relationships that are being healed require renewed vows. I've had the privilege of ministry to couples who, after a time of total forgiveness and reconciliation by the grace of God, have then restated their marriage vows. Jesus asked Simon Peter this thrice-repeated question for the purpose of the renewal of Simon's love. Jesus demanded Simon's averring his love for him.

Of loving Jesus...

Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. A lot of ink has been spilled over the fact that Jesus used the word "agape," which is often used for a God-like, unselfish and sacrificial love. Peter answers with "philos," which is usually a lesser love, which Jesus uses also in his third question. In his gospel account John may well have conveyed the fact that in his answers, Simon Peter, who had previously been so self-assured and confident, this time used the weaker word for love. And then finally, Jesus also used the weaker "philos" to ask if Peter loved with this more common love. I'm not so sure John was doing this, because no where else in his gospel does John distinguish between these loves. And, in all likelihood the conversation was in Aramaic and not in Greek, so these distinctions would not have been made. But I think that John, who wrote to communicate the full intent of Jesus' words, intended to convey the fact that Peter was now less confident of his own ability to love as he had once professed.

But, just as Peter had denied the Lord three times, Jesus wants him to repeat three times that he loves him. As has been observed, if this was Peter's ministry "ordination" service, the Lord had three questions for Simon. In my

ordination examination council in April of 1967, I was asked a round of theological questions and inquiries about my personal life and background, as the examination council was testing my fitness for the preaching and pastoral ministry. But Jesus asked three times just this one question: "Simon Peter, do you love me?"

And, as a Jew growing up, Simon learned the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your strength." And now Peter knew Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). He no doubt endorsed the confession Thomas made when he saw the risen Lord: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). But Peter had denied the Lord, after having been so self confident. But Jesus visited with him and full forgiveness and restoration was granted. But no longer could Peter trust in his resolve to demonstrate loyalty and love. He would now be less certain of himself and more dependent on Jesus. Now that he had realized the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus, he was prepared to love Jesus as his risen God and Savior. But how was he to love Jesus, now that Jesus would be departing and returning to the Father in glory?

Jesus was telling Peter that he must love him...

Through taking care of his people.

Jesus said that Simon would express his love for Jesus by feeding his lambs and taking care of his sheep. By now Simon Peter was familiar with this analogy. Jesus had declared himself to be the Good Shepherd who would lay down his life for the sheep. And he would have many more sheep who would hear his voice and follow him. (John 10:11).

As we have noted, being called sheep is not a flattering designation. As Philip Keller states so eloquently in his book, *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*, sheep are lovely and harmless, but also quite stupid, stubborn, helpless and wayward. Thus shepherding is hard work. We who are far removed from the culture of sheep farming tend to think of shepherding in terms of the bucolic religious art paintings we see of Jesus in clean robes holding a crook in one hand and a cute little lamb in the other. But shepherding is hard, dirty, and dangerous work. And particularly in that time and setting, shepherds often had to fight off wild beasts. Paul used this analogy for the work of the elders in Ephesus, who had to keep watch over the flock, and protect them from the wolves of false teaching and other forms of treachery (Acts 20:28-30).

Peter came to realize this calling to love Jesus by loving his sheep and by feeding and caring for them as an elder/overseer (1 Peter 5:1-4). As Jesus made clear in one of his judgment passages, we who are being saved are God's sheep (Matthew 25:31-46). And if we are truly God's sheep who love him, we will find ourselves quite naturally and unwittingly loving Jesus by loving his sheep. We will find ourselves feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, inviting the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. And the failure to express such love in such tangible ways

will be evidence against us on the day of judgement. As God's children, we are both his sheep and are called to become under-shepherds as well.

After and beyond Pentecost, Simon lived up to the new name, Cephas/Petros/Peter, which Jesus had given him. He became a Spirit-empowered witness for Jesus and indomitable leader of the church. And when he wrote his first epistle, he spoke from pastoral experience as an elder who had learned and was exhorting other elders to serve as undershepherds with a willing, servant spirit. He exhorted the pastors and elders to not "lord it over" the others, but to lead by example and in humility (1 Peter 5:1-11). And the truth is that God's sheep are called to become shepherds. He has given not just pastors but all of his people those whom we are to gather into his kingdom (Luke 15:1-7). And there are those we are to care for as though we were serving Jesus himself. And we are indeed serving and loving Jesus in his people.

Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) was one of the greatest missionaries in the modern missionary movement of the 19th Century. This great English missionary and statesman was asked why he gave his life to serve as a missionary to the people of China. He answered that he gave his life, not because he loved the Chinese people but primarily because he loved God, who loved the Chinese (see Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe*, page 480). Loving God means he first loved us, and when we love him in return he loves others through us. In his first letter, John says we cannot claim to love God if we don't love our fellow believer, in whom Christ dwells (1 John 4:7-21).

I wonder how often we realize the opportunities God gives us every day to love him by loving people, by ministering his grace and love, in simple and caring ways? If we love him, we will feed his sheep, take care of his lambs. The Great Commandment is to love God with all our being and connected inextricably with it is the command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-33). But he does love us and he wants us to show his love by our loving his sheep.

In the neighborhood where we live, not too far from this church building, is a small pasture where graze two sheep, a white and a black one. As Nancy and I have often walked by that "pastoral" scene in the midst of a suburban neighborhood, I have thought about the lost sheep in our neighborhood, who are (as Jesus saw the multitudes around him) "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." The need is to see people around us, like our neighbors right next door, who are in need of the Good Shepherd, and to share more of the compassion of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 9:36). Are there any sheep around you that need care and feeding? What about those "little lambs" that you feed every mealtime around your table? Are you caring for their eternal needs as well, and are you letting Jesus love them through you as you love Jesus through loving them?

And note with me, the risen Jesus confronts us with the demand of...

Realizing the price (verses 18 & 19)

Relationships don't come cheaply. Ones that last involve commitment and staying power. That's true in friendship. The Proverb that speaks of a brother who is born for adversity and of a friend who stays closer than a brother know that principle of paying the price of loyalty (Proverbs 17:17; 18:24). The marriage vow says, "Till death do us part." Ruth said to her mother-in-law, Naomi, "Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die...May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me" (Ruth 1:16-17).

It seems that after Jesus had spoken these words of reinstatement to Peter, he next began to take him along on a walk beside the lakeshore. Jesus began to explain to Peter that he would pay the price of a relationship...

Of following Jesus...

Jesus spoke to Peter about his life ahead of following him as Lord. Even as Simon and the other disciples had followed Jesus during his three-year earthly ministry, so now they must continue to follow him after his return to heaven's glory. They would follow him by means of the Holy Spirit within them. He would be their guide as they would continue the ministry he had begun to do (Acts 1:1). And ours too is the price of following Jesus as Lord and of letting him live his life in us and as us.

And the life of following Jesus is not an easy one, but requires that we live with the spirit of the disciplines and that we walk in step with the Holy Spirit, which means the producing and displaying of the fruit of the Spirit in and through our lives (Galatians 5:22-23). And the life of following Jesus is never sporadic, but requires our patience (and God's!) and perseverance. Spiritual growth is simply a process that takes time and commitment, on God's part as well as ours. God is always patiently at work in us to bring about his desired results for our character and usefulness in his kingdom.

Chuck Swindoll speaks of the challenge of the everyday Christian life that must be lived between the mountain peaks of Sunday worship. He says the problem with the Christian life is that it's so daily! Day in and day out we are called to live with the same joy and peace that we might more easily feel where we're on the mountaintop. And we're called to a life of loving service even when we think we're unappreciated or even unnoticed.

Peter needed to realize also the price of following...

Where we don't want to go...

Jesus began to share with Peter that the price of following would be to follow unto death. Jesus spoke of the binding of Peter's hands, which would be stretched out on a crossbeam. Church tradition says that Simon Peter was

himself crucified about the year AD 69 or 70 in Rome. So, for well over thirty years, Peter lived knowing that he would be led to a martyr's death. In his second letter, Peter says he is reminding the church of their calling to holiness, "as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me" (2 Peter 2:12-14). Jesus made clear to Simon Peter his pending death by martyrdom. A less reliable tradition says that Simon, feeling unworthy to be crucified as was his Lord, asked to be crucified upside down. In whatever manner, and though whatever horrible form of execution, his suffering and death would not begin to approximate the degree of Jesus' suffering, which especially was in his substitution as our sin-bearer.

The demand of following Jesus includes the price of following Jesus where we don't want to go. The life of discipleship is one of greatest joy, meaning and fulfillment, yet it is also one of submitting to the Father's will, which includes the way of difficulty and suffering, which is never our human choice. God doesn't expect us to become masochists, but demands we be realists.

In Hebrews 5, we read how Jesus, in the days of his life on earth, "offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:7-9). No doubt this passage refers to Jesus' agonizing prayer in Gethsemane on the night of his arrest (Luke 22:41-44). The eternal Son of God, who is fully God as well as man, was made complete as our sympathetic high priest and Savior by his willing submission and obedience to the cross.

So, we too learn obedience and grow in faith and grace when we submit to the Father's will for us, which always includes a cross. The Father's will is not for our unmitigated pleasure and smooth sailing. His will is that we seek his grace that comes in extra measure during times of difficulty. And we all are called to take up our cross of spiritual discipline and self-denial and to enter into the narrative of the cross. When we suffer injustice and mistreatment, as Peter himself wrote, then we should actually rejoice that "we participate in the sufferings of Christ." Peter also adds that when we suffer injustice as did Christ, we are blessed, "for the Spirit of glory and of God" rests upon us (1 Peter 4:13-14). Paul also knew that the only way to enter into the deepest level of knowing Christ, and into the fullness of his love, was through "the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings and becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

So, since the moment of this word from Jesus about his final moment of witness, when he would witness by his death, Peter was aware that the final price of following Jesus would be going where he would not want to go. But he would go with Jesus, in the steps of Jesus, and even with the joy and grace of the Lord Jesus. Even now you may find yourself in a place or position in which you do not delight. You're saying to yourself, "I don't want to be here. I didn't want to come here, to this country, to this job, to this ministry or personal or family situation. This is not what I had in mind for myself." Yet,

the point is, you are where you are by the sovereign grace of God. You may have made wrong decisions in the past, and maybe you didn't pray about your job or your last assignment. Yet, God is sovereign even over our bad choices and disobedience. And he's always there to once again take over our lives and bring about his good purposes, even though we may have disobeyed. Did not Simon Peter deny his Lord? And yet, the risen Lord forgave him and was willing to use him, and lead him in the way of the cross. And his life would not be one of ease, and would even end in a martyr's death. He would have to relinquish his personal wants and desires and ambitions, as we must as well. And he would find his joy, not in the fulfillment of his personal wants and ambitions, but in the will of God. Like his fellow apostle, Paul, Peter would learn to trust and love God through the way of death to self and the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings. Peter knew that he would have to follow Jesus where he would not want to go.

In a love relationship with Jesus, there is the price of following Jesus where we don't want to go, yet it is all...

For the glory of God.

John noted that Peter's death would glorify God (19). Later Peter wrote, "But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13). He knew that Christ will more than compensate and reward us for what we suffer for him in this life. And even our present suffering is for the glory of God. The world sees Jesus most clearly, not in our successes and in our church growth and social impact on the world. The Lord Jesus is seen most clearly through our suffering for him. It was at the foot of the cross that the powerful Roman officer-soldier said, "Surely he was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54). As was said in the ancient world, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Even today, when there are more people than ever before in the history of the church who are suffering for their faith in Christ, this is true. The gospel is irrepressible in places in the world where there is persecution of believers.

The demands of a relationship with Jesus Christ are all the way till the end, but yet they end in everlasting glory. This relationship of loving and serving Jesus is the one with everlasting consequences and rewards.

I recall something CS Lewis wrote about rewards. So many Christians, he said, are piously sanctimonious about rewards, and thinks no true Christian should give any thought for rewards. But there are rewards that are but an expression of our very relationship with Christ, which is what we seek, not for what we can gain materially, but for gaining more of Christ himself. For example, said Lewis, if a man sought after a young woman's love in order to gain access to her money, he's being crassly venal and greedy. But if a man truly loves a woman and woos her love and gains matrimony with her, the reward he seeks is the woman's love. That's the reward of heaven—just more of Jesus and the full glory of his presence and to bask in his uninterrupted love and fellowship.

Conclusion:

Peter realized that *God* is love. *Jesus* is love. And Peter began to understand that to love Jesus would mean to enter into the costliest thing that could be said about God or us. As Scherer said, "If it should ever lay hold on you, I don't know what the upshot will be, and you don't either...God is almost intolerably careless about crosses and swords, arenas and scaffolds, and about all the 'evils' and all the 'plagues.' His caring doesn't mean he goes in for 'upholstering'!" And a relationship with Jesus Christ can be very costly. It cost God to love us. And it costs us to love him.

The risen Jesus confronts us with the quality and cost of our love. You alone know the cost for you to love Jesus. It may be that there are sins and broken vows in your relationship with God. God will forgive all sins and whatever our failures, he will give us a new beginning. But for there to be that forgiveness and new beginning, there must not be repression and denial. There must be honest confession, repentance and forsaking the sinful behavior of the past. A right relationship, a love relationship with Jesus, will cost you true repentance and transparency before God. He has paid the awful price for your cleansing and forgiveness. Now you must accept it by way of the cost of your remembering and repenting. And he will give you a new beginning.

Then will come the cost of renewing your pledge to and involvement in ministry to God's people, the sheep of his pasture. This has nothing to do with the deserving or likeability of the sheep he has called you to serve and care for. In fact, Jesus is likely to give you some sheep to care for who are difficult for you to love. These sheep may be in your family, living next door to you, or colleagues at work. Then you will learn how Jesus loves them, which is why he has called you to feed them and care for them. He wants to love them through you and as you. Jesus wants you to know that he loves and feeds you even when you are not very lovable or deserving.

And you will be called to love Jesus by following him in the daily walk of your life, and through the unrewarding daily grind. No doubt to follow Jesus will mean his leading you where you simply don't want to go. (I'll have to confess, that as blessed and privileged we have been by being here, when I first realized God might be calling this direction, I didn't want to come here. A great place to visit, I thought, but not to live and learn a new culture and totally different style of ministry at my age! But I realized soon enough that my personal preference is immaterial. And because I was called here by God's appointment, it's been the greatest place and ministry on earth, one I leave with profound sadness). The Lord may have led you where you didn't want to go, and may yet lead you where you don't want to go. But be assured that the one who is leading you loves you and plans blessings for you now and glory for the life to come. But in the meantime, the way of his love is not always comfortable and easy. As Paul Scherer says, "God is almost intolerably careless about crosses and swords, arenas and scaffolds, and about all the 'evils' and all the 'plagues.' His caring doesn't mean he goes in for 'upholstering'!"

A love relationship with Jesus is costly. Yet it is the only path to life's greatest purpose and joy. And by his grace we will be able to pay the price. Each one of us must decide what it will mean to truly love him. There are demands in this most important of all relationships. When we follow him we learn what it means to truly love him.

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Describe what you imagine were the thoughts and feelings of Simon Peter when Jesus asked him those three times if he loved him.
2. Why is it important that we be confronted with and confess our past failings and sins before we seek to minister to others?
3. Do you agree that in order to render effective Christian service we need "recovered joy"? If so, why?
4. When Peter confessed his love, Jesus then told him to feed his sheep. In what ways do we express our love for Jesus today? What does it mean for you to feed his sheep, to take care of his lambs?
5. A love relationship with Jesus means a lifetime of following him. How are you seeking to follow Jesus?
6. Does following Jesus mean that you might someday have to follow him where you don't want to go? (See verse 18).
7. Read verse 19 about Jesus' prophecy of Peter's eventual martyrdom. How is God glorified through the death of martyrs, those who are killed for their faith in Christ?
8. Ask God to give you grace to be willing to pay the price of a life-long and faithful love relationship with Jesus.

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