

Do You Love Me? Love of Self, Love of Community

Scripture: John 21:15-17 (NRSVUE)

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Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?”

The conversation between Jesus and Peter isn’t just about love in the abstract; it’s about the vulnerable, ongoing process of becoming—of stepping into love when we feel uncertain, unworthy, or afraid.

1. Opening: The Tension of Becoming

I want to begin with the tension Peter feels when Jesus asks, “*Do you love me?*”

When we read scripture, we do so with our bodies.

This moment with Peter is a tension of becoming, like when I began feeding people who were part of Occupy Denver. If I was not going to be out there in the encampment, I could at least show my solidarity by bringing food and water. That was a real tension of becoming for me as I discerned how I could show my love and solidarity. I do not enjoy large crowds after being in Charlottesville, and when I was a doctoral student, I was always protesting at the ICE detention center and praying in large groups for the closure of privatized detention centers, including privately owned prisons. But, now!?! Crowds overwhelm me; crowds provoke my anxiety. I prefer to be a hermit in the woods and a monk in the world. I do better one on one than in a large crowd trying to manage all the social networks that exist. I no longer can do crowds. I’ve had to learn to love myself before I can love others well.

Love has changed me in very material ways.

The question Jesus asks Peter is one of identity and responsibility, and it’s the same question posed to anyone stepping into a vocation of love.

Take for instance the Mycelium Network that I preached on last fall.

The mycelium shows us that growth, support, and becoming happen underground, often unnoticed.

It’s really the unseen work of love that nurtures us. It’s the quiet nights in hotels when I’m able to connect with myself when I was traveling or the invitations to speak at museums that knew they were taking a risk on me because they knew I would tell the painful truth—these unseen moments and experiences are interconnected roots of the way I have learned how to love and have been loved. Experiences, mentors, and communities have supported my becoming, even when I didn’t feel ready. Like you, this open community at UUC. You have called me to lead you as the pastor of this community church, an intentional interdenominational church rooted in the Christian Tradition!

Every degree that I have earned is in the humanities. Particularly, the fields and discipline of philosophy and theology, including ethics. In seminary, I studied with a Freudian analyst and earned a cognate in psychoanalysis. If I fail as a pastor, I’ll go back to school to become a psychoanalyst and continue my work as a cultural analyst. But even in failure, we are all becoming.

Transition:

The work of becoming is slow, subterranean, and often tender. Like Peter, we long to say “yes” to love, but we sometimes get stuck in the cracks of our past or the weight of the unknown future.

2. The Cracks that Make Us Whole

Introduce the *Kintsugi* story here.

I was asked to come keynote a conference in Chicago right after moving to Nashville from the Bay Area. The conference was called: Mystic Soul. This Chicago stop would be one of three Chicago stops I would be making that year during my 300 day on the road life. I was barely in Nashville that first year I moved back home to the South.

I went to this conference and participated in kintsugi, a process of breaking a piece of pottery and mending it back together. When I did this, I didn't want the piece of pottery to break into a million pieces, because I didn't want to take the time to mend it with the gold. What I learned is that the more cracks, the more beautiful the vessel is in Japanese culture. I've been socialized to not show the cracks of my life; the moments of grace and love that have sustained me. I'm asked to be nice and polite and be put together, but the reality is that we are each vulnerable in a world complicit with its own demise.

I share with you my lived experience, because stories shape us. When we learn the story of self, we can begin to learn the story of us. When we learn the story of us, we begin to see each other more fully and we begin to midwife shalom.

My love experiment embodies a lot of cracks. These are sites of becoming.

The cracks in Peter's story are obvious—his denial, his fear. But Jesus doesn't ask Peter for flawless love; he asks for honest love. The gold that mends Peter's cracks is grace, and it's that grace that makes him a shepherd.

- Share your own cracks—the moments when love felt costly, when the call of justice felt too heavy or when your identity seemed like too much to hold.
- Name the grace that met you there: the voices, mentors, or even the internal whisper of Spirit that called you to keep showing up, cracks and all.

Grace has met me here. Each of my teachers, mentors, neighbors, you all, and even the internal whisper of the Great Spirit that continues to call me to keep showing up, cracks and all.

Reflection:

What if our cracks are not what disqualifies us from love but what makes our love more capacious?

3. Love Beyond Utility: Nouwen and the Gift of Presence

Move into the Henri Nouwen story, connecting it to your own experiences of learning to love beyond what you can give or accomplish.

I am learning that what people want is the gift of presence. When Erin and I came to the community meeting before my Call Sermon, Joan Bowden let me know that no one goes by their title here at UUC,

and that excited me because I felt like I was stepping into something that might nurture my collaborative efforts. Yet, the framework and foundation still embodies things like metrics and outcomes and goals that might be counter to the gift that people are asking for, which is presence.

- We may be tempted to measure our worth by productivity or accolades.
- Like Peter, we often want to prove our love with grand gestures, yet Jesus' invitation is to feed the sheep—to embody love in the daily, mundane acts of care.

So, I cook for people. I have people over for coffee! It's unconventional and maybe unorthodox, but if we don't get this right here in this building — if we don't give birth to Shalomn right here, which for our Jewish kin means we'll-being—if we don't nurture well-being in everything we do, we will further unmask the conscripts of supremacy culture, and we will see we are tethered to these varying systems that keep us compromised.

Insight:

Agape love is not about what we can offer, but about who we become when we offer ourselves fully.

4. Love in Public: Ruby Bridges & Desmond Tutu

Ruby Bridges and Desmond Tutu both show us that agape love is not passive; it shows up in public and takes risks for justice.

- Connect this to your own work of becoming as an activist theologian. Share a moment when you recognized that love is not just a feeling but a practice—an active, public, and communal act of solidarity.
- Name how love became a verb in your life, even when the cost was high.

When I finished my PhD, I headed to California for my first faculty job! I loved this time. I was single and finally had free-time to read what I wanted to read and my first book was quickly solicited.

In the publishing world, authors pitch to an agent, and if the agent is interested, they might pitch it to a publishing house. Publishing houses don't come to authors unless they know they can sell books!

I was asked to write my first book, *Activist Theology*, and I was compelled to help theology move back into the lives of everyday people. I used a variety of methods to do this work, and the book did well! In fact, it launched my work of being a truth teller. I set out to live my values every day of my life. I called it *Activist Theology*, and at the root of this book is relationship to self and community and the foundation of love.

Invitation:

Jesus' question to Peter wasn't just personal; it was a commission to love publicly—to feed the sheep. Love demands we step into the world with open hearts and open hands.

Introduction

So, today, we gather around a question—a question that Jesus asks not once, not twice, but three times: *Do you love me?* It is a question that unsettles, a question that demands something from us. It is a question about love—love of Christ, love of self, and love of community.

But before we rush to answer as Peter did, let us pause. Let us allow this question to search us, to sit with us. For love is not a simple sentiment but a radical call.

Douglass Day: A Story of Transformation, Freedom, and Love

On Friday, we also remembered **Douglass Day**, a day dedicated to honoring the life and legacy of **Frederick Douglass**, a man who transformed his own suffering into a vision of justice, freedom, and belonging. Born into slavery, Douglass did not know his exact birth date, but he chose **February 14th** to mark his entrance into the world—a declaration of self-love in a world that tried to erase his dignity. Douglass's journey was one of painful truth-telling. He refused to accept the dehumanizing lie that he was less than fully human. His escape from slavery was not just a movement toward personal freedom but a bold act of love for his people. He knew that **liberation is never individual—it is always communal**. His writings, speeches, and activism were acts of love, not the soft love of sentimentality, but the fierce love of justice.

The Layers of Love in the Greek Text

The Gospel of John gives us an intricate exchange between Jesus and Peter, where two different Greek words for love—**agapē** (divine, self-giving love) and **philia** (deep friendship and affection)—are woven together. Jesus asks Peter twice if he loves him with **agapē**, and Peter, perhaps hesitantly, responds with **philia**. The third time, Jesus meets Peter where he is, shifting to **philia**—meeting Peter in his humanity, in his journey of love that is still unfolding.

Isn't that how love works in our own lives? We struggle between the ideal and the real, between the love we aspire to and the love we are able to give. And yet, Christ meets us exactly where we are.

James Baldwin and Frederick Douglass: Love as Truth-Telling

James Baldwin, one of our great moral prophets, once wrote, *"Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."* Baldwin understood that love is not passive; it is an act of courage. It is the work of truth-telling, of seeing ourselves and each other clearly, of refusing to be trapped in illusions.

Frederick Douglass lived this kind of love. He told the truth about America's history, a history that some would rather forget. He spoke of the brutal reality of slavery, not to condemn, but to **call forth a new vision of beloved community**. When Jesus asked Peter, *Do you love me?*, he was not asking for a sentimental response. He was asking Peter if he was ready to take responsibility for a community in need.

Today, Douglass's call still speaks to us. The work of love is not to soothe but to heal, not to silence painful truths but to confront them with courage. We must tell the truth about our past, not to cause shame, but to cultivate empathy and transformation.

Loving Ourselves into Community

But how do we love others if we cannot love ourselves? Baldwin warns us: *"If you cannot love yourself, you have no chance of loving anybody else."* Jesus' question to Peter is also our question: Have we learned to love ourselves? Not in a self-centered way, but in a way that allows us to show up fully for the work of justice, mercy, and care?

Loving ourselves means reckoning with our past, as Peter had to. It means accepting that we are not perfect, but we are still called. It means letting go of the fear that we are not enough. Because when we

do, we find the strength to love our neighbors—not as abstract others, but as fellow travelers on this journey of grace.

Peter's becoming is unfinished, but Jesus commissions him anyway. The call to agape love isn't about having it all figured out—it's about saying "yes" to the ongoing work of love, justice, and community.

- we are making each other. I am still learning, still tending, still responding to Jesus' persistent question.
- I want to offer the image of the New England Aster and the color chartreuse—a reminder to us all that love, like mycelium, continues to grow and connect, even when it feels like nothing is happening.

Final Question:

What might it mean for us to say "yes" to agape love—not perfectly, but with our whole, cracked, and becoming selves?

Conclusion: The Call to Love in Action

Jesus' love is not static; it is active. *Feed my sheep.* Love is not just a word; it is a practice. It is the way we show up for one another, the way we hold space for each other's pain, the way we speak the truth even when it is hard.

So today, Jesus stands before us as he stood before Peter and asks, *Do you love me?* If our answer is *Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,* then we know what comes next: *Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.*

May our love be more than words—may it be the foundation of a transformed self and a beloved community.

And may we, like Douglass, love fiercely enough to tell the truth, to work for freedom, and to build a world where all can belong.

Closing Prayer

Great Spirit, Source of all life,
Teach us to walk gently on this earth,
To honor the wisdom of our ancestors,
And to hold each other in love and truth.
May we be like the rivers that carve new paths,
Like the trees that root deep and reach wide,
Like the stars that remind us of a world beyond this one.
Guide us to a future where justice and compassion embrace,
And where all beings find belonging.
We pray this in the name of Love. Amen.