

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 31, 2010

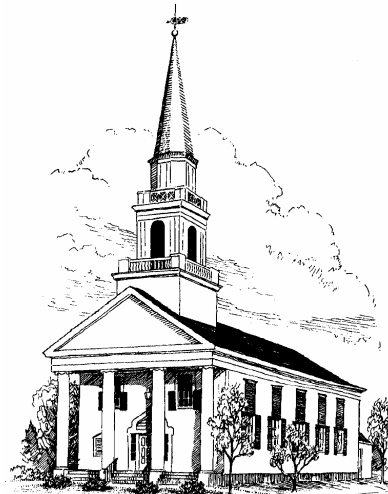
Rev. Susan M. Sanders

(UCC Minister for Global Sharing of Resources)

“Do You Love Me?”

Scripture:

John 21:15-19



What a joy it is to worship with you today. I so appreciate the invitation to be with you on this Mission Sunday and thank the Mission Committee, and Ann and Doug for their gracious hospitality.

It is my honor and privilege to serve as your UCC Minister for Global Sharing of Resources and One Great Hour of Sharing Administrator.

I bring you greetings from the Boards and staff of the covenanted ministries of the UCC. On their behalf I wish to express appreciation for your faithful ministry here in Mystic and around the world *AND* for your most generous gifts to Our Church's Wider Mission and the Special Mission Offerings which make possible the many ministries of the Connecticut Conference and the national setting of the United Church of Christ. Thank you.

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight—oh God—our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What does it mean to love? What does it really mean to love? What does loving entail from us? How do we love well? To love well speaks to the quality of our love. How do we, followers of Jesus the Christ, love well?

Are we as obstinate as Jesus? Who, at first glance, seems to be back in junior high school, asking his friend over and over and over again if he loves him. I remember the notes we would pass one another in 7th grade: “Do you love me? Check yes, no, or maybe in the appropriate penciled in box.” Oh, how we would squeal when the boy behind us would check the yes box! We'd have to ask several times to be sure that he truly meant yes. So is this illustrative of Jesus' behavior? Is he simply acting out of insecurity or immaturity, wanting to be sure of Peter's love, needing to hear it repeated several times that he does indeed love him?

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” What is Jesus really asking Peter here? Peter, caught a bit off guard, says, “Of course, Lord, you know that I love you.” Ah, the old “I may not say it but you know that I love you” trick! Must I say it out loud?” But Jesus chooses to hear him, trusts his response, and says, “Ok then, feed my lambs.”

Feed my lambs. In other words, if you love me, you will feed my lambs—you will care for my flock.

Polycarpe Joseph is Director of FOPJ (Ecumenical Foundation for Peace and Justice) in Haiti. Through Global Ministries and Church World Service, One Great Hour of Sharing supports FOPJ's program

"House of Hope," a community-based educational program for children performing domestic work (*'restavek'* work) in Carrefour-Filles, Port-Au-Prince.

Though he is still coming to terms with the earthquake himself, Polycarpe and his 17-person staff team are still finding the ability to serve others in need day after day. All but two members of the staff lost their homes, and are making do living on the streets and in parks. Every day in the middle of the street and surrounded by destroyed buildings, they prepare and serve a hot meal for some 600 people. "We need rice, beans, sardines, cooking oil, sugar and water. Thanks to another CWS partner, SKDE, we just found a safe place where to store food items. Before, we had to keep small quantities in different places for security reasons."

"Some food items can be purchased in Port-au-Prince but prices skyrocketed. A sack of rice cost \$200 before the Earthquake, \$400 two days ago. We need 3 (50 kilogram) sacks of rice to feed 600 people every day."

FOPJ is a community-based project that provides education and recreational activities for 125 children (aged 6-13) working as domestic servants for families in this neighborhood of Port-Au-Prince. FOPJ was part of a 15-member network of Haitian agencies with similar programs serving more than 2000 children.

When the earthquake struck, dozens House of Hope children were at the program. Today the building is destroyed but all 125 children served by the program are alive. "Other colleague projects of our network have lost between 20 and 60 kids," Polycarpe reports. "The roofs of classrooms full of kids fell down."

Polycarpe went on to say, "Food is essential, but we must also work on emotional recovery very soon, now. There will be a lot of people with mental illnesses as a result of the earthquake."

That is why this week a group of Haitian volunteer social workers started supporting FOPJ staff in working with children.

"Children should play, sing, dance." Because lack of facilities, activities are taking place in open spaces.

Polycarpe mentioned the important role of faith and churches now and in the future of Haiti, "The churches have to do important theological and pastoral work. God is life and hope. God loves life; God doesn't destroy it. Churches need to work to promote people's active engagement in reconstruction efforts and healing processes."

Through Church World Service and Global Ministries, One Great Hour of Sharing has helped FOPJ with emergency funds to purchase food items locally, donated food items transported from Santo Domingo, and support for emotional and psychological recovery of the staff. CWS health and school kits and larger quantities of food are being transported to FOPJ, now that a safe place for storage has been established.

"Feed my lambs," Jesus said. The hungry and heartbroken of Haiti, feeding one another. Making sure that everyone in the community has something to eat. Love made manifest.

A second time Jesus said to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter responds again by saying, perhaps a bit more perturbed, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." This time Jesus says, "Then tend my sheep." Tend my sheep. Hmm ... sheep are older than lambs. We're not only feeding now but tending—caring about the whole animal, not little lambs any longer, but sheep.

About 8 years ago, I visited with a group of women in Grahavo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, who had been refugees during the war there and had returned to their village and were trying to rebuild their lives. The

place was a mess—houses and barns mostly destroyed; school, hospital, community buildings all were bombed out. It looked pretty hopeless to me. The women of this Muslim community were the beneficiaries of a micro-credit project funded by One Great Hour of Sharing. With only small requirements for collateral, the women were able to secure small loans to buy a few goats or a dairy cow. They soon realized that if they pooled what milk was left from their respective animals, after meeting their children's needs, they could form a cheese-making cooperative, provide the community with a much needed source of protein and more quickly earn the income needed to repay their loans. All was working well, when another refugee woman returned to the village—a widow, with three young children and nothing to offer for collateral to get a micro-credit loan. The women learned of her plight, recognized how much they had received and, in return, each gave a portion of her cheese-making earnings to enable the new returnee to have enough collateral, to get a loan, buy a goat, provide for her family and join the cooperative.

This is where the story sat with me until two summers ago when I again visited the women of Grahavo. What a joy to see rebuilt homes, a functioning school and medical clinic. And the women—what a marvel—they had grown their collective dairy herd to such an extent that they were able to sign a contract with a local dairy to sell all the excess milk. Our final gift to them was to assist in purchasing a common milk storage tank, individual collection containers and a second hand truck which travels daily to each home to collect the milk. The women of Grahavo expressed their deepest thanks—to you, a group of strangers, a community of Christians—who cared enough about them to share our love and gifts.

“Tend my sheep,” Jesus said. Take care of one another; accompany your sisters and brothers on the journey to healing. [This is what it means to love.]

But Jesus asks Peter yet a third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” This time Peter gets totally exasperated. “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!” To which Jesus says, “Ok then, feed my sheep. For very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow up, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and lead you to where you do not want to go.” After this he then finished his inquisition of Peter by saying, “Follow me.”

Follow me. Yet we find it challenging to just follow the news! I mean, how is it possible—how has the world allowed, does the world know—that 1 million girls and women have been raped in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? Women are used as weapons of war, their eyes gouged out, their limbs hacked off, their innocence violently taken from them as they are raped and tortured. I have seen this in Bosnia. I know the stories from Sierra Leone and Liberia. I remember Rwanda. And once more I found myself in November 2009 still listening to stories of horrific violence against women and girls. When will it end? What can we do?

Listening to Amman Nebo of the Dept. of Women and Families at the Church of Christ in Congo tell the stories of the women the Church has assisted since the inception of this awful war in the Eastern region of the Congo, I could not hold back the tears. What is the fighting for? Over what? Why is this happening?

As usual, we are fighting for natural resources. The DRC is full of natural resources: gold, diamonds, copper, oil, lumber, coltan. This is a rich country! And yet the people of the DRC do not benefit from their own resources. A woman living in the rural area of the DRC can go to the river to get gold but doesn't know the value of that gold. That woman can't even buy golden earrings from her own country; she couldn't afford them. And yet they are sold for how much in Europe? North America?

The laptop on which this sermon was written, the cell phone that we can't seem to be without, any small appliance or PlayStation—all of these products function because of coltan. Coltan is found, almost exclusively, in the DRC. We are already addicted to it. What is the role of the international community, then? What is the role of the US government? And what does that mean for us as individuals and consumers? How is it possible that I was in a country absolutely RICH in resources but most of what I saw was pov-

erty? Why am I again asking the question, “WHY ARE SO MANY WITHOUT when THERE IS ENOUGH to go around on this planet? Why, O Lord, why?”

It’s hard for me to shake the story of one 16-year old girl who was raped in the Eastern Congo. She was impregnated and came to full term. Upon giving birth, she saw the baby and was so overwhelmed, so traumatized, that she died. A 16-year old girl—raped. A baby, the result of that rape, now motherless. The connection between that mother and her baby and my cell phone is almost too much for me to wrap my head around.

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus said. “To love me is to follow me.” To follow me is to care for others and this can sometimes mean standing up for those the world has forgotten. This can sometimes mean doing the unpopular and the misunderstood. It can even mean risking our very lives.

You see, what Jesus is actually asking Simon Peter is, “Do you *agape* me?” *Agape*, in Greek, means unconditional, sacrificial, redemptive love. “Do you *agape* me, Peter?” And he responds, “Yes, Lord, I *philia* you.” But this kind of love, in Greek, is the brotherly/sisterly love—not *agape* unconditional love. Jesus asks again, “But do you LOVE me?” And after all that time being a disciple of Jesus, after all that work and commitment, Jesus even then asks him only to follow him. “Follow me,” he says to Peter. “If you love me, follow me. This is what it means to love me well.”

Henri Nouwen, a Canadian theologian, said we’ve been asking all the wrong questions. The only question is “Do you love me?” This is the only question and Jesus asks it of us. And if the answer to Jesus’ question is yes, then you must prepare yourself. If the answer to Jesus’ question is yes, you would be wise to be ready to be led to a place you would rather not go. The Roman soldiers might very well wrap a belt around you and lead you to the cross.

Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?

It is in this text, in the 21st chapter of John—so late in the game!—that Jesus asks for the very first time, “Follow me.” The call to discipleship is only then. It takes a lifetime, a journey, to learn how to follow Christ. And how to truly love him, even if it means death. And it does. Talk about passion. Talk about courageous compassion!

The good news is that Jesus is doing the same for us. As Jesus’ disciples, this is how He loves us. He tends to us, as sweet little lambs, feeds us, cares for us our whole life long, even us wise, old, slowed-down sheep.

Do you love him? Do you love him? Do you love him?

Feed his sheep.

(With special thanks to the Ecumenical One Great Hour of Sharing Committee for theme and The Rev. Amy Gopp for exegesis, sermon outline and Congo illustration.)