

“Love Actually”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 21:14-25
April 22, 2018
Fourth Sunday of Easter

*Me and you and you and me.
No matter how they toss the dice, it had to be.
The only one for me is you, and you for me.
So happy together - The Turtles, 1967*

*Every night I hope and pray
A dream lover will come my way.
A girl to hold in my arms
And know the magic of her charms.
'Cause I want...a girl...to call...my own.
I want a dream lover
So I don't have to dream alone. -Bobby Darin, 1962*

*Well my heart went boom
When I crossed that room
And I held her hand in mine.
Oh we danced through the night
And we held each other tight.
And before too long,
I fell in love with her.
Now I'll never dance with another
Oh, when I saw her standing there. -The Beatles, 1963*

*Earth angel, earth angel,
Will you be mine?
My darling dear,
Love you all the time
I'm just a fool,
A fool in love with you. -Buddy Holly, 1954*

*When I give my heart,
It will be completely.
Or I'll never give my heart.*

*And the moment I can feel that you feel that way too,
Is when I fall in love with you. -Nat King Cole, 1956*

*I'd like to know that your love
Is a love I can be sure of.
So tell me now and I won't ask again,
Will you still love me tomorrow? -The Shirelles, 1960*

Thanks for indulging me on that little trip down memory lane. Of course, I wasn't even a glimmer in anyone's eye when those songs were hits. But when I was a little kid, anytime we went anywhere in the car, the radio was tuned to New York's WCBS FM, "Good times, great oldies!" I would eventually discover that loving your parents' music isn't particularly cool. Yet these songs from the '50s and '60s were in my heart and, looking back, I realize they stood as my romantic ideal of what love was supposed to be into my early twenties.

I feel like I should publicly apologize to a few people for that, especially my wife. Love songs aren't really about love, it turns out. They weren't in the '50s, and they aren't now. They're mostly about falling into love and feeling lonely, and about hormones. And that's fine, we shouldn't expect more from pop music. These songs are doing their job.

If you have ever been married or been in a relationship for more than a few months...

If you have ever had a sibling...

If you have ever been a parent...

If you have ever *had* a parent...

If you have ever had a deep friendship... then you know that love is so much more complicated and difficult and confusing and wonderful and excruciating and life-giving and demanding and weird and hilarious and exhausting than the Shirelles or Bobby Darin ever dared tell all the teenagers that bought their records.

I did something this week I've never done before: I framed a page of postage stamps. I mentioned on Easter Sunday that the most famous Presbyterian minister in American history, the Rev. Mister Fred Rogers, is being remembered in both a biopic and a documentary coming up. In celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the debut of his television show, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp in his honor and I bought three sheets (two for mailing very special letters).

Mister Rogers, to many, was considered way more corny than those old love songs. But those who grew up with him, and their parents who were paying attention, know that Rogers was really talking to little kids in the precise opposite of a simplistic and sentimental way. He was lovingly honest about suffering and grief and complicated feelings and disappointment and anger and self-awareness. There's a reason the music on his show was filled with complex jazz arrangements instead of the trite sing-songy tunes on other shows that tend to drive parents up the wall. Mister Rogers talked to children about a messy world filled with violence and prejudice and injustice — all in the tone of love for

neighbor and care for self and awe at the wonders of the world. In the trailer for the upcoming documentary there is footage of Fred Rogers saying, “Love is at the root of everything. All learning. All relationships. Love...or the lack of it.”

Let’s see, I’ve covered music from sixty years ago, deceased ministers who worked with puppets on PBS, and stamp collecting. What else can we talk about to really relate to the young people? Ah, yes: Jesus.

I don’t think Peter thinks love is simple. But I also don’t think he wants this particular lesson in just how complicated love actually is. Peter knows this is going to be tough, because Jesus uses his given name. The first thing Jesus said to Peter in this gospel was: “‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas.’ (which is translated Peter).” *Peter* was Jesus’s name for him as a follower. So when Jesus says, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” it’s like when you heard your full name shouted and you knew you were in for it.

There is separation in Jesus’s three questions. Simon son of John, who was called Peter when he followed, smells the charcoal fire and our noses are so connected to memory. And there’s that other charcoal fire — the one in the courtyard of the high priest’s house, where he warmed himself after the woman asked him, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” and he replied, “I am not,” and then twice more he would deny it before daybreak.

Here, on the beach, the third time seeing the risen Lord, full of fish and bread, Peter answers quickly, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” And he says it again. And the third time, with pain in his voice, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

The love of God is immense and overpowering. It is so freely given, so quickly expressed. It will make your draw drop. But that doesn’t mean it’s simple. God’s Love for Humanity Playlist doesn’t have a lot of bubblegum pop on it. It’s more like a mix of symphonies and death metal and hip hop and country twang and early ‘90s grunge and scary spoken word recordings and German opera. The scriptures tell a cyclical story of God loving and people betraying and God fixin’ to preserve God’s mental health and throw in the towel on the relationship and then God’s heart breaking all over again for us. Here, asking Peter for a confession of love, sits God’s most vulnerable offering of love. And he asks, thrice, if Peter loves him back.

And Peter finds out that love is even more complicated than all that. Each of his declarations of love is met with a charge: “Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep.” Love isn’t simply a feeling, a longing, affection and warmth. Love requires action. Otherwise it’s just a song. Love is a verb. It’s a responsibility. Hanging out in locked houses and fishing boats forever won’t cut it. Love demands work. And the work of loving God, it seems, is about feeding and tending.

“Love is at the root of everything. All learning. All relationships. Love...or the lack of it.”

Declaring our love for God and for one another is crucial. But we cannot claim offense if upon hearing our “Yes!” God replies, “Yes, and...?”

Today is Earth Day. The Rev. Monica Villarreal, pastor of Salem Lutheran Church in Flint, Michigan says she has been unable to use the water that comes out of the church’s tap to baptize babies¹. Cape Town, South Africa remains on the edge of a water crisis. Experts worry that within ten years, more and more of the world will be lacking safe and clean drinking water.

Tend my sheep.

Meanwhile, a sizable chunk of our nation’s leaders chooses to simply not believe the science of climate change and any thoughts of meaningful legislative work to lessen the brutality with which we abuse God’s creation is a pipe dream. The lambs and sheep who will roam this land in fifty and a hundred years need to be fed too.

There is some good news. The Rev. Kate McGregor Mosley, a PC(USA) pastor in Atlanta, serves as executive director of Georgia Interfaith Power & Light, an organization which has spent the last fifteen years equipping faith communities across Georgia to care for creation through worship, education and the stewardship of natural resources., helping them reduce energy consumption and costs while looking at new creation care initiatives.² Our congregation is part of the Synod of Living Waters which has a program called Living Waters for the World. That organization has, over the past twenty-five years, set up over eight hundred clean water systems in twenty-five countries.

Feed my lambs.

Of course, we could pick any of the world’s myriad complex problems and find examples of *love...or the lack of it*. The point is that the love we have for Christ must move us, literally, to action. If we are not actively feeding or tending, we can expect to hear the question again: “Do you love me?”

Feeding and tending — like any acts of love — leave us vulnerable. We might get hurt. We might lose our shirts. We might lose our lives. We might look like fools, trying to follow what Jesus asks of us.

In 1956 Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers sang:

*Why does my heart skip this crazy beat
Because it knows
It will reach defeat
Tell me why, tell me why
Why do fools fall in love? Amen.*

¹ As reported on Facebook by PC(USA) Co-Moderator, Rev. Denise Anderson, from Ecumenical Advocacy Days, 4/21/18

²<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/presbyterian-minister-recognized-clean-energy-initiatives/>