

**“Do You Love Me?”**

June 29, 2025

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Peter and Paul, Apostles

**Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.** Last Sunday, I pointed out that we have now moved into the season of Pentecost, and our paraments have turned to green. But I forgot to include what we call the “lesser festival” of Peter and Paul, which falls on a Sunday this year. According to the liturgical calendar that we follow, if a particular saint day falls on a Sunday, the readings for the lesser festival should be used. So here we are. And that is why the color of the day is red.

The last time this festival fell on a Sunday was June 29, 2014, just a few weeks after I began serving here at Zion. So I thought I would be smart and look back in my files and find the sermon I preached that day, and use it as a guide. Well, guess what? That didn’t work. The sermon I preached that day was written in German! Maybe you remember that before I was called to Zion, I agreed to preach twice at Zion Church in the City of Baltimore, a Lutheran church that requires that their called pastor come from Germany (it is even written into their constitution). He was on sabbatical that year, so I agreed to preach on June 29. The early service was in German and the later service was in English (and they used the readings for Pentecost 3). So...that means that I have never preached on these particular texts! How exciting to encounter a new set of readings after 11 years of ministry.

The festival of Peter and Paul lifts up two pillars of Christianity and symbolizes their discipleship. Peter represents leadership in the church and Paul represents evangelism to the world. You may have noticed over time that the Catholic Church tends to emphasize the work of Peter, whereas the Protestant Church emphasizes the work of Paul. They are each correct in doing so. The work of each of these saints is integral to the mission of the Church. In art and religious iconography, Peter is depicted holding a set of keys, whereas Paul is depicted as a balding man, holding a sword that represents the Word of God.

Today’s gospel lesson is the same lesson we heard on the third Sunday after Easter, which was only eight weeks ago. I remember it well because I shared with you part of my call story—how my pastor convinced me one Sunday morning to serve as assisting minister at church, and how I fell in love with leading worship that day. So this text is significant for me, but the real gift of this text is not about me. The beauty of this lesson is the blessing that Jesus bestows on Peter, even after he had betrayed Jesus three times. Peter is given the “keys to the kingdom,” meaning he is forgiven for his sins and given the power to forgive others and to lead the church while Jesus ascends to heaven. What a bold gesture on Jesus’ part. Jesus knows how much the power of forgiveness means to Peter.

I love how Jesus prefaces each of his questions to Peter by first asking, “Do you love me?” *Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?* What Jesus is asking is whether Peter will have the deep love and compassion that it takes to offer forgiveness to those who will harm, deceive, and betray him and the disciples. Will he be able to see past a person’s sins, and offer them the forgiveness that our Lord offers us? It’s not by accident that Jesus asks first if Peter’s love is real; he knows that the disciples will be betrayed into Rome’s hands and that they will be martyred, or murdered, for following this itinerant preacher. Peter had better understand the divine and unconditional love that will be expected of him. Because if Peter is not able to love humanity as Jesus does, then the work of all the disciples will all be in vain.

The blurb in today's bulletin makes a statement that I have to challenge. It says, "Being a Christian in North America today will not likely lead to persecution or death." Ok, it is mostly true. But last Sunday, after church, I scanned the news headlines on my phone and two items of interest caught my attention. One headline read, "Suspect shot and killed by a security guard after a shooting at a church in Michigan." (CNN app, June 22, 2025). The second headline read, "Suicide bombing at Damascus church kills 20, Syrian authorities say." (BBC app, June 22, 2025). It seems no place is safe from violence.

Then our bulletin asks a challenging question that I will echo: What does it mean to embody the love of Jesus in a world full of violence? The violence you encounter might not be at church, but it might be in your neighborhood. In our own nation, statistics show that one in 30 people will have a connection to the criminal justice system. How many of you know of a relationship where someone has a restraining order against another person? How many of you have had your homes broken into and your privacy violated? How many of you have experienced physical violence against you or your loved ones? How many of you have been bullied, whether recently or when you were growing up? How many of you have been abused by friends or family or dare I ask it, someone from your church or another church? Friends, the list goes on and on. And into this world of pain and suffering and mistrust and abuse, Jesus calls us to love one another and to love him and to love those whom society deems "unlovable." But Jesus' is not requesting that we do these things. He is commanding.

Discipleship is not for the faint of heart. Peter and Paul discovered that. Peter is said to have been crucified upside down and Paul is said to have been beheaded by soldiers in Rome. Paul wrote that he was rescued from the lion's mouth and gave glory to God for saving him. Peter trusted that the angel of the Lord had rescued him and he continued his mission until its untimely end. And all the while, these saints learned in their ministry that ministry was not about them. Ministry is about putting yourself into God's or Jesus' shoes and loving unconditionally, come what may. And some of that trust may include suffering and pain, rejection and loneliness, and the need for us to forgive the unforgiveable.

The painter Rembrandt van Rijn painted the portrait of Jesus on the cover of our bulletin, and I think it is a fine representation. This is a picture of a man with compassion, one who suffers as others suffer. It's almost as if he is asking the disciples or even us, "Do you love me enough to die for me?" I believe it is a fair question to ask. After all, Jesus is willing to die for each one of us. We, as his disciples, with his help, are asked to be willing to do the same. So I will ask you: do you love Jesus? **Amen.**