

**Glenview Community Church  
Glenview, Illinois**

**Candidate Sermon  
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 28, 2022**

**John 21:15-19**

**“Called and Needed”**

**A Sermon preached by James M. Matarazzo, Jr.**

*[Not preached exactly as written]*

Scripture Text: When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ (John 21:15-19)

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I. Being Like Peter

Good morning. It is wonderful to be among you this morning on this day of possibilities.

Based on the reading of the Gospel of John that we heard, the first question that I have for you this morning is this: why was Peter *called and needed* by Jesus to be the leader of the apostles? Why did Jesus want him, a simple fisherman who was almost certainly illiterate? Why Peter? Why not, for example, Paul, or at least someone like him? The Apostle Paul was a Roman citizen, spoke several languages, and was highly educated. Paul had high community standing as a respected member of the Pharisees. Surely, he would be a better leader. But Paul was not called for this task; Peter was. Peter was *called and needed* by Jesus to be the leader of the disciples. It is perhaps the glory of our faith that its first commissioned leader was a peasant fisherman, a member of a minority religion and nation, located in a dusty outpost of the Roman Empire.

But let's face it: Peter does not seem cut out for this task. He is extremely loyal to Jesus. And he is credited as the first disciple to declare that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the

living God. So far so good. But Peter will disappoint, and Jesus knows this. He even predicts it. In Luke's gospel, Jesus says to Peter: "*Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of 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.*" But Peter replied, "*Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.*" Then Jesus answered, "*I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.*" (Luke 22: 31-34) And later, Peter, fearing for his life, denies his now crucified Messiah and says: "I do not know the man" three times. Then the rooster crows and Peter remembers the words of Jesus. Not an inspiring picture.

Later, Jesus appears to the disciples after his Resurrection while they are fishing. Peter, perhaps fearful or remorseful, jumps off the boat into the lake as if to hide. Yet, after all this, we have this stunning and beautiful dialogue in John's gospel between Jesus and Peter. This is Peter's restoration as an apostle and his recommissioning as the leader. To reverse Peter's triple denial, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. He is then recommissioned to feed the flock of Christ, to be a leader of the apostles. But there will be a cost. There will come a time when he, like Christ, will be taken by others to a place he does not wish to go. There he will suffer martyrdom. Tradition states that this place was the Vatican Hill in Rome and that Peter, at his own request, was crucified upside down. The legend is that he did not feel worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Christ, so the soldiers complied. Today, the tomb of Peter is located under the high altar of St Peter's Basilica. Whether Peter is truly buried there or if the legend is true (that he was really crucified upside down) are matters lost to time. We don't know. Many historians doubt that Peter was ever deemed the first bishop of Rome, or to many Christians, the first pope.

But none of these things matter, I believe, to Jesus. I do not think Jesus cares if we call Peter the first pope or not, or where Peter is buried, or that we name churches in his honor. Jesus *does care* about Peter's answer to that simple question: *do you love me?* And he asks us the same question. If we say yes, then his command is the same to us as to Peter: feed my lambs, tend my sheep. Jesus called Peter and needed him. **Jesus calls us and needs us.**

We are called and we are needed by the living Christ to do the work of the gospel. And this is good news. If Peter, who denied Jesus three times, can be reinstated and made the leader of the apostles, then so can we. If we fail like Peter, and I dare say we will, then we know that Jesus also prays for us that our faith may not fail. And when we return to Christ, the command is the same: we are to strengthen our sisters and brothers, indeed all people of any identity around us, for they all bear the image of God.

## II. Why be a Christian today?

My next question to you is this: why does anyone today want to be a Christian? Why not accept that we are called and needed as non-religious humanists? After all, in our country, the most visible and vocal manifestations of Christianity seem regressive to many, especially to religious skeptics. The messaging can strike some as simplistic and parochial with a narrow worldview. Recent polls in the United States show that many of those identifying as evangelical Christians

no longer attend church or are troubled by its ethics or doctrine. They are members of what some political scientists call ‘blood and soil’ Christianity. At times, their messaging seems contrary to the love and mercy of the gospel. If this is Christianity, why would anyone in 2022 opt to identify with it?

Some of you know that I have taught theology in a university context. The question most often posed by students is this: Religion (and especially Christianity) has produced so much violence in our world, why would anyone want to have anything to do with it? Christians of any type tend to recoil at this statement and question, still in vogue on college campuses as it has been for decades. But the question cannot be avoided. So, if deem ourselves practicing Christians who are called and needed by our divine Founder, then I think we must try to answer it.

Many theologians address this question in three ways based on three main streams of Christian tradition.

- (1) For some people, the answer to the question ‘why be a Christian’ is strikingly simple: to gain heaven and avoid hell. Their attraction to Christianity is the belief that we are all by nature fallen, marked by original sin, and deserving of God’s judgment. Since God does not tolerate sin, the means to forgive us was to punish Jesus on the cross instead of us. By Christ’s death, our sins are taken away. All we need to obtain this unmerited and freely offered grace is to simply accept it. This simple message is powerful. It is a deeply held belief by millions worldwide. In our country, it holds firm sway in the Bible Belt of the Southern states and parts of the Midwest – including Southern Illinois.

[I should note that I think of Southern Illinois as *far, far away* since in my native Massachusetts a road trip of 45 minutes is deemed far away. A 5 ½ hour or 344-mile drive from here to Marion would be deemed “wicked far” in my native dialect. This distance is further than driving from Boston to Philadelphia. So, I reasoned here in Glenview I am far, far away from the Bible Belt. But then I learned... I’m not. One of the other smaller Bible Belts is in the west Chicagoland suburbs, especially DuPage County, and in particular, the City of Wheaton, a mere 30 miles away. Even in Massachusetts that’s not far away... I digress.]

- (2) There are others who want to be Christian for another simple yet powerful reason: it is their tradition. It is what has been handed down to them by family and community. Many in this group are attracted to the mystical practices and comforting rituals of the ancient churches. These are people for whom the gospel message is the life of prayer and worship. They find sacraments and hallowed rites strengthening and supportive. This form of Christianity is also powerful. It can incline even the most Protestant person to light a candle in a great cathedral, shrine, or holy place.
- (3) A third answer - and the one that I and many here find most compelling – is at the same time the weakest and least powerful one. The reason it is weaker is that it is nuanced and not based in a single question or a set of ancient traditions. They want to be Christian because they believe that Jesus shows us who God really is; that Christ is the way and the

truth and the life. For some in this group, Jesus is the Word made flesh, the earthly manifestation of the divine. He was and is the God-Human. For others, Jesus is the supreme example of enlightened humanity.

Now these three types of Christianity are not always incompatible with each other. All churches have some elements of all three. The first answer is most often associated with evangelical, conservative Christianity. The second is most often associated with the traditional liturgical churches like the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. And the third is most often found among liberal Christians - especially, but not exclusively, liberal Protestants. And just in case there is any doubt: our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is about as liberal Protestant as a church can be. And this third answer is the weakest and the easiest to attack. To be in the UCC is to have chosen the weaker side of the Christian Church. It is less organized. It is less certain. It tolerates doubt. It is allergic to dogma. But it is radically open to all. Many of you here have chosen to be in this type of church, as imperfect as it is. I have also chosen it. Yet, the Founder of our faith chose to be weaker; to lay aside divinity and might, and to suffer death on a cross. I think we can argue that this third answer is deeply faithful to the gospel of Christ.

Even so, our ecclesiastical weakness has a cost. We liberal Protestants, especially those of us in the UCC, are deeply self-critical. Some have suggested that we are few in number because we have unrelentingly deconstructed our traditions and holy texts. We have boycotted so many things that at times it seems we have run out of issues to disown. We are the most Protestant of Protestants because... we like to protest! Seemingly everything and everyone! We have often gleefully rejected our spiritual ancestors. We have watched as august institutions that they founded, like Harvard and Yale, to name just two, eliminate any affiliation with us or memory of us – and we have, rather oddly, rejoiced in these losses as signs of progress. No doubt, we have gone too far at times.

But the UCC is also a very accepting tradition: it recognizes all others as genuinely Christian, even when it itself is scorned and ridiculed. But I believe our strange imperfect witness is deeply needed today. It is needed by a world fractured by conflict. It is needed in our own country that is sharply divided. Our commitment to respect, tolerance, and loving acceptance is vitally important.

Why be a Christian? Well, I am one because I love Jesus. And I think many here love him too. We love the One who liked sinners, sex workers, and tax collectors and all those on the margins. We love the One who questioned the rich but loved the poor. That's the Jesus I love. It is, I think, the Jesus Peter knew and loved. It is the Jesus who was crucified and who was raised. It is the Jesus who is, as the UCC confesses, the sole Head of the Church, Son of God, and Savior. It is this Jesus whom we are to follow. I deeply want you to follow him. I truly want you to help me follow him because I like Peter *will fail*. Pastors fail all the time. But I will get up again, return to Christ, who prays for me and each one of you, and once again I will offer whatever I can to encourage and assist you on your life's journey.

So, I close with Christ's question to Peter: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" I invite you to

say “yes”. And if we say yes, let us together feed Christ’s lambs and tend his sheep. Jesus calls us and Jesus needs us for this glorious task.

To God alone be honor and glory, power and dominion, world without end. Amen.