

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**  
**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • MAY 17, 2020**  
***“BRAVING THE WILDERNESS”***

**The Litany**  
**Based on Psalm 63**

*Here we are turning ourselves to worship, eyes open,  
ready to drink in your strength and glory.*

**In your generous love we are really living at last!**

*If we become sleepless at midnight,  
we can spend the hours in grateful reflection.*

**In your generous love we are really living at last!**

*Because you’ve always stood up for us, we hold on to you for dear life,  
and you hold us steady as a post.*

**Together in generous love we live in you!**

**Song of Focus**  
***Do You Love Me?***  
**Words and Music by Ed Varnum**

Christ Jesus asks us today, “Disciples, do you love me?”  
And with our answer, our Lord tells us, “Feed my lambs.”  
Again, our Lord Jesus asks, “Disciples, do you love me?”  
And with our answer, our Lord tells us, “Tend my sheep”

“I was hungry, you gave me food and thirsty, you gave me drink.  
“I was lonely, and you visited; a stranger, you welcomed me.  
“For as you did to these, you did it unto me.  
“Go into the world and bring Good News of God’s perfect love.”

Christ Jesus asks us today, “Disciples, do you love me?”  
And with our answer, our Lord tells us, “Feed my lambs.  
“Tend my sheep. Follow me.”

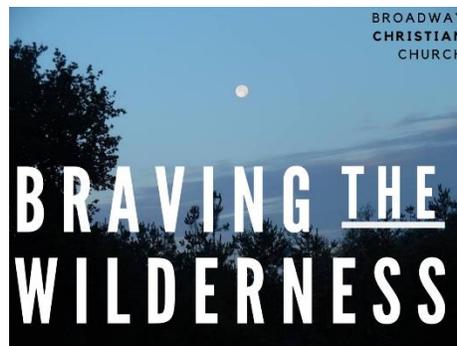
**The Scripture**  
**John 21:15-19**

*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.”

## **The Message** ***Braving the Wilderness: Following*** **Mark Briley**

Synopsis: Peter walked the peaks and valleys of Jesus’ arrest, Peter’s own betrayal of Jesus, and the uncanny reality that Jesus was raised just as he said he would be. Peter is picking up the pieces in the aftermath. Clearing his head by doing what he does best (fishing), he spots Jesus and leaves again his fishing nets to pursue the one he’s claimed as Lord. In a private moment between Jesus and Peter, Jesus gives him the “*Are you up for it?*” speech. How could he possibly be up for it? Jesus says, “*Feed them. Tend them. Feed them.*” Okay then. But how? Jesus says simply, “*Follow me.*” But isn’t Jesus departing? How can he be followed? Time to put all that time with Jesus to meaningful use. All that’s at stake? The entire future of the church.



The story of how my wife, Carrie, and I met is told in one of two ways: her way and the right way. Her way often involves a tale of me stalking her in the computer lab across from the World Religions class we were both taking at the time at Moberly Area Community College. Stalking is such a harsh and negative word... and creepy... and I pray that none of those words describe me.

Here’s where the confusion resides: I sat several seats behind her in class, but some six weeks into the semester we had never spoken. I knew her name was Carrie because Dr. George Mummert, our professor who happened to be a Disciples of Christ minister, would still holler out the old fashioned roll call. I was attentive enough to catch her name.

After class one day, I stepped into the computer lab across the hall to work on something and noticed she was in there. I said nothing. But I noticed. I went across the hall to the lab after our next class session and this time with the simple curiosity that such might be a pattern for this young lady. Is that stalking? Creepy? I think not.

She was there! And there was a computer open directly across from her, so I sat and fake-typed on the keyboard in front of me as I strategized. I decided I would ask about an upcoming assignment due in our class – after all, that was the only thing I knew we held in common at that point – Dr. Mummert and the religions of the world. When I gained enough courage, I popped my head up over my computer screen and uttered the first word ever spoken to my future wife. It was her name. “Carrie?” I asked. It was then then that my eyes connected with the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen. She said, “Yes?” surprised I knew her name (*again is that a stalker issue? Pshh*). I asked her about the class assignment even though, to be honest, I already had it finished. But that sparked a conversation that has been ongoing for the last 21 years. Funny fact for you: Carrie didn’t know *my* name until we actually had our first official date. She was clearly not stalking me.

When it comes to our own love stories, we seem to remember every nuance, every glance, every eye-connecting moment. Bob Goff says in his book, *Love Does*,<sup>1</sup> however that “*when it’s someone else’s love story, we will be polite and listen, but usually it’s entirely forgettable.*” He adds, “*It’s like looking at someone else’s vacation pictures.*”

Ah... remember vacations? Bob shared about listening to Taylor Swift’s song called “*Love Story*” on a flight one time all the way from the East Coast to the West Coast. He couldn’t tell you why exactly, but it was on his iPod and it was repeating over and over. “*If you want to know how many times I heard that song,*” he writes, “*divide three minutes and fifty-five seconds by North America.*” And even as many times as he listened to it, he could really only tell you that it was about a guy named Romeo and a girl who he guesses is Taylor. The girl’s dad wasn’t thrilled with Romeo, and he could respect that as a dad but basically he couldn’t remember anything else about the *Love Story* even though he heard it over and over again. He had nothing personally invested in the relationship. Without the personal investment, it’s like pulling an empty fishing net out of the water. Nothing sticks. No catch. You become frustrated, disinterested, or flat out quit.

When it comes to your faith, how often do you feel like you’re pulling up empty nets? You might drop the net in the water, but you’re not really invested. You haven’t owned

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Goff. “*Love Does.*” Thomas Nelson. 2012. The illustrations shared from Bob Goff in this message are found in Chapter 29, “*Memorizing Jesus*” of this book.

it as your faith story. It's just a thing or just a song on repeat that you've zoned out from hearing because, well, it's not your song.

The Gospel writer of John drops a little story about Peter and some of the disciples hanging out post-Jesus' resurrection. We "*jumped*" into it (*pun intended*) last week as we launched this *Braving the Wilderness* series. Brief recap to catch you up. Peter says, "*I'm hitting the boat – back to fishing.*" The others go with him. All night they cast the nets and all night they catch nothing but some beer cans and an old cowboy boot. The sunrise comes and they're still on the boat but ready to chalk it up as a dead night at sea. About that time, a know-it-all hollers beachside saying, "*Hey – drop net on the other side of the boat.*" Can't you hear the expletives from the tired fishermen or their taunting back, "*Drop your net on the other side...*" Who knows for sure why they satisfied the suggestion by actually throwing the nets off the other side, but they did and boom – the game has changed – more fish than they could hold? John speaks – he's always the guy portrayed as having the strongest faith – he always believes first. "*It's the Master, boys!*" And without any further thought, Pete swan dives into the sea.

That's where we left the story last Sunday. We pick up with Pete doing the back stroke toward the shore. When Peter gets there, Jesus is already serving up a fish breakfast with the other guys. Peter must have asked, "*How did you guys beat me here?*" "*We rode that big pontoon boat we were in back to shore.*" Peter probably gave John a noogie before things get serious with Jesus.

The guys are frying up some more of the catch as Jesus and Peter step aside when today's conversation plays out. Jesus asks Peter, "*Hey – Do you love me more than these?*" What are "*these*"? Maybe Jesus tilted his gaze over to the boat and its nets and equipment and the big catch of fish. "*Do you love me more than these things?*" Are you prepared to give them all up, to abandon the hope of a successful career; to let go of a steady job and digital cable to invest in my people and this work? Maybe Jesus nodded toward the other guys as a way of saying to Peter, "*Some good guys here... some real leadership potential... but I'm looking at you – do you love me more than these guys do?*"

Big, weighty stuff to put on Peter and we lose the tone of his response as if it were sent via email: "*Yes, I love you.*" Maybe he was a bit timid in response. Or maybe it was, "*Yeah, sure, of course Jesus...did you see me dive in the water – I love you, man!*" Whatever the case, Jesus asks again: "*Seriously, do you love me.*" Now a little more reality sinking in – "*Uh, yeah. You know I love you.*" And for good measure, a third ask, "*Pete, do you love me?*"

Jesus isn't an insecure friend here, surely (*are you sure you love me?*) I don't see him as a parent either, who doesn't believe he is getting the honest answer out of his kid with that ever deepening voice asking, "*Peter... Pet-er... P-e-t-e-r.*" And the text says

at this point, Pete's a little frustrated. "*Jesus – I know I cut that guys ear off, and you didn't like that and then the whole betrayal thing, which I apologized for, and now the skeptical questioning: YOU TELL ME – you know everything, "Do I love you?" And Jesus knows somehow... this is it. "Peter, feed my sheep." Peter, serve the people, carry the mission, invest in the Love Story. (singing) It's a love story, Peter just say, 'yes.'* And Jesus goes on to say, "*It's not going to be a cake walk. Probably persecution, death always close by, somebody sitting in your pew at church...*" But Peter is in. We know the rest of the story. He fulfilled his investment in the love story, spurred on the movement of life in Christ and died on a cross of his own in Rome – with his request to be crucified upside down as he said he was undeserving of dying as Jesus did.

Now, you get asked that Jesus question every week. Did you know? "*Do you love me more than these – more than stuff, more than politics, more than your job, more than lattes*" (and I'm crossing the line now). But that question is here moment to moment – not in a creepy stalking sense but in a sense of investment. What skin do you have in the game? How are you engaged in your faith?

We often talk about engagement being that time between a marriage proposal and getting married. But engagement can also be the time between hearing a truth, nodding our heads in agreement, and when we do something about it. It's moving from the Bible Study to the Bible Doing. I know folks who could count hundreds of studies they've shared in over time. The question is, "*How does it move from one more study to the "So what?" that moves and acts?"* The "so what?" is the point of accountability.

Bob Goff was going to a number of Bible Studies and shared how the teacher, who he thought was great by the way, was referencing all of these books and interpretations and languages saying, "The word *dead* in the Greek means \_\_\_\_\_." Sometimes he'd really get into it and talk about the difference between the Greek version of *dead* and the Hebrew version of *dead*, and then he'd ask some compelling question like, "*When was the last time you were dead?"* Goff's response was, "*Huh? Honestly, who really needs to hear a definition of dead? And what difference did it make? I wanted to talk about how I could do a better job following Jesus, how to practice kindness, and what might be possible to do with my faith before I'm the Greek or the Hebrew version of dead.*" What he came to realize was that as important as knowing Scripture and the stories and their contexts are, he wasn't really remembering anything he'd learn, because it wasn't taking movement in his life, it was just bouncing up against his life on Wednesdays. This may be truer than ever as we struggle with accountability during this pandemic.

I have struck up a COVID friendship with a guy, who lives in our neighborhood. Great guy. We moved in just before the world shut down, so we haven't had the normal "*get to know your neighbors*" gatherings. But this guy and I have shared some distanced

moments outside when walking the 'hood. He knows I'm a pastor and we got to talking about church... the how's and when's of return and what this isolating period has meant for faith and church. He admitted, "*My accountability's lacking.*" I nodded as he shared the list: "*Worship cancelled. Small group cancelled. Spiritual development stuff for our kids. Cancelled.*" He's struggling with the following part of faith right now. "*I can feel it,*" he said in a resigned sort of way. Maybe you're feeling this, too. The love story fades when accountability is not fostered.

Love stories involve studying... asking questions... getting acquainted with the other, of course. But if the relationship is going to work, it has to move from online dating to Ferris wheel riding or hiking or playing cards... *doing* something in relationship together.

Goff started getting together with the same group of guys each week and instead of calling it Bible Study, they called it "*Bible Doing.*" Eighteen years running now. They read Scripture and then focus on what they are going to do about what they've read. Simply agreeing isn't enough. When does Jesus ever say, "*Agree with me.*"? What does he say instead? He says, "*Follow me.*" He wanted our faith to matter to us and that had to move from even a well-intentioned study of him (*stalking by definition*) to an active participant. Jesus asks, "*Do you love me?*" "*Let's move.*"

Love brought Peter a task – feed my sheep, care for them, nurture them, sharpen their thinking and expand their activity. Get them involved. Make disciples. Now Fred Craddock would say that some people misread that word "*make*" as though Jesus is commanding his followers to coerce people into becoming disciples. That's not what it means; it means simply "*disciple everybody.*" It's a verb. Disciple people.<sup>2</sup> This is the greatest privilege and responsibility. Do you feel any of that privilege and responsibility or have we lost that?

Is the love story of God, God's alone?... or for *those* religious people?... or for somebody else other than me but certainly not *my* love story? What if the whole movement hinged on your investment? Put yourself on that sand with Jesus and him saying, "*Hey – putting you in the game here – counting on you.*" We sort of scoff at the idea, but its maybe worth a second thought. Think about the relationships you are most invested in – your marriage perhaps; your closest friend, whomever you want to think about. A great deal of that relationship hinges on your investment. Stakes are pretty high that way.

Love brought Peter a cross – the ultimate investment in any relationship is sacrifice. Jesus said it would get him. And there are Christians around the world today, who face similar persecution for their faith which always makes it a little embarrassing when we argue about petty things like a misprint on a hymn slide or whether or not we'll have

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock. "The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock." Westminster John Knox Press. 2011. Pg. 43

donuts on Sunday mornings when we gather in person again. And... to head off any disappointment, it's likely a BYOD situation for a while.

Diana Butler Bass is a professor and author. She was teaching a course in Church History, telling the stories of the persecuted church through the years and those people who led on through the hard times, many martyred for their faith. Nearing the end of the semester, a student asked her: "*Is there anyone in church history who ever died in their bed?*"

Most of us have been afforded a safe land to worship God and follow Jesus as we choose which is a wonderful blessing. It may also mean, however, that we have to be more intentional about our investment in the love story of God. What does it cost you today? Should it cost something? What would it take for you to move your faith from stagnant to active? How do you move through the engagement phase of collecting information to living the faith, fully?

Bob Goff lands the quote of the day. He says, "*I used to think I could learn about Jesus by studying him, but now I know Jesus doesn't want stalkers.*" "Stalkers are ordinary people, who study from afar, the people they're too afraid to really know. Jesus said that unless you know him like a child, you'll never really know him at all. Kids don't care so much about facts, and they certainly don't study each other. They're just *with* each other; they do stuff together. That's what Jesus must have had in mind."

If you're wondering about Taylor Swift's "*Love Story*," it all turns out great in the end. Romeo stuck around even though the dad told him to split. She got a white dress and, according to her, all she had to say was, "Yes." But Romeo surely didn't get to know her because he memorized her. He may have come to know everything about her, but he truly *knew* her because they did things together. Peter assented to Jesus that he loved him. But it is only because he actually "*Followed him*" that we're sitting on our couches and watching this service today. The Apostle Paul says "*Knowledge isn't enough.*" He lists it in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 as one of the many things that will "*pass away.*" But Love remains. Love moves. Love follows.

Carrie and I still laugh about how we got together and telling it from different perspectives as we do is mostly for fun... *mostly*... but I can't imagine what my life would be like if the only time I heard her name called in my life was when Dr. Mummert called the role in class. Our love story began because I finally had the courage to say her name myself. I said it. I was scared, but I said it. I meant it. And our love has moved ever since. It's the same for our faith.

May it be so. Amen.