

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.31.2021



**FPC Charlotte Bicentennial**

**The Reverend Katie Crowe**

John 21

Hello, everyone! It is grace upon grace to be here with you today and an honor that I can't think too much about without crying to be invited to be with you this morning as you christen a season of celebration of all that God has done over the past 200 years in, for and through this congregation. Thank you for the opportunity to speak a word upon this happy occasion. 200 years of God's faithfulness and the faithful response of God's people. 200 years! What could we possibly do but worship? What could we possibly do? All this time, First Presbyterian has inhabited the great ends of the church that you have been studying- six of them in all that you have been exploring in recent successive weeks. They are: The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind The shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God The maintenance of divine worship The preservation of the truth Today we will reflect on the promotion of social righteousness And there is, finally, The exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world. As we transition from arriving to the Word



to being present to the Word, let us ready the ground of our hearts with a prayer. Let us pray. Holy, ever-present, endlessly faithful God, we praise you that though we gather as your people in varied corners of your kingdom, we are united by your Holy Spirit's power and drawn up in your embrace as your children. So gather us in and seat us at the feet of your gospel. Make our hearts to be as fertile soil ready to receive the seed of your word. Nourish that seed by your grace that it would take root and blossom in the fruitfulness of our lives to the blessing of your people and the glory of your name. Amen.

Our reading for today comes from the close of the gospel of John, following Jesus' resurrection in the days before he ascended into heaven. It is just after daybreak and Jesus has appeared on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias and called to the disciples who were on their boat, having fished all night with no luck until he told them to put in their nets. Then they barely had muscle enough to haul in the catch. Simon Peter was so beside himself over seeing Jesus that he put his clothes on, for he had been naked, and jumped into the water to swim to meet him. His witness reminds us that sometimes you've just gotta be a fool for Jesus. When the disciples arrived on the shore they pulled out a few of the 153 fish they'd caught and threw them on a fire at Jesus' invitation to join him for a little breakfast. Listen now to God's Word: "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 Peter would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.' " Here ends our reading. This is the Word of God for the people of God: Thanks be to God. 53 years after the hamlet of Charlotte, bearing the namesake of the queen, was chartered, the Presbyterians of Charlotte were officially recognized as a church, and thus your story as a congregation began. James Monroe started his second term as our 5th president that year and Peru declared independence from Spain. Missouri was admitted as the 24th state, and the Greek War of Independence was fought against the Ottoman Empire. Oh, and the rubber fire hose was patented, to name just a few notable events. One could argue that the setting aside of this church property by this historically feisty city's founders was a communal commitment to the promotion of social righteousness, the particular Great End of the Church under consideration today, the promotion of what is morally right or justifiable, by definition. Beneath the floor boards of this sanctuary, under the sub-flooring in the space below, there in



the dirt that has been compacted for two centuries is a root system anchoring this congregation in the intent of a city to anchor its heart on and for something greater than itself. And from there you've grown. I'll never forget calling Christopher Edmonston- then a name on a reference sheet, now a trusted colleague and dear friend- to ask him about this church when I interviewed to be your associate pastor for mission. He said to me, Katie, I don't know you. But I can say that unless you can look at yourself in the mirror and say that you are definitively not called to this church, you have to go. It was one of the biggest blessings of my life and it will be for you too." And he was right. And part of what made him right was the opportunity to be part of your commitment to the promotion of social righteousness as you looked out across this city and named what of its growing, glittering elements was not morally right or justifiable. Like its stark contrast of poverty and wealth. Tree-lined streets and violence-ridden neighborhoods. Or the power of our country juxtaposed with the grinding disenfranchisement of Haiti. Or the religious freedom we enjoy here in the states vs. the persecution experienced by our friends in Russia. Or our intact lives lived at a comfortable distance from hurricane- devastated worlds. On and on the list goes. Your response took and takes seriously Jesus' words to Simon Peter that morning on the beach after breakfast: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' 'Feed my lambs.' 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' 'Tend my sheep.' 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' 'Lord, you know everything; you



know that I love you.’ ‘Feed my sheep.’ Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. These are fitting words to forge an identity around, words to stake a witness on sufficient to adorn halls with shelving for a Leaves and Fishes pantry or the deep hues of a fresco of the Good Samaritan. These are words of action and we love action words as people who want to be at least as useful to Jesus as we are faithful. Looking back over this congregation’s history there are not enough hours in the day to enumerate the ways you have sought to be about the promotion of social righteousness by taking Christ’s charge to heart; to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, feed his sheep. But this year of celebrating your past will be irrelevant to your future and the future of this city and your wider witness in the world if it is not also used to take stock of your willingness to be fools for Jesus in your own eyes and in the eyes of everyone else today. Those two hundred years behind you were preparing you for this moment where you stand at arguably one of the most perilous and important points in our country’s history since the Civil War. Where we are in the belly of a ravishing pandemic beast. And rent asunder as a citizenry divided. And being poisoned by the toxic legacy of slavery that is twice as old as you. And I submit that two hundred years from now the merit of this congregation’s ministry in this moment will not be measured by the next creative way you found to feed Christ’s lambs and tend his sheep as I know you will and you must, but by the way you answered in a relentlessly local, painfully personal, astonishingly inconvenient and at times deeply counterintuitive way Jesus’ question, “Do you love me, do you love me, do you love me?” One of the things I



loved most about serving here was watching the Holy Spirit pry our collective grip- mine included- loose from our certainty over what, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!” Was supposed to look like. By golly, if you ask First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte to feed Christ’s lambs, we’re going to do it with the best of them- highly prepared, with a clear statement of purpose and plan for answering Christ’s question, “Do you love me?” in the affirmative with action. I remember planning for our first trip to Haiti to see Pastor Actionnel and Yolande in response to their perennial invitation to visit. On the phone with Actionnel in preparation for that trip you could feel our mutual frustration mounting as I kept pressing him for a project that our group could help with- as I said, we were committed to being at least as useful as we were faithful. He initially didn’t seem to understand the question, so I assumed things were just getting lost in translation. We went back and forth with me finally giving him an example from our trips to the Yucatan where we’d be used as a means for our mission partners there to deepen relationships with local villages whose children attended their school. There we’d pour concrete roofs for homes and floors and lead a little Bible school. Actionnel lit up. The dirt floor of their guest dormitory needed paving. Great! I said. That would be perfect. Well, he offered, we could just hire some local guys to do it. Ah, but we want to be of service to them, I assured him, hire them and they can supervise and tell us what to do. Great. So, we get there and rise early the first day, eager to get to work. Seven of us or so crowd into a relatively small room to assess the scope of the project and now I feel my anxiety mounting as here’s all



these people who have traveled all this way, enduring undoubtedly the most uncomfortable journey of their lives. And this project was tiny. We had five days to deal with maybe a 15 x 20 foot room that would take no more than half a day to finish. Oh no. What were we going to do with the rest of our time? Well we get to work- two Haitians and seven or so blans- Creole for “whities” — and it isn’t long before we’re clearly more underfoot than useful as these Haitian guys get to their craft. We kept asking for tasks. They kept throwing us a bone to keep us busy. Until finally I look over and see Thold Gill standing there wrapping a string that had been used as a plumb line around a nail. “What are you doing?” I asked. He replied, “I’m wrapping this string around this nail.” “Did the Haitians give you this as a job to do?” I asked” “Yes!” He replied, “And I’m doing my job!” And we both burst into laughter. Because it took the absurdity of it for both of us, and ultimately all of us, to come to terms with what the Haitians had been saying all along. That they didn’t want our abilities. They wanted us. Actionnel had been confused on the phone because you don’t invite company to you home to share in the chores, you invite them to share themselves. That’s how love grows. That’s how the transformative power of Jesus gets unleashed in the space between two people and runs loose in your lives and makes scales fall from your eyes and wrecks your worldview and fundamentally changes the operating system of your reality in a way that the kingdom needs. This is what Gerardo at Via Infantil Maya in the Yucatan had been telling us when we pulled out our crisp, white carefully crafted agenda to check how we were doing on time before transitioning to the



next thing. He stood marveling for a moment before yanking it out of our team leader's hand and shouting, "You gringo's are crazy! You bring an agenda to the jungle!" We responded with a little self-conscious laughter before scrambling for the pages. In our case in Haiti in that moment, we realized that, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you" looked like hanging out. So by Golly if you tell First Presbyterian Charlotte to hang out, we were going to hang out with the best of them. You should have seen us hang out. We played dominoes and ate mangoes and batted a steel ring from a rusted-out bucket frame with a stick with the kids. We looked at student drawings and answered questions, used our shared faltering Spanish with the Haitian children to learn Creole words and teach English ones. We visited homes. Sat with the women in the "cafeteria" - a pot on a fire. You should have seen us hang out. Because if you had, you would have seen us all-Haitians and whities alike- soaked in laughter and tears. Because our focus wasn't on doing a project. Our focus was on growing friendship, which is precisely the place where God is enlivened. In the space between two people in conversation. That's why the seraphs are situated facing each other on top of the ark of the covenant. From the Hebrew belief that conversation is where God happens. We tasted friendships that challenged us to make ourselves vulnerable to love as we shared, each of us, our varying brands of poverty and pain such that none of us could ever be the same as their concerns and ours became one. Such that I'd field phone calls from you upon returning home, after you had burst into tears before the vast toothpaste selection in the grocery store. And watched you give away



your money with as much urgency as sailors bailing water on a sinking ship. And witnessed your struggle to reconcile your world now that life as it had been could no longer continue to be. And rejoiced as you became fools for Jesus by passing through the self-emptying cross of relationship and being led to a passion for the promotion of social righteousness that came not from here (point to head), but from here (heart). Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Jesus is asking you. And at the dawn of this bicentennial year you will want to weigh the content of your response very carefully. Because representing the gospel in the way that the challenges of our time will require if they are to be overcome will require reconditioning your muscle memory to include not only programmatic action but individual and institutional introspection around how you are being called to answer this question in a relentlessly local, painfully personal, astonishingly inconvenient and at times deeply counterintuitive way each and every day. There will be no promotion of social righteousness without doing this work. It cannot be realized by any other way than through the cross, than through all of us as disciples letting Jesus step on our toes, and following him even and especially when he stops preaching and starts meddling in our lives. When he says things like, members of First Presbyterian, do you love me when I ask you to make yourself vulnerable to your fellow church members by letting them know what's really going on inside in the name of building beloved community? First Presbyterian, do you love me when I ask you to catalogue your spheres of influence and to use your personal social capital to advocate for racial justice in



your social circles, in your schools, in your workplaces, with your partners, in every industry you interface with and every institution you participate in every single day? First Presbyterian, do you love me when I ask you to show up at city hall to keep affordable housing on the agenda? Do you love me when I ask you to join the fight for 15? Do you love me when I ask you to let the LGBTQ+ community know they are welcome? Do you love me when I ask you to interrogate the social and environmental and political and structural implications of your family's portfolio? Do you love me when I ask you to evaluate your spending? Do you love me when I ask you to table being useful and to instead take uncomfortable journeys to make new friends? Do you love me when I ask you to trust me that your world will not fall apart when you do these things. Rather, you'll be building a better world? The two hundred years since your founding in 1821 have led you to this incredible place. You have a voice. You have a reputation. You have resources. You have influence. You have a network. But most importantly, you have God. You have a heart for Jesus. You have a love for his people and a will to see anything through that staggers the imagination. You are so good and so beautiful. The trajectory of the last two hundred years has looked very different for a great many people within the shadow of your steeple and scope of your concern. But you and the Holy Spirit can change the trajectory of the next two hundred years for Charlotte by reminding it of what it said it wanted so long ago when it set aside this piece of prime real estate for you. To be a city that has its heart anchored on and for something greater than itself. It will not live into this value on its own



without you- at this city's heart- demonstrating what that means and holding it accountable to what it means. every single day. in At the end of the day the promotion of social righteousness is a great end of the church. A great end fitting for a church of a great age to pursue. As you christen this bicentennial year of reflection and celebration and discernment, as you carry out your vital witness and work, may God bless you with the wisdom, patience, appetite and humility to internalize Jesus' words as the methodology of your transformation when he says "Truly, I tell you, First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte, 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. Follow me.' Do you...love me? Amen.

